

Queer Histories -Trailblazer Jean Guilda: From the Shadows to the Spotlight

Q2Q: A Symposium on Queer Theatre and Performance in Canada

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The year was 1985 and it was my first trip to Montreal. A good friend from Vancouver had moved back to Laval and was showing me the highlights of French Canadian culture. We climbed to the top of Mont Royal; we explored the history of Old Montreal; and we went to a play one evening. Although my friend knew nothing about the world of drama, he knew that theatre was my area of study; in addition, his parents' favourite artist was starring in the show. I noticed that the audience was comprised of a different kind of theatre-goer than I was used to seeing. This was not the fashionable elite I had seen coming out of the Place des Arts. This was more of a blue-collar crowd; working-class people who were dressed in their best Sears party dresses and suits. The pre-curtain chatter was a wonderful din of francophone energy. Then the house lights dimmed, the curtain rose and the drawing room farce began. About five minutes into the play the leading lady made her entrance. Down the staircase came a stunning Hollywood vision, perfectly coiffed and groomed, every inch the femme fatale. The audience cheered and broke into applause. She spoke her first line. It was a man in a dress. It was Guilda.

Jean Guilda was a self-identified "transformist" whose career in theatre, film, television and cabaret spanned six decades and ended with his death in 2011 at the age of eighty-eight. Guilda was a trail blazer in that he performed to mixed audiences, straight and gay, in early

1950's Montreal, a time when female impersonation was considered "illegitimate performance" (Ferris, 107). Jean Guilda was a Canadian entertainment pioneer whose story is largely unknown to English Canadians. In the last sixty years, during a time when professional female impersonators performed primarily on the stages of gay nightclubs, Jean Guilda, also known as Guilda, used his beauty, charisma, professionalism, media savvy, design skills and exceptional talent to escape from homophobia and discrimination and to find fame and acceptance as a mainstream performer in Quebec.

In Jean Guilda's 1979 autobiography, he claimed to be the son of Italian nobility, the Comtesse de Mortellaro (150). At age fourteen, he ran away from home to join the Ballet de Monte Carlo (Rolland). In his autobiographies, he states that he trained as an actor, a stand-up comic, a singer, a model and an artist. During the occupation of Paris in the Second World War he discovered he could make money doing drag acts for German soldiers. However, the Gestapo subsequently chased him out of Europe after they had put a bounty on his life for hiding Jews (Rolland). After escaping to New York, he worked in the United States until his American work permit ran out, and he then relocated to Montreal in 1954. When he arrived in Montreal there was no welcoming mat, so with tenacity Guilda decided he would carve out his own new territory: "There was not a market for *travesties*, so I created one. I knew my *métier*. I am a professional female impersonator" (Hustak). His show opened at Chez Paree later that year and his act was an instant hit (Hustak). Guilda soon became a household name, known as the colorful and scandalous icon of French Canadian drag. She embodied the grand musical review tradition of glamour and more glamour (Rothan).

In her journey to acceptance, Guilda was aided by her physical beauty and charisma. In a Radio-Canada interview, her long-time arranger Vic Vogel described her legacy as being a very

special love story between Guilda and the Quebec public; the latter thought she was a phenomenon. In the same interview, Guilda herself noted that she felt “loved by the public and was asked everywhere” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). Guilda’s beauty is evident when one observes her untouched candid photographs. It is not obvious that she is a man, but it is obvious that she is stunningly beautiful in a classic movie-star way. One of her long-time producers, impresario Gilles Latulippe, indicated how she was greatly admired: “Often in a room filled with women, he was the most beautiful” (Hustak).

When observing the audiences in any of Guilda’s archival videos, the viewer sees that there are many middle-aged women in attendance. Speaking to the *Globe & Mail*, impresario Gilles Latulippe said, “A large part of Guilda’s following was women, who admired his makeup artistry” (Hustak). They would also have admired his couture wardrobe, expensive jewelry, furs and custom hair designs from Madame Rosina Seminaro of *Perruque Louis XIV* (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). The women appear to admire Guilda in the same way they would be excited to be in the presence of a glamorous and famous star like Dietrich; but Guilda was their very own, a star of Quebec. Their husbands, while being entertained by Guilda’s talent, appear to also be titillated and intrigued by her beauty and charm, perhaps adding a layer of enjoyment and acceptance to their experience because they were in on the secret that this stunning diva was in fact a father of three.

