

# From Lucile's Showroom to Ziegfeld's Stage: Fashion, Celebrity Culture and Theatre Spectacle

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## **Abstract**

In 1916 the couturière Lucile, Lady Duff Gordon (1862-1935), transformed her fashion show into a war charity revue on the New York stage, featuring her house models in current fashions. It became a successful vaudeville touring production conceived entirely by Lucile, starring her fashions, models, and herself. She is responsible for the celebrity fashion model – finding, training, and renaming exotic beauties as her shows' stars. Phyllis Francatelli starred in the title role of Lucile's revue, *Fleurette's Dream* at Peronne, while Dolores (born Kathleen Mary Rose) became a famous showgirl in Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies*, where she continued to promote Lucile's fashions by wearing them on stage. Having been introduced by Ziegfeld's wife, Lucile designed fashion costumes for both his *Follies* and *Midnight Frolics* from 1915 through 1919. Ziegfeld was able to take Lucile's fashion theatre to a new level, combining his provocative revues with outrageous theatrical costume and turning the audience's interest in current fashion into theatrical entertainment unto itself. Ziegfeld and Lucile's fashions helped create the visual identities and thus the celebrity power of Ina Claire, Marilyn Miller, as well as Dolores and other "Ziegfeld girls". This paper draws upon research from photographs, magazine and newspaper articles, Ziegfeld programs, and the Locke Robinson scrapbooks at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts as well as Lucile's sketches and scrapbooks in the library of the Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY. This paper will examine what these stage stars were wearing and why Lucile's name was so important to the fashions of the shows, providing new research in understanding this period's imaging of American women.

**Key Words:** Lucile, Florenz Ziegfeld, revue, fashion show, stage fashion, theatrical fashion, celebrity, model.

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[Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.] sat in the stalls...and saw the curtain go up on a scene which might have come out of the *Arabian Nights*. Dolores, a wonderful and magnificent Dolores, in an Eastern gown of brocade sheathing her slim figure, glimmering like an

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opal with every movement, walked slowly across the stage, turned this way and that, her incomparable head held disdainfully high, and disappeared through the curtains.<sup>1</sup>

This is how the couturière, Lucile, recounts the theatre impresario Florenz Ziegfeld's first experience at one of her fashion shows in New York. Her description of the fashion model Dolores – her exotic garments as well as her performance – could easily be mistaken for a scene from a Ziegfeld revue. Lucy Lady Duff Gordon (1862-1935) opened her first couture house, Maison Lucile, in 1894 in London and by 1905 had established Lucile Ltd. at 23 Hanover Square.<sup>2</sup> In 1910, she opened a New York branch at West 36<sup>th</sup> Street, in 1911 she opened a branch in Paris, and in 1915 in Chicago. By 1915 Lucile was based in New York and was holding her three hour-long fashion shows at a New York theatre because the crowds could not fit into her salon.<sup>3</sup> It is at this fashion show, where Ziegfeld discovered both Lucile's fashion designs and his future star, Dolores.

Ziegfeld attended with his wife Billie Burke, an American who first found fame as a singer and actress in London. She was probably already dressed by Lucile's London branch by the time she arrived in New York in 1907.<sup>4</sup> By the end of 1915, Lucile had designed fashion costumes (as opposed to typical revue costumes) for both the *Ziegfeld Follies* and his *Midnight Frolics* and continued her association with him into 1919.

Early in her career, by 1900, while still based in London, Lucile had installed a ramp and curtained stage in her couture house salon.<sup>5</sup> The stage was an important tool, present in all her couture houses. Further adding to the theatricality of her fashion shows, she replaced the usual numbers identifying each design with descriptive, and often provocative, names. For example, she named a fur trimmed chiffon and lace tea gown, 'Controlled Sin'.

