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Is Dance the Enemy?

Having won his first battle against the Seattle police, MacIver Wells still faced a practical business problem at the Madison Tavern. He needed his customers back. Like any businessman, he decided that what he needed was a new gimmick. The one he chose happened to push the edge of homosexual acceptance in Seattle another step.

He leased a piano. It was time, he figured, to turn the Madison into a bar with live music; after all, the Garden of Allah had succeeded so well for a decade. Under city law, though, Mac's plan was illegal, because live music required a cabaret license.

Mac recalled that at first the city inspector looked the other way, aware of the bar owner's recent success in court and deciding the piano could be considered just another piece of decorative furniture. Then Mac added stools for singers. That went too far; the inspector insisted they be moved away from the piano. Mac responded by taking the stools away but sponsoring amateur nights during which anyone could stand next to the piano, either playing it or singing. They just could not sit. The inspector knew about the defiance, Mac said, but ignored it.

The bar was beginning to fill again, and the next step was obvious—at least from a business perspective, if not from a legal one. Mac remembered, "Then the girls wanted to know if they could dance. Dancing was allowed under that license, but you had to go and ask permission from the liquor inspector. But I let 'em dance anyway. Then the next thing I knew, the cabaret inspectors were up and they said, well if you're going to go ahead with this dancing, you'll have to have a policeman on the door on weekends. What the hell—on the weekends and not during the week—I don't know why. But we had to hire a policeman Friday and Saturday nights."

"That was the first gay tavern [in Seattle] that ever had dancing," he claimed. "From then on, it spread."

Margaret King, then a basketball coach teaching in Edmonds, remembered the impact Mac's decision had on her. "It was this little bar with a little dance floor. I thought I was in hog heaven," she recalled in 1992. The location and the clientele were better than what she had encountered in the bars on the mudflat. The women who went to the Madison, she said, "were all professionals. In fact, they were mostly

all teachers. That's how I started living two lives—I had my life at school teaching PE. And then on weekends, I would come to Seattle to be a lesbian."[1]

Another woman, who preferred to remain unidentified during an interview in the 1990s, also remembered the effect Mac's decision had. The Madison became so popular, she said, "We had to have police at the door because the street people wanted to come in and see what the queers were doing!"

What they were doing was something new in Seattle. Mac's almost offhand decision made the Madison the first above-ground tavern that allowed Seattle's lesbians to dance—although many still chose to dance with gay men who came into the bar. It was a bar with windows, so the activities inside could easily be seen from the street.

The women who went to the Madison and the men who tagged along with them enjoyed a sense of camaraderie. One woman interviewed for the Alice B. Theatre Oral History Project (who asked to remain anonymous) remembered, "It seemed like [gay] people in Seattle in those years were very friendly toward one another. The girls liked having the fellas there. The guys probably didn't like it as much, but they put up with us." The guys did not dance with each other. That was a step not yet taken. If men danced in the Madison, according to Mac and others, they usually stayed in couples with women.

At about $150 per month, the cop on the door was part of the extra payoff demanded to allow lesbians to dance aboveground. It required a bit of adjustment in the local beat officers' attitude, what with homosexuals suddenly being aboveground and above the Deadline and dancing. The first two officers assigned did not even bother to show because, according to Mac, they said they could not stomach the notion of the lesbian celebration going on inside the Madison. But when the cops still insisted on collecting their money, Mac brusquely told their sergeant that if he had to pay extra to allow gay women to dance, then the cops had to at least show up. A different beat officer finally agreed.

One man in particular who would eventually take note of Mac's new success was his own young bartender, Joe McGonagle, hired in 1961. He had just arrived in Seattle, fresh from duty at Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane, on the arid plain of eastern Washington. He had been eager to escape one frontier to discover another, one that had come to him by way of a party where he had danced with another airman's wife for so long that he had drawn what he thought were jealous glares from the husband. The next day the two men accidentally met, but to McGonagle's surprise, the other man was friendly and invited him for coffee at his bungalow. The wife had gone home to Seattle. A few weeks later, McGonagle stayed overnight and the two men shared a bed. Years later, in an interview, McGonagle would still remember how romantic that first experience had been, with French windows filtering the light and, outside, a lilac bush ready to bloom.[2]

As soon as he could, McGonagle sought a place where he could follow his yearn-

ings more freely, and like a gold rusher, he went west to Seattle. Concealing his age with a fake ID—he was only nineteen—McGonagle took a job at the Madison. One night, off work at Seattle's curfew hour for bars, 2 A.M., he walked the half-mile south across the Deadline and to the corner at Washington and Second. He paused at the top of the same staircase that over the decades had been eyed by Collins, Considine, Vilma, Wilhelmina, Rose Bohanan, and hundreds of other gays and lesbians. Then he walked down into the old basement.

