

# CHARMION AND THE BUSINESS OF PHYSICAL CULTURE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Vaudeville performer and strongwoman Laverie Cooper, better known by her stage name "Charmion," was born in Sacramento, California in 1875.<sup>1</sup> Charmion was well known for her provocative trapeze disrobing act, featured in one of Thomas Edison's early silent films, as well as her exhibitions of strength and muscularity on the vaudeville stages in New York between 1897 and 1910.<sup>2</sup> Charmion was part of a wave of muscular female performers around the turn of the twentieth century whose acts flew in the face of Victorian values as they pushed the boundaries of traditional notions of femininity and demonstrated new ways for women to express themselves through bodily reform.<sup>3</sup> Women like her were physical culture promoters and keen entrepreneurs who, both out of desire for adventure as well as necessity, had to be inventive and use creative strategies to keep their performances interesting and their businesses alive. Charmion therefore combined exhibitions of her upper-body muscularity with a sensual disrobing act on the trapeze, drawing much attention, criticism, and revenue. What is more, to gain widespread recognition, she was

one of the first female vaudeville performers to take advantage of the developing photography, cinema and print industries to promote her act, testifying to her entrepreneurial spirit and business mindedness.



**Charmion showing off her upper body muscularity.**  
*Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theater Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.*

The vaudeville industry around the turn of the twentieth century was one of the most successful mass entertainment markets in North America. Its wide range of performers, including dancers, singers, acrobats and comedians, drew large and increasingly female audiences. While vaudeville had its roots in burlesque performances, which were considered vulgar and appealing only to a "male working-class" appetite, keen businessmen like Tony Pastor and B.F. Keith, and Edward Albee made sure they promoted vaudeville as a pleasant leisure time activity for the middle-class family and they forbade smoking and drinking, activities commonly associated with

male culture and burlesque. The success of the vaudeville industry at the time lay in the ability of its managers and performers to maintain a veneer of purity and respectability and to conceal nudity by representing it in a morally acceptable way. These strategies not only enabled managers to cater to a growing group of female clients, but also held censors at bay and prevented theater closings.<sup>4</sup>

Charmion also adopted such strate-

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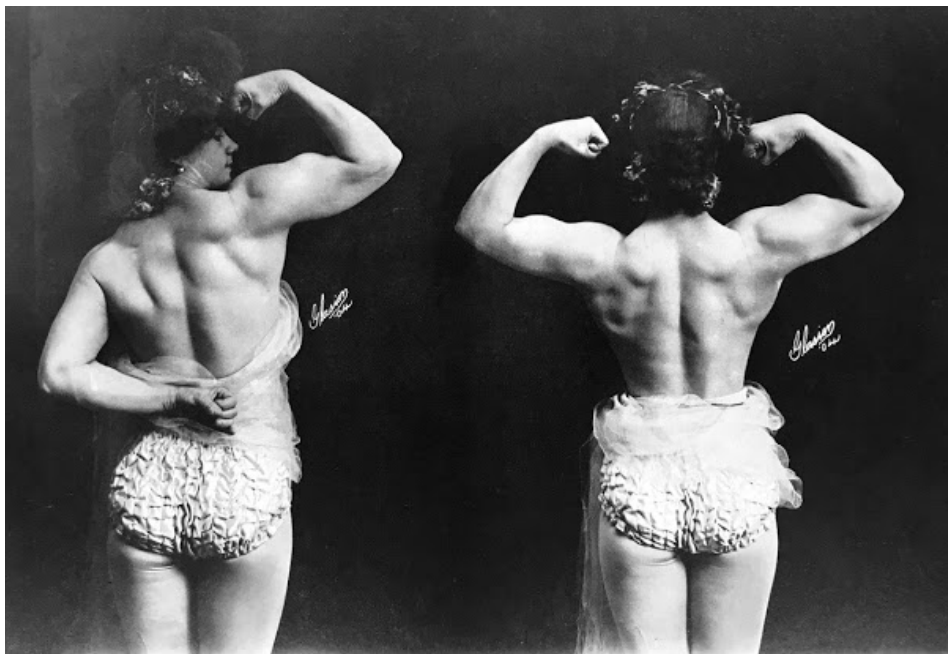
gies and tried to offset initial negative reactions to her provocative disrobing act and “unfeminine” muscularity by presenting herself as a physical culture advocate and dress reformer. In concurrence with increasing fascination with the well-developed muscular body during this era, as well as feminist campaigns to reform clothing that restricted women’s movements, she framed her performances as instructional examples for women who wished to show their strong bodies and learn how make physical activity part of their daily lives. While flexing her muscles in front of spellbound audiences, she promoted physical activity to her female admirers, stating that “[e]very woman ought to exercise on getting up in the morning. Take a drink of cold water, then exercise with small dumbbells—if you have none, take flatirons—going through motions with arms up and down.”<sup>5</sup> To enable free movement of the body, she also advised women not to wear corsets or long skirts.<sup>6</sup>



