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Material Girl

One of the first **professional female impersonators** in America, **Tom Martelle** was a star of the **1920s stage** and a regular sensation in Maine.

BY WILLIAM DAVID BARRY & DANIELLE FAZIO

“WHO’S THE FINE-LOOKING girl over there who just nodded to you? I wouldn’t mind knowing her myself,” writes journalist Philip B. Sharpe for *Sun-Up Magazine* in May, 1925, a glossy publication in vogue from 1923 to 1932. The “girl” in question was in fact a **Mr. Tom Martelle** (alternately spelled Martell), one of the most celebrated female impersonators of the era and a keen visitor to Vacationland. The story, tucked between articles about “Wet and Dry Fishing” and the Quoddy Hydro Project, and styled “A Case of Dual Personality—But No Jekyll and

Hyde,” may have come as a surprise to *Sun-Up* readers more used to the magazine’s usual *modus operandi*: “Resort features... Adventure, Romance, Beautiful Pictures—a magazine just chock full of good things.” More enticingly, the story captures female impersonation and vaudeville theater in New York, punctuated with two photographs of Martelle, in and out of drag, captioned “Tommy the Boy” and “Tommy the Girl.” Adventure, romance, and beautiful pictures: check, check, and checkmate.

Although Martelle had been astonishing East Coast audiences since 1911 (his

sheet music—words and music by Martelle—can still be found in flea markets, antique shops, and on eBay), information about the performer is scarce. Almost nothing can be read about him beyond the 1930s. The *Sun-Up* feature captures rare details about this forgotten figure. Sharpe writes that Martelle was born in Los Angeles, “twenty-eight years ago this month,” placing his birth date in 1897. He often visited Maine to perform at the Jefferson Theater on Free Street and enjoy the open roads. “Motoring has always had a strong appeal to Mr. Martelle, and the State of Maine has been visited



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by him during several vacation tours in the past few years.”

Just five years later, Martelle’s name disappears almost completely from the playbills of history. In the 21st century, his obit is still below the digital radar. Conversely, his brief but brilliant career is well documented in newspaper clippings and promotional materials of the era.

Emerging onto the show business scene in 1911, Martelle was billed as “The Boy With the Pretty Gowns.” “[Martelle’s] success continued to build by the end of the teens when he was in a production of Julian Eltinge’s famous musical *The Fascinating Widow*,” says **JD Doyle** of the **Queer Music Heritage** radio show. “Eltinge was definitely the most famous female impersonator of the time—he even had a New York theater named for him [Eltinge 42nd Street Theatre, now Empire Theater].” Martelle’s big break came in 1923 with the release of the musical comedy *The Gay Young Bride*, followed by *The Fashion Girl*, *Some Girls*, and *Glorious Annabelle*.

“One clue to his popularity is that he was among the very few whose image was used in the venue advertisements of the time,” Doyle says. “The most common billing given to him was as ‘The Foremost Delineator of Feminine Types.’ He was especially known for his dazzling costumes.” Doyle is both intrigued and frustrated by the shooting star of Tommy Martelle. “So, what happened to him after the 1920s? I’d

Cherry Bomb

Conor Leigh Tubbs from South Portland has performed in drag as **Cherry Lemonade** for the better part of seven years. What does the local star make of the early female impersonators of the 20th century?

Would you consider [Martelle and Eltinge] to be early examples of drag queens? Part of me wants to categorize them as drag queens. Part of me battles with that. It’s one thing to dress in women’s clothing and prance about, it’s



love to know.”

NAUGHTY VACATIONLAND-A VAN-ISHING ACT

The *Sun-Up* exchange offers a unique insight into the temper of the times. A May, 1925 Portland newspaper article lists scandalous local personalities tongue-in-cheek: “Charmatta Ballad, a musician;” “Lillian Fairservice, a maid;” and “Catherine King [who] lives next door to George Queen.” Mirroring this, the city was up for grabs. Large downtown buildings were under construction, Prohibition was being giddily ignored, and in slick local periodicals, writers were crafting cheeky shorts such as “How to be Successful With Men” and “The Flapper in Search of a Husband.” Indeed, Rockland-born poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (“My candle burns at both ends”) was the very spirit of the Flaming Youth and Roaring Twenties caprice. When it suited her, she wore trousers and daringly took on the persona of Vincent.

But the fun couldn't last. Following the financial crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, Portland was one of the most financially flattened communities in the country. The Jefferson Theater (where John Wilkes Booth performed, and where local performing “reached its peak of excellence”) was torn down in 1933, Millay faded somewhat from the limelight (though she returned to Ragged Island, off Orr's Island, each summer), and no one seems to

another to use drag as a platform to pay homage to the strong, fearless women of the world. It's hard to say what the intentions were behind their acts, as they lived in a time that valued women less than men. Do you believe the drag arts of today are inspired by vaudeville theater of the 1920s? Absolutely. That dingy, grimy, booze-soaked, speakeasy-style nightlife atmosphere is making a comeback in a big way.

