

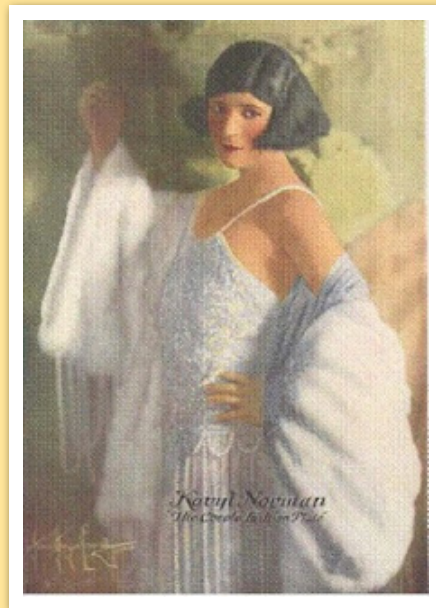
# An Open Book



Saturday, May 9, 2020

## King of Queens: Karyl Norman

The Creole Fashion Plate:



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In the annals of vaudeville, one name stands alone: Karyl Norman. He, along with Francis Renault, and Julian Eltinge, were the reigning kings, or queens, if you will, of female impersonation. But while much has been written about Eltinge and other interpreters of drag, such as Bert Savoy, Tom Martelle, Gene Malin, Earl Lind and Ray Bourbon, little is known about Karyl Norman, who by all accounts was one of the most fascinating and glamorous of vaudeville's gender-bending vamps, the original voguin' vixen and one of the premier princesses of the so-called "Pansy Craze." Karyl Norman paved the way for countless female impersonators who came after him. He also wrote many of his own songs, which puts him in a different league than Eltinge and his peers who always used songs written by others. Karyl's legacy endures primarily due to his sheet music which shows up constantly on eBay, although many dealers are not aware that this stylish siren was in reality a man.

Most accounts of Karyl Norman, I've found, are just plain wrong. His name is often misspelled, both his stage name and his birth name. I've seen mentions of him as "Norman Carroll," "Carl Newman," "Norman Thomas," and "Carole Norman." Writers have claimed his real name was George Paduzzi. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* says it was "Poduzzi." One account I read said that he was born in Australia; another that he was African-American and lived in Harlem. Yet another stated that he ran away from home at the age of 16 to join a minstrel show. The truth is less exotic but just as fascinating. Here is what I've managed to find out so far.

Karyl Norman was born George Francis Peduzzi on June 13, 1897 to a middle class family in Baltimore, Maryland. John Waters would be proud. George came from a long line of Peduzzis. According to census records, his family had been in Baltimore for generations, as far back as the 1790s. His grandfather Francis Peduzzi, born in Maryland around 1823, was a blacksmith and coach maker. Francis's father had come from Italy and settled in Maryland. (A Peter Peduzzi married Sally Shaw in 1797 in Baltimore; this might be Francis's father.) By 1880 Francis had retired as a "grocer." He had married his wife, Amelia Chanceaulme, back in June, 1845. She must be the source of Karyl's fascination with Creole culture. The Chanceaulmes go back to the 1790s in Philadelphia. Martin Chanceaulme, born in the West Indies, around 1788, was a master craftsman and cabinet maker who did work for Winterthur. He moved to Baltimore by 1840 and is listed as white, with no "colored persons" in the household. Back in the 1700s, the word "creole" merely meant that someone was born in the colonies of French or Spanish descent. It did not imply necessarily that one was of mixed race.