A moving scene from Lois Siegel’s documentary illustrates the love that everyday Quebecers had for their Guilda. A six-foot-two bearded man who does drag is trying on size eleven ladies’ high heels in a little corner shoe store in the small town of St. Anne de Belleville. The rather confused, yet gracious owner is a white-haired senior in a cheap suit and tie. As he concludes the sale, he asks his customer to please tell his friends that the store carries large shoe

sizes. The customer replies that he will tell Guilda. The owner cracks a huge schoolboy smile and with a little bow replies “That would be a thrill for me” (*Lip Gloss*).

Guilda’s daring and charisma surely contributed to her popularity, as evident from an examination of a publicity still from one of her shows. Guilda, appearing at her most glamorous à la Marilyn Monroe, stands between two naked young men, handsome faces showing but with their bare derrières pointed to the camera. Perhaps this is not too shocking today, but the photo was taken in Catholic Quebec in the early 1960’s (Guilda 1979, 172).

The Québécois media was an important partner in the journey to fame and acceptance of media-savvy Guilda. Jean Guilda “led the kind of life that fed headlines to the Quebec tabloids for decades” (Rothon). Portrayed in his two autobiographies and substantiated by many newspapers and tabloids of the time (“Lover’s suicide” *Globe and Mail*, “Group sex in Monaco” *Xtra West*, “Outrageous feats” *La Presse*) are all the scandalous details of his marriages, his divorces, his children, his multiple affairs with handsome younger men, his extravagant purchases, and his subsequent bankruptcies. One of the most shocking stories that kept him in the public eye was the 2006 revelation of his relationship with a sixteen-year-old boy, whom he had variously claimed as his son, nephew or cousin (Hustak). Tragically the boy, Ivan, who Guilda said was “the love of his life” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*), committed suicide — a tragedy that inspired even more newspapers, books and media reports focusing on Guilda. Another front-page story occurred in 1996 when Guilda reunited with his daughter Gaye. Her mother had kidnapped her and moved to Seattle, telling Gaye that her father had died. Thirty-nine years later, long after the death of her mother, her stepfather sent her a box in the mail. The contents of the box revealed to Gaye that her father was in fact still alive; this led to the reunion that caused another media frenzy in Quebec (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). In the Radio-Canada documentary, Guilda’s old co-

worker Marie Marcelle shows Gaye a copy of the tabloid *Echos Vedettes*, the headline screaming “*Un Histoire Incroyable! Jean Guilda Finds His Daughter*”. Even more than forty years after she achieved her Canadian fame, Guilda was still big news to Québécois, as evidenced by the front page cover picture and an additional full two pages of interviews and photos of the reunited father and daughter.

Jean Guilda understood what the media and his public wanted, and he gave it to them. Throughout his career Guilda often worked for the Mafia, and the press and fans were titillated to hear of the famous gift of a seven-carat diamond a Mafia Don admirer gave Guilda. News outlets and consumers alike were even more shocked to hear that, to spare Guilda a divorce from his third wife, the mob had offered to kill her for five hundred dollars (Rothan). To fan the flames even further, Guilda was quoted as saying that the mafia were “the best employers I ever had” (Rothan). When Guilda’s galleries of publicity photos are viewed online and in her two autobiographies, it is clear she knew how to craft events, such as the purchase of her thirty thousand-dollar chinchilla coat or her eleven-carat emerald ring, into a media event for the press.

Guilda used other celebrities to summon the press in order to keep her star shining bright. In addition to her Québécois fans, the rich and famous flocked to her shows. Numerous archival photos show her receiving well-known personalities back-stage or entertaining them at post-show dinners. Her admirers included Princess Grace and stars of the day Josephine Baker (Guilda 2009, 166), Edith Piaf (Guilda 1979, 71), Charles Aznavour, Gloria Swanson (Guilda, *1001 Vies*) and Maurice Chevalier (Guilda 2009, 176).

The love affair between Guilda and the Quebec media lasted more than fifty years. Even in later years when she performed less, she could always find ways of staying in the public eye, whether in the form of a new media stunt, a personal appearance, or the promotion of a new

record album. Guilda was not above using other humans or animals to ensure he kept his fans and audience captivated. Over his sixty-year career sons, daughters, handsome lovers, visiting celebrities and a parade of various small dogs were often on, or in, Guilda's arms.

