

had been designed as a movie theater without stage lighting. In an effort to bolster sagging ticket sales, brother Abe suggested imitating the *Folies Bergère* and extending the stage into the audience by means of a runway. The troupe of six dancers "was able to get so close to the audience that they could actually smell their perfume and hear their heavy breathing. It was sensational! Never before had an audience been able to get so close to the performers." From then on, the most expensive seats in the house were those closest to the runway. "To tell the truth," admitted Minsky, "burlesque was on its way to becoming nothing more than a legal way of selling the illusion of sex to the public."<sup>32</sup>

By 1922, when the Mutual burlesque wheel was formed, cooch, which was now performed to the rhythms of jazz, had been renamed the "shimmy." Zeidman describes the Mutual shows, which were built around the shimmy and the runway: "The chorus girls on the runway, yelling, shimmying directly at and over the men, the music blatant, jangling and dissonant, the audience alternately hooting or derisively encouraging – it was a demonic, orgasmic spectacle. Hands upraised to a merciful heaven, the girls would sprawl out on the runway, twist, writhe, squirm and shake, each to her own inventive obscene devices."<sup>33</sup>

### OOO **Cooch and Carnival**

Working-class men in America's small towns and villages, far from the nearest burlesque theater, also became part of the audience for Fatima, Omeena, Little Egypt, and hundreds of their sisters as cooch dancing rapidly joined carnival sideshows and appeared along the midways of agricultural fairs in the early years of the new century. Ever since, exhibitions of feminine sexuality have been touted in sideshows featuring Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, pinheads, and pickled fetuses. A generation after Lydia Thompson shared the bill at Wood's Museum and Theater with Sophia the giantess, feminine sexual spectacle once again became associated with the freak show. And it still was a century later. When asked to name the principal attractions of the carnival in the late 1960s, the editor of the carnival trade paper, *Amusement World*, put "girl shows" at the top of his list:

That's what the boys *really* come to see. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. There are damned few carnivals, particularly little ones, which don't carry at least one girl show. "Reeves" they call them, but they're actually kooch.... Carnivals that hit the rural South or the Pennsylvania Dutch country... have to carry as many as three girl shows to handle customers who spend the whole night going from one to the other and returning to the first and starting it all over again.<sup>34</sup>

This historical symmetry is not coincidental. Nor is it coincidental that dime museums reached their apex of popularity in the same decade that burlesque became an autonomous branch of American show business, or that in the 1870s burlesque stars and freaks constituted the two most popular genres of *carte-de-visite* photographs.

The heyday of the dime museum was the 1870s, when at least fifty museums operated in New York City alone, most of them concentrated along the Bowery and lower Broadway. Nearly every major American city sported at least one museum: Bradenburgh's in Philadelphia; Drew's in Providence; and Kohl and Middleton's in eight cities, including Chicago, Louisville, St. Paul, and Cleveland. In the 1890s the rise of vaudeville drew patrons away from the museums, which declined rapidly after the turn of the century. The "human curiosities" that had always constituted the core of the dime museums' appeal left the museums for circus sideshows, becoming part of the latter during its "golden age" (1870–1920). By the 1890s, a major circus sideshow had over fifteen exhibitions plus a troupe of cooch dancers and a band, frequently made up of black musicians. As the circus declined in the 1920s in the face of competition from the movies, amusement parks, and radio, freaks shifted venues for the last time, becoming part of traveling carnivals. By 1937 three hundred carnival units toured the United States, and in each the freak show (called a "kid show" or "ten-in-one") was an important if not central attraction. According to *Amusement World*, at least one thousand shows still toured the country in the late 1960s, attracting an audience of seventy-five million people.<sup>35</sup>

Here, the term "freak" stands for these human attractions not to derogate them but to signify their status as show business performers. The difference between a person with a medically defined physical



abnormality and a freak is, of course, the discourse through which each is constructed. Robert Bogdan tells the story of Jack Earle, an unusually tall University of Texas undergraduate, who was spotted by the side-show manager when he visited the Ringling Brothers Circus. "How would you like to be a giant?" the manager asked Earle.<sup>36</sup> The physically exceptional person becomes a freak when his or her abnormality is made the basis for the commercial construction of radical otherness. That otherness is structured as a grotesque essence, which confuses and thereby challenges the boundaries between key self-definitional categories: self and other, male and female, human and animal, large and small.<sup>37</sup>

It is the shock of resemblance and similarity in this radical other, and not the freak's total alienness, that is at the heart of the freak's power to enthrall and disgust. Siamese twins fascinate because they transgress the boundaries of physical autonomy, creating a doubled self that is neither a single body nor two separate ones. Hermaphrodites were frequently exhibited so as to construct an incredible but tantalizing androgyny: costume and makeup arranged so that in one profile he appeared to be a bearded male, while in the other she was a smooth-faced and sexually differentiated female. All manner of physical abnormalities were made the basis of half man/half animal freaks: hyperthir-sute men became Jo-Jo the Dog-faced Boy and Lionel the Lion-faced Man; phocomelics (individuals with vestigial arms and legs growing directly from their torsos) were transformed into seal children; and skeletal deformities, skin disorders, and other types of disfiguring conditions were made the basis for human/animal hybrids: frog boys, snake boys, pony boys, alligator boys, bird girls, mule women, and, of course, the Elephant Man.