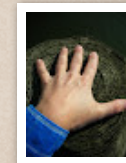


Young George took the name Karyl Norman from his father, a carpenter, who was born Norman Augusta Peduzzi. It's not clear when Norman died, but he's listed on a passport application Karyl filled out in 1917, so he may have been alive at that point. I've not been able to find out any source for the name Karyl except that his mother, nee Mary Drusilla Hoffman, was born in Carroll County, Maryland. She was the devoted stage mother type, handy with a needle, who helped design Karyl's outlandish and sumptuous gowns. She traveled with him whenever he performed and eventually moved with him to New York City in the 20s when he lived above the nightclub where he worked. They were inseparable. When Karyl went to Europe in 1921 to perform in England and

King of Queens:  
Karyl Norman

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## About Me



### An Open Book

Welcome to my blog "An Open Book" where I cover literature, film, theatre and just about anything that intrigues me. I have been a writer and editor for several decades. My work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Architectural Digest*, *Village Voice*, *Vanity Fair*, *Opera News*, *Met Home and Out*. If you have any questions or additional information to add regarding one of my articles posted here, you can reach me at

France, he took his mother along with him. When he returned on the Olympic and was met by the press at the disembarkation, she was standing by his side. Mama Rose had nothing on her.

But why did young Karyl style himself as the Creole Fashion Plate? Well, it turns out that the term "creole fashion plate" was not a new notion. Other minstrel performers had used the phrase around the same time. A "fashion plate" was a Victorian expression referring to sewing patterns that were sent out in template form and then cut along the patterns to recreate the design. Magazines like *Godey's* in the 1850s and 60's often printed color plates showcasing the latest Parisian styles. It was the height of chic to be called a "fashion plate," since it meant that one's own handsewn creations were the latest vogue.

When Karyl first took his act on the road, he was dubbed simply -- The Creole Fashion Plate. Flaunting his Creole roots was only natural. But there was also a long-standing tradition in minstrel shows of female impersonation. It goes back to before the Civil War, when traveling troupes donned blackface and imitated the high-spirited music of slaves. By the 1910s, touring "tabloid" shows were common. Parodying beautiful young black belles was part of the act. Black minstrel stars also put on blackface to accentuate the farce. Bert Williams, for example, was one of the biggest stars in show business. Karyl found his own peculiar niche and used it to his advantage, although he does not seem to have ever used cork to make himself appear darker. Perhaps his swarthy Italian coloring was sufficient, although his 1917 passport application describes his complexion as "fair." Whatever the shade of his skin tone, it seems apparent that Karyl needed to play up the minstrel aspects of his stage act in order to find work. First because it fit into the minstrel tradition but also because it was less threatening to society for an exotic Creole to be prancing around in women's clothes than some effeminate white guy from Baltimore.



But parade he did. In April 1916, Karyl performed in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland as George F. Peduzzi in Ned O'Brien's minstrel show at the City Opera House. He was listed simply as "singer." O'Brien, one of the top blackface comedians of the era, staged a number called "Darktown's Bravest Fighting the Flames." But it was "Geo F. Peduzzi" who won raves the next day as "an unrivalled female impersonator." Karyl's act was an immediate sensation. His costumes were over the top, yet never trashy. He had an innate sense of chic no matter how outré his routines. Thanks to his mother's handiwork, his creations dazzled theatregoers, male and female alike. He twirled about the stage in satins and silks and marabou feathers. He also had a gift for singing, his voice traipsing along two octaves, chasing notes from the top of his lady-like trill down to the depths of his ringing baritone. *Variety* noted that he could switch from a "male voice to a female falsetto "with the agility of a Flatbush commuter changing trains." Judging by his passport photo, he looked like what I imagine a Flatbush commuter would look like. But he's described on the form as being "5 Foot 6 inches tall. Dark Brown eyes. Dark Brown Hair. Straight Nose. Small Mouth. Round chin. High Forehead. Oval Face."