Some names, such as 'Dangerous Ground' she liked so much she reused them, once for a scarlet tulle dance dress, once for a panniered dark blue ball gown, and once for a 'tempest blue' and gold printed velvet and chiffon draped gown.<sup>6</sup> Other scandalous names, such as 'Her Climax' referred to utterly respectable ensembles, in this case a blue charmeuse and white lace afternoon gown. And sometimes she would simply attach the name of an already famous client to a gown in her style, such as the 'Lily Elsie' and the 'Mary Pickford'.<sup>7</sup> Lucile was so associated with these evocative names, adding to the complex drama underlying her fashion shows, that by 1910 London plays could reference them for laughs. The 1914 play by Edward Knoblock, *My Lady's Dress*, satirized the practice with a gown named 'Take Me.' The finale was a fashion show by a fictional couturier, whose salon contained a small stage.<sup>8</sup>

Several years after Lucile and other designers including Poiret, established the fashion show as theatrical spectacle and created the modern dress – and body – by disguarding the corset, Lucile and Ziegfeld upped the theatrical experience. They

had help from the dance director Ned Wayburn, whom scholars have incorrectly given the majority of credit to for inventing the Ziegfeld walk,<sup>9</sup> and the set designer Joseph Urban. Together they created a scene where showgirls, some of whom were former Lucile models, enter the stage by tearing through framed paper painted with the outline of the Lucile dress they were each modelling — fashion illustrations come to life.<sup>10</sup>

Lucile always understand - and exploited - the theatrical impact of her dresses, her models, and her clients. She capitalized on this knowledge by not only designing costumes for the theatre from early in her career, but by dressing well-known entertainers on and off the stage. She created an inseparable bond between the personalities who wore her designs and the undeniable personality of her designs. Her influence was considerable, and she ventured so far as to mould, and often create, some of these stars' personalities.<sup>11</sup> This was especially true in her collaboration with Ziegfeld.

But what was this personality that her clothes imparted? There is a distinct 'Lucile look', and one can often identify a Lucile dress even without seeing a label or reading a credit line. Her designs are ethereal, and flamboyant, often asymmetrical, made from multiple layers of several colours of chiffon and satin – with more satin, lace, brocade, fur, velvet, and beaded trimmings. Some designs are combinations of different pastel colours, and others fusions of bright colours. In fact, she had an extremely varied repertoire of styles – from romantic to exotic to historicizing to modern. And although she may be better known for her over-the-top theatrical creations and tea gowns, she also created elegant, trim day suits that were a staple of her own wardrobe.

In 1916 Lucile, probably stimulated by her collaboration with Ziegfeld (and possibly due to financial hardship),<sup>12</sup> took her fashion shows to a heightened level of entertainment by creating a revue benefiting a World War I charity. Her first show, – *Chansons Vivantes* – was a theatricalised fashion show, starring her models in her latest designs. It was staged at the Plaza Hotel's Gold Ballroom in 1916 and was quickly followed in 1917 with the fashion play, *Fleurette's Dream at Peronne*, at the Little Theatre and later at the Palace Theatre.<sup>13</sup> *Fleurette's Dream* became a successful vaudeville touring production conceived and executed entirely by Lucile, starring her fashions, her models, and herself, all acting out a rather flimsy wartime plot. Fleurette, a young Parisian model, hides in a cellar from German airstrikes. She acts out the dream she has of her former life: strolling and shopping with friends, hosting a party, and dressing for an evening out, complete with multiple wardrobe changes for herself and her friends. A *New York Times* review recommended that, 'It's military environment is rather unnecessary, and an equally striking effect would have been achieved by dropping all pretence of narrative and merely parading the mannequins across the stage.'<sup>14</sup> Although in her autobiography *Discretions and Indiscretions*, Lucile takes full credit for this new fashion entertainment, she was in fact, contributing to an established tradition of

pageants, charity performances, and touring revue acts that capitalized on the inherent entertainment factor in fashion, and created shows where fashion was the star.

