

= Barbette (performer) =

Barbette (December 19 , 1898 ? August 5 , 1973) was an American female impersonator , high @-@ wire performer , and trapeze artist born in Texas on December 19 , 1899 . Barbette attained great popularity throughout the United States but his greatest fame came in Europe and especially Paris , in the 1920s and 1930s .

Barbette began performing as an aerialist at around the age of 14 as one @-@ half of a circus act called The Alfaretta Sisters . After a few years of circus work , Barbette went solo and adopted his exotic @-@ sounding pseudonym . He performed in full drag , revealing himself as male only at the end of his act .

Following a career @-@ ending illness or injury , Barbette returned to Texas but continued to work as a consultant for motion pictures as well as training and choreographing aerial acts for a number of circuses . After years of dealing with chronic pain , Barbette committed suicide on August 5 , 1973 . Both in life and following his death , Barbette served as an inspiration to a number of artists including Jean Cocteau and Man Ray .

= = Early life and career = =

Barbette (birth name cited as Vander Clyde and Vander Clyde Broadway) was born on December 19 , 1899 , (although it is sometimes cited as 1904) in Texas . Most sources indicate he was born in Round Rock , although Barbette stated that his birthplace was Trickham . His Draft Registration Card , dated 7 September 1918 , states that his birthday was 19 December 1898 .

Some confusion surrounds the name of Barbette 's father . On a 1923 passport application , Barbette lists his father 's name as " Henry Broadway " and notes him as deceased . However , Barbette 's death certificate gives his father 's first name as " Jeff . " The death certificate lists his mother 's name as " Hattie Wilson ; " Barbette listed her name as " Mrs. E. S. Loving " on his passport application , as well as his 1918 Draft Registration form .

In the United States Census of 1900 , Barbette (then given the birth date of 19 December 1897) and his mother , Hattie Broadway (née Martin , 1879 @-@ 1949) , were living in Llano , Texas , in the household of his maternal great @-@ grandparents , Florence E. and William Paschall , a farmer . Hattie , then aged 21 , was listed as a widow on the census , while her son 's birthdate is given as December 1897 . Also living in the household was Hattie Broadway 's younger brother , Malcolm Wilson . Hattie Broadway married , as her second husband , in 1906 , Samuel E. Loving (1868 @-@ 1953) , who worked in a broom factory , and had five more children , sons Eugene Loving (1908 @-@ 1971) and Sam Paschall Loving (1917 @-@ 1996) , and daughters Hugo Loving (1910 @-@ 1912) , Bonsilene Loving (born 1914) , and Mary Martin Loving (1915 @-@ 1997) ; after his mother 's second marriage , Barbette was known as " Vander Loving " .

Barbette 's mother took him to the circus at an early age in Austin and he was fascinated by the wire act . " The first time she took me to the circus in Austin , I knew I would be a performer , and from then on I 'd work in the fields during the cotton @-@ picking season to earn money in order to go to the circus as often as possible . " Barbette practiced for hours by walking along his mother 's steel clothes line . He graduated from high school at the age of 14 .

After high school , Barbette began his circus career as one @-@ half of the aerialist team The Alfaretta Sisters . One of the sisters had died unexpectedly and Barbette answered the surviving sister 's ad for a replacement , auditioning in San Antonio . Together the pair decided that it was more dramatic for a woman to perform the acrobatic stunts . " She told me that women 's clothes always make a wire act more impressive ... and she asked me if I 'd mind dressing as a girl . I didn 't ; and that 's how it began . " Following his time as an Alfaretta , Barbette next joined an act called Erford 's Whirling Sensation . This act included three people who hung from a spinning apparatus by their teeth . He then developed his solo act and moved to the vaudeville stage . He took on the name " Barbette " , believing that it had an exotic French sound and because it could conceivably be either a first or a last name . His solo debut was at the Harlem Opera House in 1919 . Barbette performed trapeze and wire stunts in full drag , maintaining the illusion of femininity until the end of

his act , when he would pull off his wig and strike exaggerated masculine poses . For the next several years he toured the Keith Vaudeville Circuit , advertised as a " versatile specialty . "

= = The toast of Europe = =

Barbette made his European debut in 1923 , having been sent by the William Morris Agency first to England and then to Paris . He appeared in such venues as the Casino de Paris , the Moulin Rouge , the Empire , the Médrano Circus , the Alhambra Theater and the Folies Bergère .

He returned to America in 1924 to appear in The Passing Show of 1924 which ran for four months beginning in September . Also in this timeframe he became a featured attraction with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and toured London , Brussels and Berlin . It was during an engagement at the London Palladium that Barbette was found engaged in sexual activity with another man . His contract was cancelled and he was never able to obtain a work permit for England again .