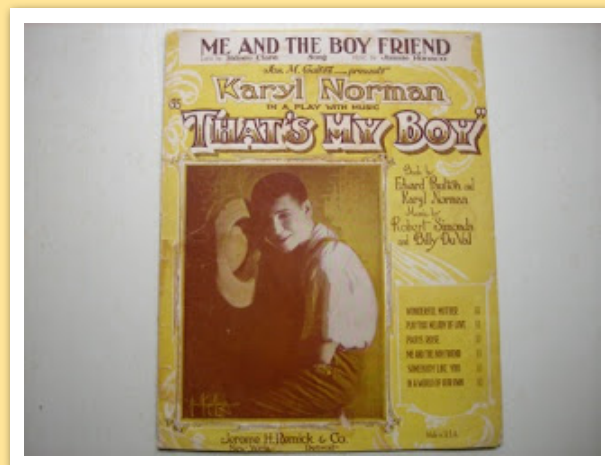
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Despite his lack of looks out of drag, audiences clamored for more. Karyl was signed to the prestigious B. Keith syndicate and toured the country in Orpheum theatres alongside the Mellette Sisters, popular dancers of the day. First billed just as "The Creole Fashion Plate" without a name, it was left to audiences to decide if he was male or female. He was marketed as "Puzzling and Delightful!" "The Master Illusionist!" In Winnipeg, Canada, he won rave reviews: "He or she... possesses equally good soprano and bass voices. Seldom does a woman show more grace than the Fashion Plate, and seldom is a man more muscular." As his fame grew, Karyl's name was added to the marquee. Demand was strong. The new kid on the block, Karyl Norman, who had once worshiped at the heels of Francis Renault when he played Baltimore, was now giving even Julian Eltinge a run for his money. Karyl did find time amid his busy schedule to fill out a World War One draft registration card. But it would appear his services as a "theatrical performer" were not needed in the army.

In 1917, Karyl sailed to Australia to bring his novelty act to another continent. One can only imagine what the populace thought of his amusing Creole turns. Returning in February 1918 to Vancouver, Karyl continued to refine his act. He went back on tour. As silent pictures began to dominate the market, he introduced silver screen sirens into his routine, impersonating bombshells like Theda Bara, the original Vamp, and later Joan Crawford as Sadie Thompson in Somerset Maugham's *Rain*. Karyl billed his art as "character impression," rather than female impersonation. But the audiences lapped it up no matter what it was called. Throughout the next ten years, he traveled the country, performing from Brooklyn to Oakland. He became one of the top headliners, as famous as Fanny Brice and Will Rogers. He did not always dress in drag. One of his most popular routines was dressing as a country bumpkin, a la Huckleberry Finn, which he performed in a play entitled *That's My Boy*.



Whatever Karyl Norman may have been in his private life, he was a master showman on the stage and a whiz at publicity. In 1921 he announced that he was engaged to the dazzling acrobatic star of vaudeville, Ruth Budd. This seemed to press agents a match made in hype heaven. For Ruth Budd was as masculine as Karyl was feminine. They were the Eagle and the Dove cooed gossip columnists, but it wasn't quite clear which was the Eagle and which the Dove.

Ruth Budd had made a name for herself as "The Girl with the Smile." Dangling from ropes in a tight-fitting white union suit, she dazzled audiences with her "dainty" and "winsome" charm, but also her "muscles of steel." She made her film debut as Darwa, a female Tarzan, in the 1919 flick *A Scream in the Night*. So when his engagement to this tomboy beauty was called off in 1922, few Broadway wags were surprised. As one newspaper put it, "He is the epitome of fastidious femininity -- coy, shrinking, super-refined. He is the violet, the cut glass, the rare china, the dove." And she, by inference, was the eagle.

What went wrong? Some blamed Rudd's domineering stage mother who didn't care for Karyl. Others said it was Mrs. Peduzzi who interfered, unwilling to share her son with another woman. Others claimed that Karyl had made the fatal mistake of offering to his bride-to-be suggestions on how to improve her act. She shot back that she'd been in vaudeville before he knew what a stage door looked like. Her accompanist Leo Minton took Karyl's side. She fired him on the spot and performed the next four days without an accompanist. Karyl called her from a drug store and rescinded his engagement vows. Ruth Budd was no softie. She sued Karyl for a whopping \$50,000 for "breach of promise."