What do you make of the often hyper-masculine personas of the 1920s performers off-stage?

When I'm out of drag, I do embrace the masculine sides of my personality. But here's the thing about drag queens that people don't understand: It takes a *real* man to get in drag.

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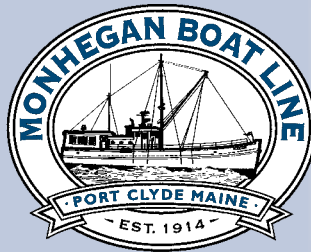
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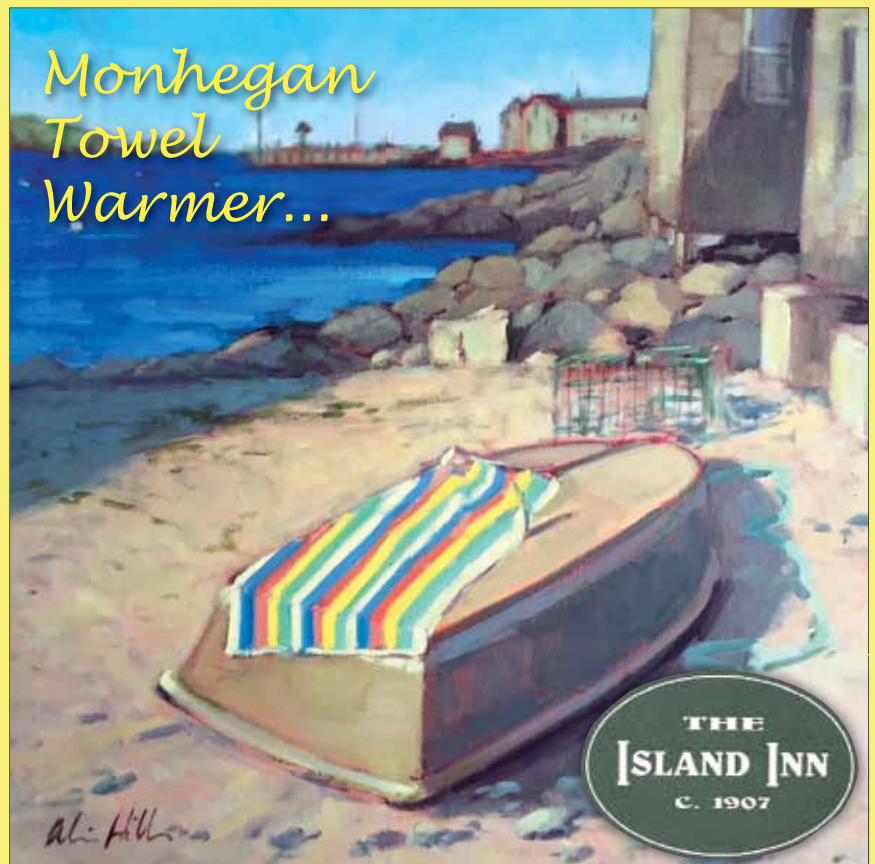
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The Jefferson Theater on Free Street was a glamorous mainstay of the local arts scene before it was torn down in 1933.

know what became of Tom Martelle. Austerity tightened its belt on the glamour of the twenties, and throughout America, local laws such as Detroit's 1944 ordinance prohibited people from appearing in the "dress of the opposite sex." And with the shifting tides of culture, "The Foremost Delineator of Feminine Types" seems to be lost to the footnotes and ephemera of history.

THE MAN BEHIND THE MAKE-UP

The art of female impersonation may have titillated a 1920s readership, but from a modern perspective, the gender bias and gender anxiety may be the most striking fact of the story. Sharpe is quick to expound upon Martelle's masculinity, "Mr. Martelle is a real he-man. Off stage he has none of the feminine traits which I have found in other female impersonators and costume models that I have met." Martelle himself indulges in some hedged political correctness: "Girls, as a rule, act more than men. They are continually acting... I am casting no insult against their sex—If I was a woman-hater, I never would be working in this profession."

The *Sun-Up* story ends with beauty advice for Martelle's female fans. "When you get right down to it, you can't fool the men a great deal. Powder is necessary, but rouge and lipstick look sad in the eyes of men, who often say, 'I wonder what she would look like without that Junk.'" Apparently the professional female impersonator failed to see the irony in his comments. But if a sexual history of our state is ever to be written, it is visible and crying for notice between the pages of magazines, biographies, newspapers, and documents that a true, often colorful, understanding of sex, gender, and social history has always dreamed of coming forward to surprise and delight. ■



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