By 1915 a book titled, *American Pageantry* by the journalist Ralph Davol, was published on the history of this phenomenon from the vantage point of an observer of the many contemporary pageants. In May of 1915 *Vogue* covered "The Old Fashion Fête" hosted by Pratt Institute of Art students at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which starred historical costumes.<sup>15</sup> In April *Vogue's* second "Fashion Fête" had been staged at the Palace Theatre – where Lucile would later stage her own *Fleurette's Dream at Peronne*.<sup>16</sup> In this production, which also went on the vaudeville circuit, a *Vogue* cover illustration enlarged to life size was flipped back to reveal a model wearing a design from the pages of the magazine. Two Lucile dresses were included among those by Lanvin, Jenny, and other couturiers. Probably unique to Lucile's fashion shows and fashion plays was the intense publicity generated by her models, who were already established celebrities; some were able to use these fashion plays as springboards to theatrical careers.

Lucile created the fame of her fashion models – finding, training, and renaming exotic beauties as her shows' stars.<sup>17</sup> She was the first fashion designer to actively recruit and cultivate models as personalities unto themselves. Each model's individual personality inspired her, and she created her designs by draping directly on them. This also allowed her designs to be shown to their best advantage on her idea of an ideal type, which she believed would make the best impact on fashion show audiences and in the media. First in London – as early as the turn of the century – she assembled a group of beautiful women, each with her own unique attributes, and trained them in stage presence, posing, and her 'slithering' Lucile walk.<sup>18</sup> This coaching, along with their association with Lucile, made several of these women celebrities. They became 'it girls' known for their star power, often their sex appeal alone, and not for any other more traditional talent. In Lucile's autobiography she remembers how men used to wait outside her couture house, hoping for a chance to present flowers and other tokens of their affection to her models.<sup>19</sup> By 1917 in New York, these models included, Hebe, Dinarzade (born Lillian Mulligan), Arjamand, who answered Lucile's ad for, 'the thinnest girl in the world', Phyllis (born Dorothy Francatelli), and most importantly, Dolores (born Kathleen Mary Rose). Phyllis starred in the title role in *Fleurette's Dream*, while Dolores continued to promote Lucile's fashions by wearing them as a Ziegfeld showgirl.

It was Ziegfeld, now famous for his glamorized image of the American-girl, who took Lucile's fashion theatre and the vogue for fashion pageantry to the next level. His productions advanced the public's interest in fashion as entertainment unto itself and he packaged the showgirl as a glorified commodity to be consumed through her presentation of dress. Ziegfeld's productions and

Lucile's fashions helped create the celebrity power of actress 'it girls' Ina Claire and Marilyn Miller, as well as the original model-turned-actress, Dolores, and other 'Ziegfeld girls'.

The fact that many of Lucile's modern day fashion designs had an element of costume in them with their theatrical flair made her an ideal choice as a stage designer, especially for Ziegfeld's productions. Her stage costumes were often strikingly similar to her current fashion designs, undeniably sharing the same influences and creative developments. And sometimes, as was common among other fashion designers', the dresses on stage were pulled directly from her showroom.<sup>20</sup> The dress 'Terrible Temptations' is one example of this.

In the fall of 1915 there was a general shift in fashion's silhouette seen in the work of many designers, not just Lucile. The slender tubular silhouette of 1907-1914 with its high waistline, gave way to a wider silhouette with a looser waistline and a shorter, fuller, skirt. These fashions influenced by the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were nonetheless still very modern. They were often in sheer layers of fabric held out with hoops and showing pantalettes underneath, a style, which soon became the rage on stage. The February 15, 1915 issue of *Vogue* shows a photograph of the actress and dancer Alice Muffat dressed in such an outfit for her role in *Lady Luxury*, in which the caption states, '...Lucile chooses a favourite model, shown also at her New York opening.'<sup>21</sup> This dress silhouette continues to turn up in countless variations in Lucile's designs for Ziegfeld's.