For those who hired Guilda, the extra media attention came as a blessing, ensuring that business was good. Radio-Canada reported that she performed for thirty-three years at Montreal's Theatre de Variété. Sometimes she was so popular that she had to perform four shows a night. Impresario Gilles Latulippe was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* saying, "He did a minimum of one hundred shows a year. He never missed a season. He was a perfectionist. He left nothing to chance. His was an enormous talent. He did it all. He was a chameleon, the real thing" (Hustak). Radio-Canada further reported that in a Quebec City theatre, Chez Gerard, Guilda had been a *tour de force* by setting a record that no other artist had ever accomplished when she performed a sold-out thirty-five-week run. They called her an elegant perfectionist who had a great amount of talent. (Guilda, *1001 Vies*).

A great testament to Guilda's staying power is exhibited by her thirty-three year run at the Theatre de Variété where her keen design sense of spectacle and theatricality shone brightest. One of her most famous entrances was in a show called *Au Secours*, where she was literally parachuted into the onstage scene of an airplane crash, flown in by a crane in the style of a *deus ex machina* goddess (Guilda 2009, 129). She also loved historical productions and was famous for her Cleopatra character. A publicity still from that production shows Guilda wearing not much more than a ruby-encrusted snake headdress and breastplate, surrounded by six young muscled male dancers, two of whom were wearing gold horse heads (Guilda 1979, 173). An American booking found her as the star attraction at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas for the princely sum of US\$ 8,000.00 a week (Guilda 2009, 92). A 1953 photograph seems to have

omitted the sides of the stage so it is difficult to determine the exact number of cast members, as some may have been left out of the picture. What is very clear is that the audience is giving a standing ovation to a final tableau of the cast of approximately twenty-four showgirls, male dancers and female backup singers. At the centre of the stage stand two gentlemen, arms fully extended holding Guilda above them. She is costumed in a Cinderella ball gown, topped with an octopus-like headdress comprised of eight-foot tentacles made of boas that artfully form a waterfall onto the top of her head. I calculated that the distance from the floor of the stage to the top of her headdress would have measured a minimum of seventeen feet. In an interview taken from Siegel's documentary, Guilda claims to have been a Vegas ground-breaker, the first female impersonator to headline in that entertainment capital and now world-famous for such shows (*Lip Gloss*).

Another example of her design skill and use of spectacle is visible in a photograph from her 1965 ground-breaking engagement at Montreal's Place des Arts. This theatre hosts ballets, operas and other prestigious arts presentations; the press reported that the cultural élite in Montreal were aghast that Guilda would give a show there. It was a controversial matter as evident from one of the headlines of the time that asked, "Guilda at the Place des Arts? What's Going On?" (Guilda 2009, 163). *La Presse* reported that Guilda "was snubbed by some theatrical intelligentsia, but accepted without moral judgement by the working classes" (St-Jacques). The people came to support her, and Guilda's 1965 show "filled the Place des Arts (Guilda 1979, 163). The photograph from the production (Guilda 2009, 163) shows Guilda at the height of her powers of dazzling Quebec audiences with spectacle. She is surrounded by a small army of showgirls in jewelled bikinis and three foot headdresses. Guilda herself is costumed in a black armless gown. Her headdress is constructed of very delicate and exotic ostrich feathers, and is as

tall as she is. Her matching cape and satin-lined train needed to be held by two male dancers, as it appears to have measured approximately fifteen feet wide and was manipulated to stand up behind her to a height of at least twelve feet. *Xtra West* reported that there were never enough sequins, feathers, dancers, or chorus girls for Guilda (Rothon). Guilda's image was described by journalist Sylvie St-Jacques as a "triumph of extravagant toilette; feathers wigs, mystery and ambiguity" (*La Presse*).