In his study of the freak show, Leslie Fiedler explicitly links the experience of watching an exhibition of human biologic abnormality and that of witnessing sexual spectacle. Both share "the sense of watching, unwilling but enthralled, the exposed obscenity of the self or the other. And only 'freaks,' therefore seems a dirty enough word to render the child's sense before the morphodite or Dog-faced Boy of seeing the final forbidden mystery: an experience repeated in adolescence when the cooch dancer removes her G-string and he glimpses for the first time what (as the talkers say) 'you'll never see at home.'" However, the parallel Fiedler draws between the experience of watching a freak show

and that of glimpsing the hidden mysteries of the cooch dancer needs to be taken a step farther. The cooch dancer is not like a freak, she is one. Her exhibition is structured around the tension between her similarity to "ordinary" women the male audience member sees and knows outside the tent and her fascinating otherness produced by her expressive and displayed sexuality. As Fiedler notes, there is an erotic element to all confrontations between the "mark" (the carry term for the audience member) and the freak. The mark pays to see what has been concealed: the body of the freak, the sight of which guarantees the authenticity of his or her otherness. Before he was "rescued" by Dr. Frederick Treves, John Merrick, the Elephant Man, was exhibited as the object of a kind of striptease — his draped body finally uncovered at the end of his manager's lengthy spiel. Even Treves's later "medical" lectures merely served as a different discursive frame for what was still in essence a climactic moment of exhibitionism. "After all," concludes Fiedler, "Merrick's total horror could be seen only in total nudity."<sup>38</sup>

But if there is always an element of the erotic in the display of the freak's body, there is also always an element of the freaky grotesque in the cooch dancer's sexual display. Just as the microcephalic is transformed on the stage of the freak show into a pinhead, the biologically sexed woman makes herself into a different kind of sexual creature when she takes on the role of cooch dancer. Her authenticity is also guaranteed by the revelation of her body and its hidden mysteries. Pagan Jones, a cooch dancer touring with carnivals in the late 1960s, compared performing in big city clubs and in carnival sideshows. At the former, she said,

All the guys do there is drink and smoke and chatter. . . . They hardly even look at the performers. You don't know what the hell they want and neither do they. . . . But out in front here [at the carnival], you know exactly what the boys want every second and you try to give it to them. . . . The marks out there don't want a chorus line; they don't want show tunes; they don't want choreography or ballet. All they want is sex — bumps and grinds — they want to see something they don't see at home.<sup>39</sup>

Girl shows are distinguished by how "strong" the dancers are allowed to perform — in other words, by the extent of sexual abandon of the dancing routines and the degree of genital display. In the larger and



more sedate carnivals (those that play state fair dates, for example), the performance might end with a strip down to the G-string or its removal for a moment just before the dancer leaves the stage. In smaller shows, however, where "stronger" acts are the norm, the performance might end with a gynecological anatomy lesson as the performer caters to what Arthur Lewis calls "insatiable male curiosity about the exact nature and geographic disposition of 'women's parts.' " At one show he witnessed, several regular marks brought flashlights with them. "These they used in businesslike fashion in order to examine, clinically and under laboratory conditions, what they 'couldn't see at home.' "40 As a part of the cooch dancer's body, biologic equipment possessed by half the world's population – including women left "at home" by some of the marks – is transformed into a site of fascination and mystery. William Dean Howells never would have recovered from the sight.

### ○ ○ ○ **Burlesque Enters the Twentieth Century**

By the turn of the century, burlesque was institutionally an autonomous, modern, oligopolistic branch of American show business, its two wheels encompassing enough theaters for a full season's work for the several thousand performers, stagehands, and ancillary personnel who worked in burlesque. With industrialization and the minimizing of competition brought about by the creation of the burlesque trust, the formal qualities of burlesque also became more standardized. Each company with a "franchise" on one of the two wheels came out with a new show each season, which included a first part (an opening production number and attendant sketches, frequently featuring ethnic comedians, or a one-act sketch interrupted by musical numbers), an olio of individual acts, and a concluding afterpiece.<sup>41</sup>

The links with Thompsonian burlesque had become tenuous. By the 1890s, Lydia Thompson could write that burlesque as she knew it "has been retired for a time," its glories now "merely memories of the stage." The very word "burlesque" had been "cruelly used and abused" by its latter-day practitioners. Today, she lamented, "the startling posters, composed of bald headed men and floating Venuses . . . coupled with the word 'burlesque' are enough to make the better class of theatergoers fly from the very name."<sup>42</sup> The middle-class women who had