

LGBTQ+ HISTORY MONTH

February 2021

Fanny and Stella

Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park were middle class Londoners who performed on stage dressed as women, known as 'Fanny and Stella'. They were particularly well known in the West End and their theatrics extended off stage too, attending events dressed in Ladies clothing. Boulton and Park were from upper middle-class families, both homosexual and both enjoyed wearing women's clothing. Together they formed a theatrical performance duo wherein they would perform female roles in touring productions. They continued to dress in female clothing off stage and were known to go shopping, to eat in restaurants and to take in shows whilst dressed in women's attire. It is believed that they even watched the 1869 Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race in full drag.

In 1870 both were arrested on the charge of 'conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence'. They were held on remand for months before trial and subjected to invasive physical examinations from a police surgeon. Whilst on-trial the prosecution and police were unable to show that either Fanny or Stella had engaged in an unnatural offence (sexual activity), furthermore the defence was able to show that neither had hid the fact that they were dressing in woman's clothing, moreover that they had done so for entertainment purposes. At the time cross-dressing, particularly for acting purposes was not against the law and therefore the defendants were quickly found not guilty.

Fanny and Stella continued to perform after their trial, however it appears that they performed separately, but both appeared to have travelled as far as New York. Boulton passed away in 1904 in London from a brain tumour whilst Park passed away aged just 33 in 1881, likely from Syphilis.

Their legacy lives on with reference being made to them in '*Lord Arthurs Bed*' a 2008 play by Martin Lewton and '*Fanny and Stella: The Shocking True Story*' written by Glenn Chandler and performed in 2015, and finally '*Stella*' by Neil Bartlett in 2016. A Blue Plaque is installed on the house where Boulton and Park lived in Bloomsbury, London. Recent studies of the case have shown that it was a factor in the introduction of the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, making male homosexual acts punishable by up to 2 years hard labour, effectively criminalising gay men.

Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boulton_and_Park

<https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2020/05/29/the-1871-trial-of-boulton-and-park/>