Jean Guilda's most potent weapon in his rise to fame and acceptance was sheer talent. In 1968 he was given a *tour de force* opportunity to show off his acting skills in the Radio-Canada dramatic production of *Les Grands Esprits*. His character, the Chevalier d'Eon, was a notorious diplomat and spy; he was one of the most fascinating and intriguing characters of eighteenth century France (D'Auria, 345). D'Eon presented in the first half of his life as a male career diplomat and writer. The latter part of his life, mostly spent in England, he presented as a woman, the Chevalière d'Eon. For many years, D'Eon's sex was hotly debated throughout Europe (Devor, 8). In addition to realistically presenting as both sexes, the actor would be required to exhibit skills from the masculine and soldierly, to those of feminine diplomacy. An actor of great ability was required to handle both the physicality and the classical language style of the period. Jean Guilda was just the man, and woman, for the role and his performance won him many critical plaudits (Rothon). The footage has been saved so that audiences may readily view it for themselves today on YouTube (Darcen). The acting is of the highest quality, making it so unfortunate to know that Jean Guilda had few other opportunities to demonstrate his abilities as a leading man. Upon his death, this performance received rave reviews that the mainstream media reports (*La Presse*, Radio-Canada, *Globe and Mail*) universally noted as being a highlight of his career.

Having exhibited such professional talent in a historical drama was surely one of the reasons that following this performance, the respect from Guilda's public and the media grew even greater. Jean Guilda had proved he was not just a cross-dressing cabaret act. If his chorus girls, songs and dance, even his wigs and gowns were to be removed, what was left for the world to see was a fine actor who was also a consummate professional.

Guilda's talent and longevity are also evident in the facts about her career achievements. These include her recording five record albums, creating and performing in over sixty-five plays and theatrical revues (Guilda, 2009, 198), and appearing to critical acclaim in over one hundred film and television projects (Rothan). In Siegel's documentary film about female impersonators, Guilda is celebrated as "the finest female impersonator in Canada, or anywhere in the world" (*Lip Gloss*).

Jean Guilda's career and media prominence positively affected gender issues and gender awareness in Quebec society. This entertainment pioneer found a way to be a mainstream star for Francophone Canadians when, as sociologist Michele Dorias says, "Even people who were homophobic loved Guilda at a time when the phrase sexual diversity did not exist" (St-Jacques). Radio-Canada reported that Guilda was the first person who "brought the aspect of sexual diversity to Quebec" (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). Her accomplishments and acceptance helped pave a path for modern Quebecers to be more accepting of homosexuality, transsexuals and drag queens in both the entertainment world and society itself. She did this by projecting an image that was understood by society, not *gay* or *queer*, but, as *La Presse* called it, "a friendly sexual ambiguity" (St-Jacques). The English-language national newspaper the *Globe and Mail* also wrote: "He was accepted without moral judgement by audiences who recognized his talent" (Hustak). Guilda's long-time presenter Yves Desgagnes echoed that sentiment, saying, "Guilda was accepted

without moral judgement by the working classes, who heartily enjoyed his performances and elegance” (St-Jacques).

Jean Guilda was an “icon of popular culture and precursor to sexual diversity (St-Jacques). However, in a Radio-Canada interview University of Laval sociologist Michel Dorais stated he found that “Guilda’s stardom was surprising because he was the antithesis of what a male is in Quebec” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). Dorais further noted in a *La Presse* interview upon Guilda’s death that he had conquered that challenge because, “the audience was always curious about the mystery of Guilda; she made transvestism comfortable at a time when it was seen as something scary” (St-Jacques). Radio-Canada reported that Guilda was the first person who “brought the aspect of sexual diversity to Quebec” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). According to Michelle Dorian and Mado, Guilda succeeded in opening the doors for others, blazing a trail for many of today’s well-known cross-dressing performers of Quebec (Guilda, *1001 Vies*).

Did Jean Guilda achieve mainstream acceptance because *she* was so beautiful and *passed* as a woman? In one of his autobiographies, Guilda says he was not considered for a starring role in *La Cage Aux Folles* because he looked too much like a woman, not a transvestite. In a Radio-Canada interview, Jean Guilda says he wanted to work as a man but “she” (Guilda), would refuse the contracts. In another interview he said that he tried to work as a man but there were no contracts for him (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). It could be argued that the reason he was not offered work as a man is the same reason why he was able to achieve such acceptance from heterosexual Quebecers. It is understandable that potential engagers were conflicted when major newspapers like *La Presse* named a man, Jean Guilda, “the most beautiful woman in Montreal” (Rolland).