**Charmion posing provocatively without corset, circa 1898. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theater Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.**

performers’ agency. While they made it possible for women like her to gain more widespread acclaim, they also, to a large extent, contributed to the objectification of the female body. Images could be bought, collected and fetishized and, different from the staged performances during which Charmion would interact and talk to the members in the audience, the silent movie left much to its audience’s imagination. Cinematography thus, to some extent, intensified the divide between women pushing the boundaries as agents of their own sexuality and a movie industry that tried to capitalize on the female body as sexual object.<sup>7</sup>

The advantage beautiful and strong performers like Charmion did have, was that they were rarely directly linked with any kind of



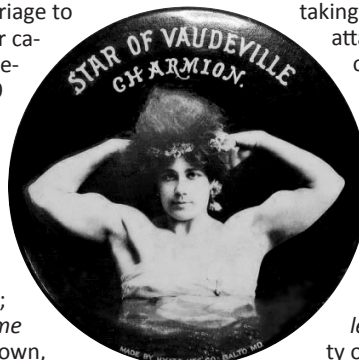
**This image of Charmion’s back and biceps originally appeared in 1904 in Frederick Whitman Glasier’s *The Circus Book, 1870s-1950s*.**

feminist radicalism. The carnivalesque atmosphere of the theater, where reality seemed temporarily suspended, allowed for daring and sexually provocative performances to be staged without much social repercussion. As historian Susan Glenn has noted in her work on female spectacle and the theatrical roots of modern feminism, female performers around the turn of the twentieth century constituted a kind of “proto feminist vanguard.” While performers like Charmion may not have had a widely shared set of ideological values or a specific political agenda, their unconventional acts helped lay the groundwork for feminism even before the term was coined.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Charmion and her colleagues played crucial roles in helping to carve out women’s demands for the right to sexual expressiveness and autonomy over their bodies and identities.

Regardless of whether or not performances like Charmion’s at the time were read as liberating or restricting, they helped question and challenge traditional notions of the (Victorian) female body as passive, weak, and physically unfit. And while Charmion alone did not dismantle patriarchal structures that tended to objectify women’s sexuality for the pleasure of men, she helped set new standards for female health and beauty that combined physical fitness, strength and freer movement of the female body.

## NOTES

1. See Theodore J. Hull’s genealogical project: William M. Vallee/Laverie (“Charmion”) Cooper at: [http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht\\_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm).
2. See Trapeze Disrobing Act, 1901, dir. Thomas Edison, Edison Manufacturing Co., 2 mins., Trapeze disrobing act Library of Congress at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/96514756>. Newspaper clippings in a large variety of American as well as some European newspapers informing about Charmions’ career were found for the period 1897-1910. Little is known about Charmion’s career after 1910, and it may well be that her marriage to William M. Vallée in 1912 marked the end of her career as a vaudeville performer. According to genealogist Theodore J. Hull, Charmion died in 1949 in Orange County, California. William M. Vallee/Laverie (“Charmion”) Cooper (archive.org).
3. See Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004); Jan Todd, “Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity,” *Iron Game History* 10, no. 1 (November 2007): 4-13; Jan Todd, “The Mystery of Minerva,” *Iron Game History* 1, no. 2 (April 1990): 14-17; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Janet Davis, *Culture and So-*



Charmion sold pins and cabinet cards that displayed her muscles.



Charmion’s disrobing act garnered much attention even though she was never actually nude. When “undressed” on the trapeze she still wore tights and an acrobat’s costume. This image appeared ca. 1898 as part of a set of Ogden’s “Guinea Gold” Cigarette cards. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

- ciety under the American Big Top: *The Circus Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
4. See Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 4.
5. “The Drama: Synopsis,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 20 March 1904. According to the *Utica Sunday Tribune*, Charmion even wrote a book for women on “how to enjoy life by taking simple exercises,” which, according to the report, attained “an immense sale” and led to the adoption of her system in many leading schools and colleges for women around 1906. No information about this book has surfaced, however, and it may well be that Charmion made it up as part of her stage biography. “Charmion, The Perfect Woman at the Orpheum this Week,” *Utica Sunday Tribune*, 23 November 1906.
6. “She Hangs by Her Heel in Mid-air,” *Sunday New York World*, 9 January 1898.
7. See Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 270-271.
8. Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4-6.