The Lucile client who is best known for this style of dress is the dancer Irene Castle, a sometime performer on the Ziegfeld stage. She wore a famous version in the 1914 musical *Watch Your Step*, now in the collection at The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Irene Castle was photographed in the costume in the February 1, 1915 issue of *Vogue*, with the caption:

She who runs [to see the show] may read Lucile in every line and flower and fleck of colour of the costume...As for line, here is the right bodice fitting low over the skirt and the not too much and not too little flare of skirt which Lucile insists upon... Beneath all, barely visible are pantalets of lace.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, in the same article there is also a small line-drawing of a similar *Watch Your Step* costume with this shorter skirt and pantalettes, with the caption, 'One part audacity, two parts pantalets, and the most important part, the fact that Mrs. Vernon Castle designed it and her mother made it.'<sup>23</sup> This text suggests that it may have been Irene Castle, and not Lucile who first hit upon this dance-friendly silhouette. This is evidence that Lucile and her designs did not just help to create stars, but that the influence also went in the opposite direction – with Lucile's star clients inspiring, even generating the impetus for her designs.

The role of dance, both social dance and performance dance, played an important role in fashion. Stage performers and dancing stars in particular were very likely to either create or at least help introduce new fashions. They needed performance wear that allowed for increased range of motion when new dance steps were created.<sup>24</sup> Lucile would collaborate with these stars to create fashionable designs that fit their needs.

This style of dress with matching meant-to-be-seen pantalettes was associated with entertainers, and so it was viewed as an advanced and even scandalous style for other women to wear. It can now, with the distance of time, be acknowledged as a change in fashion that paralleled a shift in women's more active lives and a more modern society. As the fashion historian Anne Hollander explains, 'clothes are social phenomena; changes in dress *are* social changes. [And] that political and social changes are mirrored in dress.'<sup>25</sup> However, at the time this fashion had, at least one, more pedestrian connotation; one of the risks of Lucile designing for Ziegfeld was that her recognizable fashion styles on stage were often connected to the showgirl stereotype, whose success depended upon her looks and costume, rather than on her talent. The November 1917 issue of *Vanity Fair* explains that the film actress Peggy Hyland wants to be seen as a serious artist, 'She wishes it distinctly understood...she refuses to go in for the pantelet-and-hoop-skirt school of drama.'<sup>26</sup>

This did not diminish the publicity a showgirl's star power created for Lucile's designs. If the fashion designer is the image-maker, Lucile imaged these women as desirable and powerful, if not always serious – and the women's image in turn reflected on the clothes. The ambivalence about the showgirl's profession, the typically mundane origins of these women, and their variable talents did little to detract from the glamour their celebrity lent to the clothes. Just a month prior, *Vanity Fair* ran an article titled, 'Where Preps the Pantaloon: A Contemplation of the Small Time Vaudeville Artist' with a photograph of the vaudeville entertainers the Dolly Sister's in matching costumes by Lucile. The author informs the readers that vaudevillians, 'Gracie Doyle and Lillian Rucker, "The Fashion Plates"' whisper confidently that Mrs. Vanderbilt, Mrs. Astor, and other leaders of the Four Hundred deliberately steal from them all their ideas in the way of up-to-date Parisian dress.<sup>27</sup> Implying that these actresses put fashion before acting, the article describes what could be a typical, although simplified, Lucile look as:

...the average vaudeville lady's idea of inspiring envy in the bosom of Mrs. Oelrichs [a prominent society figure] is anything pink with a sufficient abundance of silver spangles upon it to make it look like one of the winter chandeliers in Sherry's.<sup>28</sup>

Sherry's was a popular eating pavilion similar to the Ritz, and despite this unceremonial dressing down, *Vanity Fair* cannot go ten pages without mentioning or

printing a photograph of a vaudeville actress often wearing a Lucile creation. Such was the allure of these women.

The English beauty, Dolores, was the most successful of models turned showgirl. For many years there had been serious actresses who increased their fame by modelling clothes such as Réjane and Sarah Bernhardt, and there continued to be actresses such as Ina Claire, but Dolores was a famous model turned actress – a trend that continues today. Once Lucile invented the entertainment of the fashion model and legitimized the viewing of the modern female body, it was only a matter of time before this form of entertainment, jumped – or strutted – to a larger stage. And although Dolores found her niche on Ziegfeld’s stage as a glorified mannequin more than as an actress, she excelled in both venues. She made the slithering walk Lucile taught her the ‘Ziegfeld walk’.

