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| Miss Zoraya  A short Historical Story  By Maryanne Peters  **In 1879 — the year with the highest number of cross-dressing arrests of the century— the *San Francisco Chronicle* published an admiring front-page article on the recently deceased circus performer Omar Kingsley, who had performed as a woman, Ella Zoyara, to enhance audience perceptions of his equestrian skills. Kingsley had lived and performed in San Francisco in the 1860s and 1870s, and audiences rarely knew that Zoyara was his creation. Remembering these shows, the *Chronicle* praised Kingsley’s skills as an equestrian and female impersonator and fondly recalled his ability to “impersonate female character in a manner that almost defied detection.” Even though Kingsley’s “deception” attracted many “would-be lovers and husbands,” the *Chronicle* embraced the act with good humor, remarking that “few of those who have witnessed the graceful performance of the beautiful Zoyara dreamed that the performer was a man.”** | A picture containing text, black, white, old  Description automatically generated |

**Reporters who wrote such stories were aware of cross-dressing law and occasionally noted the disjuncture between stage acclaim and street harassment, although not with any critical insight. During a 1911 interview with the female impersonator Lew Sully, a *Chronicle* reporter compared the theatrical value of male and female impersonation while noting, in passing, that “off the stage, to be sure, both misdemeanors are equally reprehensible in the eyes of the law.”**

So you see, it was a matter of survival. All over our nation people were being arrested simply for wearing the clothes that belonged on their bodies; the clothes that they were more comfortable in.

But was it always that way for Ella Zoyara, renowned equestrian circus performer? Let me tell you her story.

Omar Kingsley was born in St. Louis, Missouri on September 4 1840, the younger of two children. The boy was a dreamer, quite unlike his older sister. At the early age of six his parents took both children to visit a travelling circus that had set up in town. It sounds like the old story – young Kingsley was caught up in romance of it all – the bright lights and spangles and the smell of sawdust and greasepaint. He imagined a life and when the circus left town, her disappeared with it.

His parents searched for a few months, but when Omar’s father died in an industrial accident early in 1841 his family had other priorities. Omar had become a carny.

He apprenticed himself to Spencer Stokes who trained him to do-an equestrian act. The boy was his own drawcard as a child but Spence realized that a new angle was required to keep an audience engaged. Ella Zoraya was his idea. She may never have been created otherwise.

Omar was blessed with a beautiful face, a profusion of rich dark hair and a slender form. All that was required was an undergarment that gave him slim figure some feminine curves and the right alluring costume, and the vivacious Ella was introduced to the world.

The activity was vigorous such that a wig was impractical, but over time Ella’s hair grew long and was always arranged in appropriate styles. Perhaps that fact and the growing interest in people meeting this new sensation outside the circus ring resulted in the costume rarely being doffed.

In short, the impersonation had become reality. Omar had all but disappeared. Ella was in the ring and outside it, and she was a sensation.

Rumors circulated about her origins, perhaps seeded by Spence himself. She was a gypsy with almost magical gifts or a foundling the mysterious only survivor of a shipwreck off off Mexico who had acquired his riding skills from the Appache indians, or she was the illegitimate daughter of a rich Turkish horsebreeder who had run away and sold into slavery only to escape to America. Everybody was talking about her.

Spence was in themo;d of Mr. P.T.Barnum, or thought himslef to be. A performer with skill is good, by everybody loves a story – a performer with skills and an exotic background is better. And if it also happens to be a beautiful young woman – well, better again.

She had become her own act and she was on tour. The United States was not big enough. There was a tour to Europe and then other parts of the world.

Miss Ella Zoraya acquired cult status. People, including famous people wanted to see her and be seen with her. Women wanted to follow the fashion of her clothes and her hairstyles. Before long there were “Ella corsets“, “Ella combs“, “Ella bans“, “Ella bags” and the “Ella Riding Stick” became a fashion item even when not riding.

Her admirers were legend. In Moscow a Russian count is said to have fallen madly in love with him, and he offered Stokes a large sum for an introduction. And in Italy no less that the king himself sought her favors. King Victor Emmanuel saw Ella perform at the circus and afterwards sent for her. The King presented her with a magnificent black stallion, and then attended every one of her performances in his country.