Interested in examining this issue further, I chose one of the most arresting photographs of Guilda (Guilda 1979, 154), and conducted an unscientific survey. Every person I asked for

comment saw a stunningly beautiful woman who had just accepted a “Quebec Oscar” awards statuette and was sharing the moment with what they guessed to be her adorable, approximately five-year-old daughter. They weren’t sure who the woman was but she looked familiar and surely was a Hollywood movie star. They were then shocked when I told them it was in fact a photo of a French Canadian father and his daughter. Guilda was certainly talented, but I believe this anecdote illustrates one of the reasons that she jumped the final hurdle to mainstream acceptance. Guilda embodied the feminine ideal, allowing her to rise above discrimination. She never hid the fact that even with the tools of her trade, the couture gowns, diamonds, furs, expert makeup, corsetry, and wigs, underneath remained a man in a dress. In footage from an awards banquet, the television host admires her beauty and compliments her on her beautiful teeth. Guilda demonstrated her charm and charisma when she exclaimed to him, “That’s the only real thing I have” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*).

Guilda was “a single visionary who appropriated the ultimate femininity” (St-Jacques). The fact that she was “closer to the world of her generation’s mainstream entertainment than to contemporary queer culture” (Rothon) is what made her so accessible to her public. Add to that her talents in acting, singing, dancing, design, combined with her charisma and media savvy, it is understandable and admirable how Jean Guilda was able to avoid homophobia and discrimination and find fame and acceptance as a mainstream performer in Quebec.

The *Globe and Mail* reported that Guilda’s last performance happened “after a Toronto newspaper had declared Jean Guilda dead” (Hustak). At the age of eighty-four, Guilda decided to return to the stage *une dernière fois*, one last time, just to prove that he was alive” (Hustak). Radio-Canada cameras caught the final preparations as he sat at his mirror to create his alter ego. The bald elderly man in the crumpled undershirt laboriously applied his eye make-up. He is

shown later in the film being escorted into the engagement, looking composed and regal in a very matronly, yet sparkling gown. The delicious irony here is that his final booking was at the request of the Knights of Columbus, which is not only an international fellowship of Catholic men, but also only those Catholic men “who accept the teaching authority of the Catholic church on all matters of faith and morals” (Knights, 2,3). Jean Guilda himself was a Catholic who lived in the very Roman Catholic province of Quebec. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* contains six full texts of scripture that are listed as biblical condemnations of homosexual behavior. In fact, Volume 7 reports that the twenty-first century Catholic Medical Association continues to hold that homosexuality is preventable and treatable for those so motivated (67). Guilda’s final engagement and his funeral both attest to the fact that the fame and respect he was accorded, even from the Catholic Church, trumped his life of church taboos and many publicly reported affairs with men, including the aforementioned sixteen-year-old purportedly adopted son.

Upon Guilda’s death, the public was invited to attend the ceremony held July 6, 2011 at Montreal’s grand L’Eglise Saint-Viateur d’Outremont (Rolland). As viewed in the *1001 Vies* footage of Radio-Canada, an elegant, somber crowd files into the church. A uniformed church official’s white gloves hold the black and gold box of cremated remains. He leads two priests up the centre aisle to the altar where he places the box beside a bouquet of white lilies. A dual photograph of Guilda at her most glamorous and Jean at his most handsome sits incongruously in front of a painting of *The Last Supper*. In the eulogy, the priest calls Guilda “the incomparable, the unique, the magnificent” (Guilda, *1001 Vies*). The quintessential confirmation that Jean Guilda had escaped homophobia and found acceptance in Quebec was obvious from the respect and great honor the Roman Catholic hierarchy showed both *him* and *her*, in his last performance, albeit in a box.

As I concluded my research, the thought that lingered most was the realization that cross-dressing, both on and off the stage, has been part of many different cultures over the past two millennia. As with many other aspects of human nature, society's view of cross-dressing changes with the times. Over time, judgement has moved from accepted practice, to contentious, to controversial, to respectable, to unrespectable, to banned, to illegal, to today where it has returned to be seen, once again, as more accepted in our society. Cross-dressing acting roles win Oscars (Jared Leto), Golden Globes (Jeffrey Tambor) and Emmy awards (Laverne Cox). Dame Edna is our favourite queer auntie, transgender actress Ms. Cox makes the cover of *Time*, and a celebrated American male Olympic athlete says "Call Me Caitlyn" and dons a frilly corset for the cover of *Vanity Fair*. With his exceptional attributes manifest in his work, Jean Guilda was able to challenge the establishment, escaping the homophobia of his time and helping to pave the way to a greater social acceptance of this behaviour today. Even the modern Girl Guides have the welcome mat out for the transgender youth of 2016.

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