Dolores was known for her haughty demeanour and command of the stage. Lucile remembers her as, ‘the best mannequin I have ever had,’<sup>29</sup> while Ziegfeld tagged her as, ‘The Loveliest Showgirl in the World.’<sup>30</sup> A young Diana Vreeland remembers the impact the *Ziegfeld Follies* had on her, stating:

I remember his girls so vividly. Dolores was the greatest of them – a totally Gothic English beauty. She was very highly paid just to walk across the stage – and the whole place would go to pieces. It was a good walk I can tell you – it had such fluidity and grace. Everything I know about walking comes from watching Ziegfeld’s girls.<sup>31</sup>

Dolores was paid \$75.00 per week when she first worked for Ziegfeld, and was earning \$500.00 per week by 1923.<sup>32</sup> The August 10, 1918 *Town and Country* declared, ‘Miss Dolores is...almost terrifyingly good looking. She has presence and line and wears her tissues and satins with a regal aloofness which is most effective amidst the gorgeousness of the “Ziegfeld Follies.”’<sup>33</sup> Even for her speaking roles, Dolores’ press still focuses on how her appearance enhances the show, such as in the 1920 production of *Sally*, where she of course wore designs by Lucile. Dolores’s costumes credits in the program read, ‘costumes by Lucille, Ltd. Dolores gowns first act and last scene especially designed on Dolores by Lady Duff Gordon in Paris.’<sup>34</sup> Whereas the costumes worn by subsequent actresses in the same role, such as Barbara Dean, were credited as simply, ‘costumes by Lucille, Ltd.’<sup>35</sup> Dolores retired in 1923 suffering the fate of many beautiful girls – marrying a millionaire, the American sportsman and art collector Tudor Wilkinson.

Perhaps the most famous image of Dolores is the photograph of her in the ten-foot high peacock costume from 1918-1919, which was not designed by Lucile but by Pascaud of Paris. Dolores was not even the first Peacock, as Anna Held (Ziegfeld’s common-law ‘first’ wife) wore a similar costume in the finale of Ziegfeld’s *Follow Me* in 1916. Her costume was also created in Paris, possibly

from her own original design.<sup>36</sup> However, it is Dolores who is remembered as the peacock. And her costume shows both Lucile's and Ziegfeld's influence on theatricality and costume as framing. The December 1919 issue of *Vanity Fair* headlines the image with the accurate caption, 'Dolores – Personifying the Spirit of Vanity'.<sup>37</sup> Dolores' performance embodied the showgirl image, emulated by other performers, both famous and less so for years to come. As early as 1920 Gertrude Hoffman transforms into another showgirl peacock, and Dolores's stage influence was still felt in Josephine Baker's elaborate costumes from the 1930s.

And just as Dolores was both emulated and so imitated, Lucile was both imitated and close to outright copied both during her time designing for Ziegfeld's productions and beyond the end of her fashion career in 1922. In a 1920 revue production *Vanity Fair*, a vignette called 'Lace' could not be a closer imitation of Lucile's style. 'Lace' is described as entertainment, 'dedicated to the glory of woman and her clothes. No one can deny that this fantasy of "Lace" is a worthy tribute.'<sup>38</sup> Yes, a tribute - rightfully dedicated to Lucile and her designs. Beyond other revues imitating the 'Lucile style', Ziegfeld also continued to use costumes in the Lucile style created by her couture house long after she stopped designing. Her influence can be seen beyond Ziegfeld productions as well. Ina Claire, a Lucile client on and off the stage, wears a dress in the 'Lucile style' in Avery Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* staged at the Lyceum Theatre in 1919. The dresses are credited to Bendel, but the influence of Lucile cannot be mistaken. This is especially apt since Ina Claire plays a showgirl in this comedy, spoofing the stereotypes associated with women in the theatrical profession.