What those in-the-know knew, of course, was that Karyl was not the marrying kind. Unlike Eltinge who fiercely protested that he was not that way, Karyl was less inclined to mince words. Earlier in 1921, Karyl had been made an honorary member of the Ohio State University's dramatic club. The boys who dolled up as girls in the annual "Scarlet Mask" put on an all-male show called "Oh, My Omar," sporting Karyl's seductive wardrobe. He had donated his costumes, worth over \$3000, the papers said, because of his devotion to the cast. In 1924, he was slated to appear in the fabled *Greenwich Village Follies*, which catered to the Bohemian set. Cole Porter wrote the music and lyrics that year. But according to various reports I've read, Karyl seems to have been dropped in favor of Fifi D'Orsay when the show went on tour.

Once when the Marx Brothers were appearing with Karyl in some dingy dive on the road somewhere, Groucho was asked to introduce the vaudeville star. But Groucho got tongue-tied and called Karyl, "The Queer Old Fashion Plate," and lost his job. So says Harpo in his memoirs. Others have claimed that quip as their own, including author Kenneth Rexroth who first saw Karyl in 1923 at The Green Mask, a "tea room" in San Francisco. He bitchily dubbed Karyl, a "queer ole chafing dish."



Whatever his critics might have called him, Karyl had the last laugh. He continued to wow audiences from coast to coast. In 1925 Wood Soanes, writing in the *Oakland Tribune*, lauded him as "a top-notch entertainer," the "premier female impersonator on the stage." Norman, he went on, "brings youth and a feminine voice that Eltinge in his prime did not possess." He "scored a tremendous hit with the Orpheumites who called him back for two encores and treated him to so many curtain calls that a speech was necessary to allow the show to proceed." The following year, in July, Soanes added that Karyl Norman was set to appear in a new play called "*The Half-Caste*" by Jack McClellan. It's not clear if that show ever made it to the stage.

In April 1927, however, Karyl Norman made the leap from "vo-de-ville" to the legitimate stage when he was given his own Broadway show: *Lady Do*, at the Liberty Theatre. A full-fledged musical, choreographed by none other than Busby Berkeley who would go onto fame in Hollywood, the show also starred lovely Nancy Welford. Karyl played several characters, including Rose Walthal who lived on a large estate in Roslyn, Long Island. Despite ho-hum notices -- *the Times* said it ran to "two exceedingly long acts" -- the spectacle, set in Paris and New York, ran for 50 performances and was a triumph for Karyl who had come a long way from little ol' Baltimo'. The show also marked the Broadway debut of a handsome young Latin lover named Cesar Romero who waltzed about the stage with his partner Elizabeth Higgins, a young heiress.

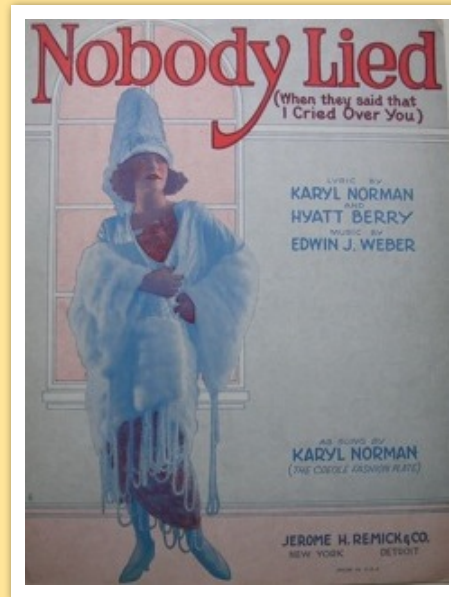
Soon Hollywood beckoned. Karyl was signed by Vitaphone Pictures at Warner Bros to appear in a couple of shorts: *Types* in which he sang "Georgianna," "Daisy Days" and "5 Foot 2"; and *Silks and Satins*, in which he crooned "Daddy Come Home" while gussied up in his Creole finery. In 1929 he was appearing beside Jimmy Durante at the Palace.