Barbette was championed by avant garde artist Jean Cocteau . Cocteau wrote in 1923 to Belgian friend and critic Paul Collaer :

" Next week in Brussels , you 'll see a music @-@ hall act called ' Barbette ' that has been keeping me enthralled for a fortnight . The young American who does this wire and trapeze act is a great actor , an angel , and he has become the friend to all of us . Go and see him ... and tell everybody that he is no mere acrobat in women 's clothes , nor just a graceful daredevil , but one of the most beautiful things in the theatre . Stravinsky , Auric , poets , painters , and I myself have seen no comparable display of artistry on the stage since Nijinsky . "

To other friends he wrote " Your great loss for 1923 was Barbette ? a terrific act at the Casino de Paris ... Ten unforgettable minutes . A theatrical masterpiece . An angel , a flower , a bird . "

In 1926 Cocteau wrote an influential essay on the nature and artifice of the theatre called " Le Numéro Barbette " that was published in Nouvelle Revue Française . In this essay , Cocteau celebrates Barbette as an exemplar of theatrical artifice . " Barbette , " writes Cocteau , " transforms effortlessly back and forth between man and woman . His female glamour and elegance Cocteau likens to a cloud of dust thrown into the eyes of the audience , blinding it to the masculinity of the movements he needs to perform his acrobatics . That blindness is so complete that at the end of his act , Barbette does not simply remove his wig but instead plays the part of a man . He rolls his shoulders , stretches his hands , swells his muscles ... And after the fifteenth or so curtain call , he gives a mischievous wink , shifts from foot to foot , mimes a bit of an apology , and does a shuffling little street urchin dance ? all of it to erase the fabulous , dying @-@ swan impression left by the act . " Cocteau calls upon his fellow artists to incorporate deliberately this effect that he believes for Barbette is instinctive . Cocteau commissioned a series of photographs of Barbette by the Surrealist artist Man Ray , which captured not only aspects of Barbette 's performance but also his process of transformation into his female persona .

Cocteau cast Barbette in his experimental film *Le Sang d'un Poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*) (1930) , Cocteau 's first film . Barbette appears in a scene in a theatre box with several extras , dressed in Chanel gowns , who burst into applause at the sight of a card game that ends in suicide . He replaced the Vicomtesse de Noailles , who along with her husband had originally shot the scene but were appalled upon seeing the finished film , as the card game / suicide had been shot separately . Speaking of his preparation for the scene , Barbette , who knew he was replacing the Vicomtesse , said ,

" I tried to imagine myself a descendant of the Marquis de Sade , of the Comtesse de Chevalier ... and a long line of rich bankers ? all of which the Vicomtesse was . For a boy from Round Rock , Texas , that demanded a lot of concentration ? at least as much as working on the wire . "

Cocteau fell in love with the Barbette persona but their affair was short @-@ lived . Others in Barbette 's European circle included Josephine Baker , Anton Dolin , Mistinguett and Sergei Diaghilev .

Barbette is credited with having returned to the United States in 1935 to star on Broadway in the Billy Rose circus musical *Jumbo* . However , some sources suggest that this may have been a Barbette impersonator .

= = End of performing career and later life = =

Barbette continued to perform until the mid @-@ to @-@ late 1930s . Most sources report the year as 1938 , while others as early as 1936 and as late as 1942 . The end of Barbette 's performing career is attributed to a number of causes including a fall , pneumonia , polio , or some combination of the three . All generally agree that whatever the cause , Barbette was left in extreme pain and in need of surgery and extensive rehabilitation to allow him to walk again . He became the artistic director and aerialist trainer for a number of circuses , including Ringling Bros. and the Shrine Circus.His work with Ringling Bros. has been described as " reinvent [ing] the aerial ballet " . The Bird Cage Girls , The Swing High Girls , The Whirl Girls and the Cloud Swing Girls were among the female aerialist troupes whose routines were Barbette 's specialty . Barbette served as a consultant on a number of films , including the circus sequences for Till the Clouds Roll By (1946) and The Big Circus (1959) , and was hired to coach Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis on gender illusion for the film Some Like It Hot (1959) . Cocteau biographer Francis Steegmuller wrote a profile of Barbette for The New Yorker in 1969 entitled " An Angel , A Flower , A Bird " . He created the circus sequences for the Orson Welles @-@ produced Broadway musical Around the World . Barbette created the aerial ballet for Disney on Parade and toured with it in Australia from 1969 through 1972 .

Barbette spent his last months in Texas , living in Round Rock and Austin with his sister , Mary Cahill , often in severe pain . He committed suicide by overdose on August 5 , 1973 . He was survived by his sister Mary and a half @-@ brother , Sam Loving . Barbette was cremated and his ashes were buried in Round Rock Cemetery .

= = Cultural legacy = =

In addition to Cocteau 's essay Le Numéro Barbette and his appearance in Le Sang d 'un Poete , Barbette also inspired the characterization of " Death " in Cocteau 's play Orphée . The book Barbette , collecting Cocteau 's essay , the New Yorker profile by Steegmuller , Man Ray 's photographs and other material , was published in 1989 . Alfred Hitchcock based a character in the 1930 film Murder ! on Barbette . Different Fleshes is a book @-@ length poem about Barbette written by Albert Goldbarth . It won the Voertman Poetry Award from the Texas Institute of Letters . In 1993 , performance artist John Kelly , under commission from the Brooklyn Academy of Music , based his piece Light Shall Lift Them on him . Barbette 's story is also told in the play , Barbette , written by Bill Lengfelder and David Goodwin and first presented in Dallas , Texas , in 2003 .

Barbette may have been the inspiration for the 1933 German film , Viktor und Viktoria , which features a plot about a woman pretending to be a female impersonator , whose gimmick of removing her wig at the end of her act is " inspired by [Barbette 's] signature gesture . " Viktor und Viktoria was remade in 1935 (First a Girl) , 1957 (Viktor und Viktoria) and 1982 (Victor Victoria , which inspired a 1992 Broadway musical of the same name) .

A French restaurant in Minneapolis is named Barbette after the aerialist .