Stella Bloch and ‘Up to Date’ Java

In this substitution in which identity is inverted, this passivity more passive still than the passivity conjoined with action, beyond the inert passivity of the designated, the self is absolved of itself. Is this freedom?

Levinas, Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence, 2006: 115

A warm day in June in the year 1923. The scene: a third-floor walkup on East 34th Street in Manhattan, the apartment of John Murray Anderson, the ‘dandy impresario’ behind ‘the most compact, streamlined, witty, and modern’ of musical revues, the Greenwich Village Follies (Kendall 1979: 178). The fourth ‘edition’ of the Follies is due to open in September, and Anderson is busy plotting with a creative team he has assembled in his apartment – which also functioned as the impresario’s office – as he took a leisurely bath.

Like the more famous Ziegfeld Follies, the Greenwich Village Follies, a touring show Anderson launched in 1919 at New York’s Greenwich Village Theater, emphasized glamour, sophistication and the display of female skin. Greenwich Village was linked in the bourgeois imagination to nude artist models, and Anderson supplied half-naked beautiful women in plenty. But this was not just a sex show. Productions were knowingly meta-theatrical, with references to New York theatre luminaries like George M. Cohan, puppeteer Tony Sarg and theatre critic George Jean Nathan. The 1920 edition was framed by a Village pawn shop where a singer pawns her voice, a comedian pawns his sense of humour, and a theatre owner looks to buy Originality. The 1921 edition's frame story was about a theatre reformer in the mould of Edward Gordon Craig, who wants to replace actors with marionettes but is shot for his ‘new ideas’ before he can implement them. The director appeals to a heavenly judge, who sends the reformer back to earth with an angel as his backer to realize his avant-garde concepts in the Greenwich Village Follies. The following year's show was a quest of a Romeo who goes ‘each night from show to show in search of female charm’.1
For the 1923 edition, Anderson has been considering an Asian theme, toying with a particular focus on Java. Java was a motif in the Follies from its start, in part because of the popular association between Greenwich Village and batik. Batik was introduced to America as a bohemian practice by artists associated with the Arts and Crafts movement living in Greenwich Village, including Dutch artist Pieter Mijer.2 Mijer’s book *Batiks and How to Make Them* (1919), which described how to create batik clothes and decorations ‘by using beeswax, dye and a little skill’, went through nine printings between 1919 and 1931.3

While other American performing artists envisioned Java as a rare court culture, an exotic and precious bloom, Java in the Follies was sexed up and revved into the jazz age, and commonly crossed with Hawai’i and other tropical cultures. Dancers in Javanese numbers wore slit sarong skirts with exposed knees and thighs. They sported bikini tops with exposed mid-riffs or tightly-fitted gold vests with plunging necklines. Bodies were painted and adorned with golden ornaments, bracelets, armlets and anklets. Nails were painted bright vermilion or fitted with metallic finger extensions. Most of the dancers had bare feet, sometimes with brightly painted toenails, but some wore ballet shoes. There was an abundance of batik cloth (designed and selected by Pieter Mijer) tucked into bodices and trailing to the ground. Chiffons and golden tassels wrapped around waists and arms; silver belt buckles, huge golden earrings and thick golden necklaces proliferated. Head gear was highly elaborate. Some performers wore black wigs in buns, resembling the *sanggul* hairpieces worn for formal occasions in Java, or long black wigs with flowery ornaments. Male vat-bearers in a batik sketch wore golden head-dresses with Thai-like points wrapped in green turban-like cloth. A singer portraying a Javanese princess had a hugely elaborate golden head-dress with red sashes trailing from it. Others wore tiaras, crowns, *praba*-like ‘wings’, peacock feather head-dresses or even Grecian helmets.

Settings and props were an equally fantastic mixture of ethnographica and Orientalism. A backdrop for a 1919 Javanese number seems to be a representation of ancient Egypt, with an animal-headed god and nemes head-dresses. Performers carried gongs, painted banners and golden platters, and monstrous beasts adorned the stage. In one number, Ada Forman, one of the original members of Denishawn, the interpretive dance company directed by Ruth St Denis and her husband Ted Shawn, danced in Javanese costume together with a caricature puppet of herself made by Tony Sarg. In another sketch, depicting the making of a batik shawl, a piece of cloth draped over a stand decorated by two *naga* serpents flows into a bowl for dying; a covered urn sits at the side.

The sketch titled ‘In Java’, part of the first edition of the Follies, offers a fair idea of how the Follied imagined Java. The number featured a dance by Ada Forman, supported by ten chorus girls. This was a big production number, a highlight of the show. In the song for this dance, ‘My Little Javanese’ sung