Like everyone before him, McGonagle was in awe. "There was this big barn of a room," he remembered. "As you came down the stairs, there was a little anteroom—they had a pool table there so that people could play pool if they wanted. You walked in and to your left, from the center of the dance floor, was where the men would hang out. To your right was a smaller area where the women would sit and drink. Then there was a huge long bar that went more than half of the room."

By the time of McGonagle's arrival, the Casino was beginning to change and add a new reputation. By then, it too had added dancing. In the 1960s, in fact, the club would come to be better known among gays and lesbians in the city as "Madame Peabody's School of Dance," a kind of English prep school reference to a dance school for children learning their first steps.

The focus, then, at both the Madison and the Casino was shifting from just drinking together or watching vaudeville together to actually moving together. While few on the new dance floors were likely to have contemplated the dramatic political impact their dancing would have in Seattle, in fact there would be a significant one. Some academics, like anthropologist Judith Hanna, have analyzed the impact of dance as a type of communication among repressed minorities and observed that dance often replaces an otherwise forbidden verbal expression. Dance historian Curt Sachs noted that in the flow of body and emotion, a dancer can "escape the sober facts of his existence" and go instead to a world where "imagination, fancy and vision waken and become creative." That which cannot yet be spoken publicly can instead be danced, and so, to dance together in any sort of public setting was both to enjoy a self-acceptance and to risk giving more offense to outsiders who happened to learn about it.[3] The heterosexual tourists who visited the Garden of Allah could still safely frame the events there as theater and entertainment—after all, vaudeville had always offered female impersonation. But the display of large numbers of men and women dancing with members of the same sex and sharing physical contact could provoke surprise, if not fear, as well. Descriptions of dancing at the Casino appeared in King County court records by the late 1960s.[4]

One witness, for example, attended a Halloween party:

> By 12:30 A.M., [the Casino] contained several hundred persons, mostly men and boys, ranging in age from the late teens to the thirties. A smaller number of women of these age groups entered also, and a smaller number of men past the late thirties and early forties. A coin-operated record-playing machine furnished dance music.

> Generally, the women danced only with women; the men danced with men and boys. . . . The air in the hall was heavy, so foul that it became necessary for me to frequently seek out fresh air ducts around the sides of the room in order to avoid nausea and dizziness. Uniformed Seattle policemen were in attendance at the doorway of that establishment throughout the time I was present. At least twenty-five or thirty of the male attendees were obviously under the age of twenty years. . . . One boy, fifteen years of age, one who could not by any stretch of a knowledgeable person's mind be considered older than seventeen, entered the cafe, danced with older males, men past their middle twenties, and drank beer from a bottle which he carried around the floor. . . .
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> Conditions soon became dangerous to safety. Aisles between tables soon became slick with beer spilled from broken bottles on the floor. . . . When I took a paper sack and began picking up broken glass from one of the more obvious danger places, the act seemed singular enough to bring amused questions from one of the many scores of men who were dressed in women's gowns and party dresses. During the entire three hour-plus period that I remained . . . the scene was characterized by: men dancing with other men and with younger boys, women dancing with women, men and boys engaged in open-mouthed, hollow-jawed tongue kissing with one another, some while dancing, others while seated at tables; men and boys engaged in stroking one another's trousers directly over the buttocks, testicles and penises. . . . One far corner of the hall, off to the direct left of the entrance, was dimmer than any other area . . . and was far less frequented. . . . Occasionally, as the hours passed, isolated male couples would walk back into that area and situate themselves in the near-blind corners which parts of the wall structure afforded, and continue their kissing, embracing, and stroking while partially concealed from general view.

A public school teacher who went into the bar had this to report: "I observed young girls, some who may have been under twenty-one, dance together. Sometimes they would kiss and pet with passionate embraces. These girls would occasionally fondle their partners' buttocks in the area of the rectum and endeavor to rub their partner's genitals for the obvious purpose of sexual stimulation."

Another affidavit came from a man who went as a guest of two lesbians, seeking, as he said, "first hand knowledge of male and female homosexual activities." He was struck by the power of the dance and eventually agreed to be another man's partner.