In 1930 Karyl, after returning from another triumphant tour of Australia and New Zealand, achieved fame of a different sort when he appeared as the headline attraction at a new nightspot called The Pansy Club at 204 W. 48th Street, on the corner of Broadway in New York. Part of the so-called Pansy Craze of the late 20s and 30s, this club catered to a different clientele than those of his old vaudeville days. The queerness of drag was coming out of the closet. No one who dropped by the Pansy Club could claim ignorance as to the sexual persuasion of the "queens" who vogued along its runways. Like the drag balls up in Harlem, the Pansy Club was a hideaway for a burgeoning underground gay subculture, but also a haven for aging flappers and party-goers who liked "slumming." That these establishments were run by gangsters proved their undoing however.

In January 1931, the Pansy Club was raided by the police and shut down, as was Cleo's Ninth Avenue Saloon at 46th Street. Just a few nights before Dutch Schultz, the notorious mobster, had been gunned down and stabbed, and very nearly killed, at Club Abbey, a notorious late-night hang-out where drag queen extraordinaire Gene Malin ruled the roost. Malin had previously starred at Club Rubiyat in Greenwich Village. While Schultz survived, others were killed and the police cracked down on all late-night clubs which violated blue laws. Some gay historians see the crackdown as motivated more by homophobia than concern for safety, but at the

time it was defended as a direct response to organized crime's involvement in Manhattan's cabaret scene.



The raid seems to have impacted Karyl's career. While he continued to perform at vaudeville venues -- he was at the Orpheum in Oakland in October 1931, and at the Palace again with Jimmy Durante -- he worked more often at nightclubs. Vaudeville was dying. Most acts now were used simply as filler between movies. Talkies were the new fad. Karyl did a few RKO gigs at movie palaces. But it was less thrilling than his glory days as a B. Keith headliner. In 1932, Karyl found work as hostess at La Boheme, a now legendary nightclub in Los Angeles. Outfitted with 350 seats, La Boheme was everything its name implied, and catered to Hollywood celebs and their entourage, but it closed shortly after opening due to liquor violations. By 1933 he had opened his own place: the Karyl Norman Supper Club where he co-starred with soubrette: Colette Convoy.

Come 1934, Karyl's career showed no signs of winding down. He played the Parthenon in a show called "Harlem Scandals," alongside "12 sepia beauties" in a huge "colored revue" with stage, screen and radio stars. In July that same year, he was performing opposite Morton Downey at the Mayfair Gardens in Baltimore. In 1937 he moved across the continent where he was a fixture at San Francisco's Finocchio's, perhaps the most famous club featuring female impersonators. Then his career petered out. I can't find any trace of him for the next few years. Perhaps he got bored with the endless routine. But in 1943, columnist Leonard Lyons wrote that "Karyl Norman, the Creole Fashion Plate, is preparing a comeback with an impersonation of Lena Horne." No doubt his career was experiencing its own "Stormy Weather."



Most accounts state that George Francis Peduzzi died in 1947 in Hollywood, Florida. I haven't been able to find an obit for him. But a "George Peduzzi" is listed in Florida's death records for that year in Broward County. Most likely it is him. I like to think that he was enjoying the sun and fun of Florida's white sandy beaches when he died, a mere 50 years old, an aging beauty with perhaps too much makeup on, sort of a Creole version of Aschenbach from *Death in Venice*. His death may have gone unnoticed by many, but for those in the know, Karyl Norman will always reign as the unrivaled diva of vaudeville.

[ADDENDUM: While reading Robert Bloch's memoir, I was startled to find out that the author of *Psycho* had chosen the name Norman Bates partly because he wanted to reference, even subconsciously to readers, Karyl *Norman!* Bloch also said that it occurred to him that Bates was "neither woman *nor man*," a pun that underscored the cross-dressing that was part of his mental fixation with his mother. This little known fact was revelatory to me, especially since it shows that Karyl's legacy was even wider and more enduring than I imagined.]

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