

(převzato z *Making Things Perfectly Queer*)

Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance* has been the subject of straight feminist analyses, but what's here for queers?¹ Some aspects of potential queer pleasure overlap with straight feminist pleasure: for example, having women at the center not only of the narrative but of the narrative action, becoming as much agents-subjects as they are spectacularized objects. The men in this film can't quite get a purchase on the narrative. Just when it seems as if one of them will begin to control the action, Arzner narratively neutralizes them, and Maureen O'Hara's Judy, Lucille Ball's Bubbles, Maria Ouspenskaya's Madame Basilova, or Katharine Alexander's Miss Olmstead ("Olmie") steps in to move the plot along. And the narrative often moves along in terms of these women's work and their relationships to each other through their work. Mayne suggests that "female authorship acquires its most significant contours in Arzner's work through relations between and among women," and that this includes establishing a "female gaze [that] is defined early on in [*Dance, Girl, Dance*] as central to the aspirations of the women as they are shaped within a community of women."²

At first glance, the burlesque performer Bubbles seems to be a conventional straight golddigger who is the romantic opposition to ballet-dancing Judy for rich alcoholic Jimmie Harris (Louis Hayward). But look again: Bubbles is jealous of Judy not primarily or ultimately because of jealousy about Jimmie. Bubbles enviously admires Judy's dancing talent, her "classiness," and her quiet strength of character. After she becomes a successful burlesque queen called "Tiger Lily White," Bubbles finds Judy and offers her a job as her lead-in act. Of course, Bubbles knows Judy's ballet dancing will be mocked by the crowd. And we know Bubbles herself will derive some satisfaction from Judy's humiliation, but not so much because Bubbles is meanspirited as because she hopes it will place Judy on the same personal and professional level as her.

And this is just the queer point—not only is most of Bubbles's jealous energy directed toward Judy, it is ultimately about Judy, in the sense that it is about Bubbles's envious admiration of Judy. She wants Judy with her, and she wants Judy in a situation she controls. Indeed, a lesbian/queer reading of *Dance, Girl, Dance* would recognize the obvious: the most compelling emotional energies and tensions develop around Bubbles's and Judy's intertwined professional and personal lives. Arzner (and Bubbles) uses Jimmie in the narrative in the same way women characters are traditionally used in "straight" male narratives—that is, as a public vehicle for transgressive erotic exchanges between same-sex characters.³ Bubbles loves the money and fame her solo career brings her, but she can't forget high-class Judy, so she attempts to combine the personal with the professional by convincing her manager she needs a lead-in act, and then hiring Judy for the spot.

A reading along these lines would see Bubbles's sudden decision to trick a drunken Jimmie into marriage as her way of removing a romantic and sexual threat to her partnership with Judy.

1 Perhaps the best straight feminist reading of this film is Lucy Fischer's "Dance, Girl, Dance: When a Woman Looks," in *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 148–54. Danny Peary also has a section on the film in *Cult Movies* (New York: Dell, 1981), 59–64, where he discusses its reputation as a feminist cult film.

2 Mayne, *Woman at the Keyhole*, 101.

3 On this point, Mayne finds that "Judy's attractions to men are shaped by substitutions for women and female rivalry — Steve Adams is a professional mentor to substitute for Basilova, and Jimmie Harris is an infantile man who is desirable mainly because Bubbles wants him too" (*Woman at the Keyhole*, 103). My reading of these "substitutions" would note that Adams is coded as a feminized man whose trusted associate is the butch Miss Olmstead, and that it is less "female rivalry" than repressed queer desire on Bubbles's part that makes her find Jimmie "desirable mainly because" she notices Judy's interest in him. Besides, Judy's wish on a star after a date with Jimmie is for a dancing career, not for him. As for Basilova, it is worth noting in this context that her removal from the plot is accomplished in classic homophobic narrative fashion: she gets hit by an oncoming bus as she takes Judy to her ballet audition. As if to comment on Basilova's (un)expected death, Arzner moves from her body to pan up the phallic building across the street that houses the ballet company.

This interpretation seems reinforced by Bubbles's attempts to provoke Judy to display visible signs of jealousy about the marriage. At this point they, and we, know Bubbles doesn't really care for Jimmie, and that even Judy is more devoted to her dancing career than to him. So what would this jealousy be about if it were not an indication of lesbian (or perhaps bisexual) desire?

But Judy seems more concerned about herself and her career than she is about Bubbles, although Arzner makes Judy's spectacular show- and narrative-stopping, woman-bonding, straight man-bashing speech seem to be Judy's response to the news of Bubbles's marriage to Jimmie. Thus positioned, the speech makes one wonder a bit about the possibility of Judy's repressed queerness, especially as she implicitly defends Bubbles in her indictment of straight male sexuality as the illusory base for patriarchal empowerment: "We'd laugh too," Judy shouts out to the burlesque show audience, "only we're paid to let you sit there and roll your eyes and make your screamingly clever remarks. What's it all for? So you can go home and strut before your wives and sweethearts, and play at being the stronger sex for a minute? I'm sure they see through you, just like we do!" /obr. 1, 2/

However, Judy's deconstruction of the straight sex show in and out of the burlesque house (and, by extension, the movie house) also signals the end of her partnership with Bubbles. Realizing this, and incensed that Judy has ruined their act, yet perhaps also encouraged by Judy's man-bashing rhetoric, Bubbles rushes out and instigates an onstage wrestling match with Judy. Although this match can be appropriated for straight uses, as it is by the cheering men in the burlesque house, it seems less a conventional "catfight," given Arzner's narrative contextualization, than the wild, confused expression of Bubbles's thwarted and not fully conscious desire for Judy.⁴ /obr. 2, 3/

Earlier in the film, Judy, substituting for Bubbles, auditions for a job by attempting a hula. Failing to impress the club manager with her restrained movements, it appears as if Judy and the entire troupe will continue to be jobless. Enter Bubbles, who looks at Judy, sizes up the situation, and launches into a sexually suggestive hula. Bubbles's dancing here seems designed as much to show herself off to Judy, and to impress her, as it is to impress the lecherous club manager /obr. 5-8/. But a full reading of how this sequence helps to establish a space for articulating lesbian desire within or alongside positions that represent straight male desire needs to consider the part played by the character of Madame Basilova in this scene, and throughout the narrative.