> To sit on the sidelines and observe from a distance does not compare with actually being in the midst of the crowd. I learned more in fifteen minutes of dancing than I had learned in ten hours. . . . The majority of those dancing were males, but how they were dancing is really something to be told. No self-respecting heterosexual couple would be caught dead dancing in the manner of the homosexuals. There were all kinds of poses used in dancing. All of the couples were holding each other very

> tight and close. Legs were intertwined, kissing was profuse and when you came near to the couple you could hear little moans and groans like you read about or hear being connected with sexual ecstasy. My partner, for one, was almost crushing me, sweat pouring off of him, until it was quite sickening.

The Reverend Mark Matthews, in one of his sermons in 1908, had posed a question addressed mostly to the city's mudflat. In "Is Dance the Enemy?" he had called the dances in Seattle's public halls and saloons a "whirling maze of physical attraction . . . beneath the respect of dignified, intelligent, refined people" and had warned that dancing was "only engaged in by the most vicious, the most depraved, the most vulgar and coarsest elements of society." But to the city's homosexuals in the early 1960s, it was this sexually tinged dance that was so empowering and freeing. The country's African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s used their traditional gathering spots in churches to launch a civil rights movement. Gays and lesbians used the dance floors.

"You could go in," Joe McGonagle remembered, "and dance your ass off all night long." Stephen Blair, who had healed some of his World War II traumas at the Garden of Allah, also went to the Casino in the 1960s. "I used to go there four nights in a row because I loved to dance, to do calypsos," he said. Madame Peabody's was a celebration of the physical, an invitation to the fun of belonging. "That goddamned place was loaded," Blair said, adding with what was both a degree of exaggeration and of fond impression, "It must have held about four thousand people."[5]

Some who arrived were scared—just as Wilhelmina had been three decades earlier when she paused at the top of the staircase that led to DelleVitti's underground Casino bar. The name, Madame Peabody's, served as a protective disguise. Tamara Turner had grown up during World War II in a house above Lake Union and by the late 1950s was studying history at the University of Washington. "Somebody at the U had said something about 'All the queers go to the Double Header,'" she would remember later. "So we went down there wearing blouses and straight skirts and flats and nylons and carrying our little purses. Some prostitutes there told us there was a gay club around the corner. We bought a six-pack, and at closing time, we walked around the corner to the place below Barney's Loans—on Second and Washington. Everybody referred to it as 'Miss Peabody's' or 'Aunt Peabody's' or 'Miss Peabody's School of the Dance.' And so you could say you were going to Miss Peabody's and gays would know what you were talking about, but straights wouldn't. In those days, everybody talked in code and it was the only way." Similarly, McGonagle recalled how "One Saturday night, somebody said, 'Let's go down to Madame Peabody's.' [And I said,] 'What the hell's Madame Peabody's?'"[6]

Some who went wanted still more secrecy than was guaranteed by the code name. Turner recalled seeing two women sitting at a table with brown paper bags over their heads. "They had drawn faces on the bags, and then cut out holes for eyes, nose, and mouth," she said. As it had in the 1940s and 1950s, the club still attracted

a wide range of people. Turner remembered seeing "tough, working-class women" with short hair. "There'd usually be some really, really masculine women in white T-shirts with the sleeves rolled up to hold a pack of cigarettes, and then these other women in cocktail dresses and high heels."

By day, the Casino still drew neighborhood drinkers and pool shooters. Some were gay-friendly straight men, like one man who met Jackie Cachero, the eighteen-year-old lesbian who had been confined at Western State Hospital for three years. After her release from the asylum, Cachero had survived on the mudflat by turning tricks solely to earn money—"Ain't no way in hell I'd go to bed with some man for nothing," she said later in an interview with the lesbian newsletter *Out and About.* In the process Cachero had become pregnant, and, she said, the hospital authorities would not release her baby unless she married. "I met Mariano down at the Casino," she remembered. "They used to go down there and shoot pool all the time. . . . He kept asking me to marry him." So she did, but not in an attempt to pass as "normal." "I'm normal with women," she said.

"On our wedding night, I brought my old lady home; she slept in the middle. . . . And he said, 'Ooh, I don't care, I don't care.' So it's been him and me and my girlfriends ever since." By the time of the interview in 1979, they had been married for seventeen years. "I'm probably the only bull dagger in town that's got a husband, a wife, and seven kids," she said. She had found a place to belong.[7]

McGonagle, like many others, remembers dancing all night at Madame Peabody's and then staggering up the same staircase that Rose Bohanan had stumbled up a decade earlier. He would emerge onto the corner of Washington and Second early in the mornings. "In summertime especially," he remembered, "the sun would be just coming up and you'd think, oh Jesus, I must look like the wrath of God."

"Get me home!"