Even after Lucile retired her company's name still held such cachet that a program as late as 1925 used the credit line, 'modern costumes by Miss McWhorter, formerly of Lucile, Ltd.'<sup>39</sup> Evelyn McWhorter took over as head designer in 1922 after J.M. Gidding and Company gained control of the company. A fashion show program dated soon after this change in management invokes Lucile's theatrical image showing a full skirt with pantalettes, a silhouette, first seen back in 1915.<sup>40</sup>

This continuous imitation shows the importance of Lucile's impact on Ziegfeld's productions, on revue costumes, and on fashioning the image of the American showgirl in the decades after the turn of the twentieth century. Without Lucile, her theatrical designs, her celebrity models, models turned actresses – American entertainment and possibly the historical career paths of women entertainers, albeit beautiful women entertainers, would be very different. Dolores spirit lives on and can still be seen today.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lady Duff Gordon, *Discretions and Indiscretions* (London: Jarrolds, 1932), 214.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Ziegfeld and Paulette Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 55.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> The Lucile Archives 1915–1925, Special Collections, The Gladys Marcus Library at SUNY FIT.
- <sup>7</sup> The Lucile Archives 1915–1925, Special Collections, The Gladys Marcus Library at SUNY FIT.
- <sup>8</sup> Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theater and Fashion* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 144.
- <sup>9</sup> Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 199.
- <sup>10</sup> Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 63.
- <sup>11</sup> Duff Gordon, *Discretions and Indiscretion*, 102.
- <sup>12</sup> Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway*, 203.
- <sup>13</sup> Marlis Schweitzer, “Patriotic Acts of Consumption: Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon) and the Vaudeville Fashion Show Craze,” *Theatre Journal* 60 (2008), 588; “Fashion Display at Palace,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1917, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> “Fashion Display at Palace,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1917, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> *Vogue* (May 15, 1915): 56.
- <sup>16</sup> *Vogue* (June 1, 1915): 33.
- <sup>17</sup> Duff Gordon, *Discretions and Indiscretion*, 76.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>20</sup> *Vogue* (February 15, 1915): 54.
- <sup>21</sup> The Lucile Archives 1915–1925, Special Collections, The Gladys Marcus Library at SUNY FIT.
- <sup>22</sup> *Vogue* (February 1, 1915): 50.
- <sup>23</sup> *Vogue* (February 1, 1915): 49.
- <sup>24</sup> Exhibition Object checklist for *Fashion on Stage: Couture for the Broadway Theater 1910-1950*, at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, June 24, 1999 - February 27, 2000.
- <sup>25</sup> Ann Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 4.
- <sup>26</sup> *Vanity Fair* (November 1917): 76.
- <sup>27</sup> *Vanity Fair* (September 1917): 63.
- <sup>28</sup> *Vanity Fair* (September 1917): 63, 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Duff Gordon, *Discretions and Indiscretion*, 69.
- <sup>30</sup> Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 292.
- <sup>31</sup> Diana Vreeland and Christopher Hemphill, *Allure* (Garden City: Doubleday).
- <sup>32</sup> Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 292.
- <sup>33</sup> *Town and Country* (August 10, 1918).
- <sup>34</sup> The Ziegfeld Production of *Sally* at The Colonial Theatre Program, (New York, 1920): 25.
- <sup>35</sup> The Ziegfeld Production of *Sally* at The New Amsterdam Theatre Program, (New York, 1921).
- <sup>36</sup> Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch*, 66.
- <sup>37</sup> *Vanity Fair* (December 1919): 62.
- <sup>38</sup> *Vanity Fair* (June 1920): 57.
- <sup>39</sup> New Fall Edition of the *Ziegfeld Follies* at The New Amsterdam Theatre (New York, 1925): 49.
- <sup>40</sup> The Lucile Archives 1915–1925, Special Collections, The Gladys Marcus Library at FIT.

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