The tour was expensive - Spence was forced to sell the stallion in Spain to cover costs – but upon return he could advertise her as “Miss Ella Zoyara: The greatest female rider that Europe had ever seen”.

She was accomplished. She was graceful but strong and daring. But she was not a female rider. Yet nobody knew that. Much later people have said – “But we always knew”. Except, they didn’t. This was down to her skill and the fact that she never wore anything but female clothes. Photographs have circulated of a young man said to be her in male dress, but that is an imposter.

Even people employed in the show had no idea that this was not a woman. The pretence was so perfect because it seemed that it had become real.

And it was an important part of her popularity. She was inundated with letters from admirers – women praising and men expressing emotions and even proposing marriage.

When she left California in 1863 bound for Australia and the east with John Wilson’s circus, she did so as a woman. She boarded the steamer in feminine dress and stayed so dressed for the entire tour. Nobody in Mr. Wilson’s company would ever know. The only remember the beautiful and vivacious Ella Zoyara and her graceful and spectacular performances in the ring.

The only unpleasant interlude happened in Manila during the tour to the Philippine Islands when a Spanish officer fell in love with the Fair Ella but was refused an introduction. With the support of cohorts the Spaniard sough to abduct the performer and there was a fight which ended with both John Wilson and Ella spending a night in jail. Apparent the true sex of our heroine was discovered, but the Circus had already moved on to China and Japan.

Whatever Wilson knew from that incident he kept to himself. She was an important part of his circus. Once she returned to the United States she was keen to re-commence her own show, and he neeed her to stay. In the end she became one of the proprietors of Wilson's circus, still in the name Ella Zoraya, and we know that this a fact. But from here the story must depart from what is accepted now to be truth.

It is said that the with age the beautiful Ella who had won the hearts of so many men, suddenly became masculine and abandoned female clothing and was ready to perform as a man under the male birth name of Omar Kingsley. The lie in that is that Ella Zoraya continued to perform as herself right up until and including that Last tour to the East 1877 – 1878. It was widely reported that Ella Zoraya died in distant Bombay of small-pox on April 3 1879 at the age of 38. It is not said who was in attendance. It is not said what became of the body.

The truth is that there was no body because there was no death, and certainly no small pox. Ella Zoraya living on, but not in that name.

As she had discovered on her first trip to the subcontinent may years before that, and shortly after the incident in the Philippines which had deeply distressed her, in India there are people who were once men but have become women. These people are called hijra, and they have learned how to make changes to their bodies to ensure that they never become masculine.

John Wilson had learned her truth when they were in a Spanish jail in the Philippines, but he was neither going to lose his star performer nor the person that he had come to care for and respect as a woman. He was prepared to help her, and in China and Japan he learnt a great deal about cultures which accept that movement between the sexes can be achieved.

In India steps were taken, back during that first visit. So whoever the male rider was who claimed to Omar Kingsley was, he was not Omar Kingsley. The fact is that it suited John Wilson and his partners (including Ella) to deal with the rumors about Ella by creating a new Omar.

On that second visit to India both Omar Kingsley and Ella Zoraya did cease to exist, but not by death. John was finally able to realize his ambition and marry Anna, the woman that he had been in love with for 15 years.

That night in the Philippines when he learned that the object of his affections was not truly female, amy well have broken a lesser man, but carnies are tough and resourceful. All that it took was time.

He still had Ella in the ring, and somebody that he could introduce as Omar if that was ever needed. But as stated in the opening to this story, in this country and at this time, a man dressing as a woman commits a crime, and neither John nor Ella would risk going back to jail.

Ella or Anna, she was born to be a woman. The original costume may have been forced upon her by the ambitious Spencer Stokes, but it was as a woman that she came to understand, she belonged. And in the arms of a man she belonged too, where only a woman may lie.

So the only way for them to live was for her to die. They were able to create all the background that was Anna and to secure the marriage licence and get it done. They were married for 18 years before John Wilson died, and Anna followed 5 years later.

I knew them both. Circus people. Exciting people, rich in experience who lead full lives. It makes you understand why a six year old boy might leave his family and create a new life for himself that way the Omar Kingsley did.

The End

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