Madame Basilova is a once-famous Russian ballerina who has been forced to make her living by training troupes of chorus girls for nightclub floor shows. Bubbles and Judy both work in her current troupe, but Judy is the only one with a talent for classical dance, so Madame Basilova focuses her attention on training Judy for an audition with a major ballet company. Wearing plain tailored outfits and ties, Madame Basilova offers, in appearance and narrative function, striking parallels to the many publicity pictures of Dorothy Arzner at work, usually showing her gazing intently at the more traditionally feminized actresses she is directing.⁵ Basilova's name also suggests that of one of Arzner's more famous lovers — the Russian actress Alla Nazimova, who also produced films, the most notorious of which was a 1922 version of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.⁶

Both Basilova's work training dancers — whether classical or burlesque — and Arzner's directing Hollywood actresses in straight, patriarchal narratives are concerned with presenting women as erotic spectacles. So Basilova and Arzner find themselves in rather queer positions vis-a-

4 Mayne's reading of this moment is feminist, but not lesbian: "And the catfight that erupts between Judy and Bubbles on stage is less a recuperative move . . . than the claiming by two women of the stage as an extension of their conflicted friendship, rather than as the alienated site of performance" (*Woman at the Keyhole*, 102). Although concerned with examining the "lesbian inflection" in Arzner's treatment of "female bonding" as part of how the director expresses the tensions between female friendships and lesbianism, Mayne discusses Bubbles's and Judy's bond as an example of heterosexual female rivalry.

5 Sarah Halprin, in "Writing in the Margins," *Jump Cut* 29 (1984), notes that there are "two 'minor' characters [in *Dance, Girl, Dance*] who both dress and look remarkably similar to Arzner herself (i.e., tailored, 'mannish,' in the manner of Radclyffe Hall and other famous lesbians of the time), and are placed as mature, single, independent women who are crucial to the career of the young Judy and who are clearly seen as oppressed by social stereotyping, of which they are contemptuous" (p. 32). Basilova is one of these butch women, and Miss Olmstead is the other. It is Olmie who first jumps up to applaud Judy's tirade against the burlesque house audience.

6 Film cited: *Salome* (1922, Nazimova Productions, Charles Bryant).

vis the women they work with. The dance instructor and the film director are women whose jobs encourage them, indeed require them, to assume an erotic gaze while preparing women for public presentation. In an interview, Arzner recalled the time she visited the set of a never-completed "Tarzan-type picture" in order to discuss *Christopher Strong* with Katharine Hepburn. "She was up a tree with a leopard skin on!" the director recalled, adding, "She had a marvelous figure."⁷

In *Dance, Girl, Dance* Arzner appears to acknowledge the erotics of her own position as Hollywood film director through her treatment of Madame Basilova. Simultaneously, Arzner demonstrates how easily supposedly straight male erotic spectator positions might be claimed as sites of lesbian/queer pleasure. The scene I mentioned in which Bubbles dances the hula for Judy (and, one might add, for Madame Basilova) is one example of how a lesbian erotic gaze is negotiated in *Dance, Girl, Dance*. Even more striking is the sequence Arzner constructs around Madame Basilova's secretive and pleasurable gazing at Judy while she practices a dance.

Lured by music playing above her office, Basilova climbs the stairs. Before reaching the top, she stops and positions herself behind the balustrade, glancing off at Judy. As Basilova places herself to gaze at Judy, the camera makes a graceful tracking curve away from Basilova, positioning itself so that our first sight of Judy is clearly not Basilova's; it is a spectator position emphatically established as being next to Basilova's, which offers Judy as a (sexual, entertainment, identificatory) spectacle for those "not Basilova" viewers — straight men, by traditional feminist theoretical convention, but also, potentially, gays, bisexuals, and straight women. Subsequent shots of Judy, however, will represent Basilova's gaze in their angle and distance, until Basilova sneaks down the stairs and the shot of Judy returns to a non-point-of-view one, which now encourages a range of erotic responses from viewers, as the previous sequence has marked at least two different eroticized spectator positions in relation to the spectacle of Judy's dance. /obr. 9-14/

In this sequence, by the simple expedient of making a culturally invisible spectator active and visible in her spectatorship, Arzner suggests something extraordinary: the space for queer expression has always existed within, or alongside, what traditionally have been considered straight cultural forms and conventions. These forms and conventions only seem inevitably bound to express straight positions because, historically, they have been used most often, and most visibly, to promote straight ideologies and desires. Make queer positions visible and differentiate them from straight positions, Arzner implies in *Dance, Girl, Dance*, and we can articulate queer discourses right in the heart of existing cultural forms — no secret (sub)cultural coding, recoding, and decoding necessary.

7 Peary and Kay, "Interview," 25.



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