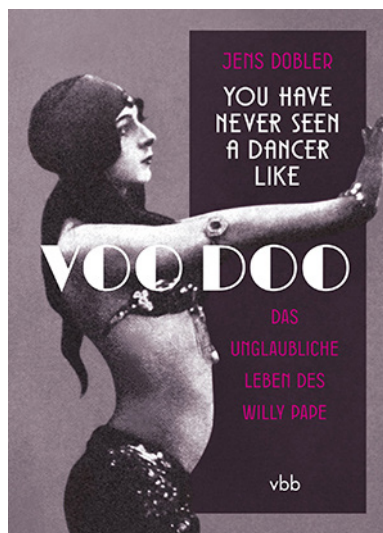


# You Have Never Seen a Dancer Like VooDoo A BIOGRAPHY OF “EXOTIC SNAKE DANCER” WILLY PAPE

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Dobler, Jens. 2022. *You Have Never Seen a Dancer Like VooDoo: Das ungläubliche Leben des Willy Pape*. Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg. 160 pages.

In his book *You Have Never Seen a Dancer Like VooDoo: Das ungläubliche Leben des Willy Pape*, historian Jens Dobler presents the reader with an

extensive biography of the artist Willy Pape (1891–1940), a white Berliner, and his stage persona VooDoo.<sup>1</sup> As a so-called female impersonator, VooDoo was a staple of German and European variety show theatre of the 1920s. During her active career from 1911 to 1927, she did not only

<sup>1</sup> As it is no longer deductible which pronouns Willy Pape/VooDoo would prefer on and off stage, I will use he/him for Willy Pape and she/her for VooDoo as it is common today for Drag Queens.

tour through Germany and Europe but was also present in many queer<sup>2</sup> magazines, like *Die Freundin* or *Das 3. Geschlecht* for example, as well as several scientific publications of Magnus Hirschfeld, a famous sexologist of the time.

Dobler recounts Pape’s life in a lot of detail, beginning with the tin can factory of his father and ending with his death in 1940. About two-thirds of the book is occupied with the stage life of VooDoo, which entailed many tours, events, and contacts. Starting in Munich with her first show in June of 1911, dancing through all of Europe, her last known show took place in Berlin in December of 1929. As Dobler describes her stage life he spotlights venues, i.e. the Flora-Theater in Hamburg (pp. 70–73), to give a short overview of their histories, locations, and other visiting artists. Similarly, Dobler analyses other stars of variety theatre, who could have

<sup>2</sup> I use queer as a description for non-normative (in the sense of deviation from a supposed norm) gender and sexual identities. I am referring to the history of the origin of the term “queer”, which is explicitly meant to show and break the construct Butler named the heterosexual matrix: a supposedly natural connection between body, desire, and gender (Butler 1999, 41-42; 194). Nevertheless, I would like to stress the ahistorical use of the term, which might suggest the existence of an identity shared by a group. This might have not been the case for Weimar Republic.

been inspirations for VooDoo, like Mata Hari or Maud Allan. He also details possible contacts she had or might have had with other artists, for example the group Ba-Ta-Clan-Girls from the Bataclan-Theatre in Paris. In doing so, Dobler focuses on the part of VooDoo which is tied to the variety show scene of the time. He paints her as a variety show star in Europe asking why she remains unknown today. He states that variety theatre has been ignored by historians of theatre and performing arts for far too long as it is regarded as proletarian amusement in contrast to other art forms like classical theatre or opera (p. 101), hence explaining his focus on it. The book on VooDoo is a fine contribution against the forgetting of this art form.

While the stops and venues of her tours are still traceable today, the full content of VooDoo's shows remains a mystery as there are neither tapes nor many pictures of them. Only a handful of photographs, and descriptions by reviewers or of the advertisements can be used for deductions. Dobler paints a picture of erotic dances full of exoticism, similar to the aforementioned inspirations like Maud Allan. Her shows seemed to have been filled with orientalist and colonial references in clothing, requisites, the show titles, and the distinct performance as a "Schlangentänzerin" ("exotic snake dancer") with a living boa on stage. The snake, which supposedly was big and heavy, stayed with Pape well after his last show. Whereas VooDoo's active career ended in 1927, Willy Pape's life in the queer nightlife scene of Germany continued.<sup>3</sup>

The latter part of the book is concerned with the last 13 years of Pape's life during which he and his partner Emil Schmidt ran a successful and

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3 Dobler sets 1927 as the end of VooDoo's career as it is the year Pape moved back into his parents' house to nurse his father (p. 124). But in the list of shows the last show is dated to 1929 (p. 152–154). Therefore, it is plausible to say the active career of VooDoo ended in 1927 whereas the last show was in 1929.

famous gay bar named Zum kleinen Löwen (The Little Lion) located in Berlin-Kreuzberg. Dobler presents us with several accounts of people who visited the bar and wrote about it, i.e. Klaus Mann who noted in his diary that he visited "VooDoo" (p. 124). The bar remained open until mid 1933 when the national socialist government used varied methods to close all of Berlin's gay bars within a couple of months. Dobler only writes a handful of pages about Pape after the closing of his bar during the Nazi regime until his death in 1940 as there is little known. Pape and Schmidt kept living together but moved into the far outskirts of Berlin. After opening another bar in Berlin in 1939 with Schmidt, Willy Pape died in 1940.

Dobler's book can only be described as a labor of love. It is a very detailed account of an almost forgotten prominent figure of variety shows and the queer Berlin of the Weimar Republic. Dobler unearthed possibly every trace there still is of VooDoo and Willy Pape to tell the story he published now. He even found a newspaper clipping about VooDoo from the Estonian magazine *Esmaspäew*, where she is pictured in male and female garments and described as a "hermaphrodite, whose female organs are more pronounced and who performs in variety and cabaret" (p. 109). The book is an important work on a distinctive person and his stage persona; a great example of an individual history to explore a wider historic context. Further research could be the reasoning behind and the ways of expression of colonial tendencies and racist motives in popular culture of the German queer scene, examining queer magazines like *Die Freundschaft*, *Die Freundin* etc.

Dobler's focus on VooDoo's involvement in the variety theatre scene is understandable but neglects the compelling entanglement of orientalism, colonialism, racism, gender, and sexuality VooDoo represented. Not only her name evokes European ideas of magical African religious practices, but orientalist and colonial references were blatantly present in her whole stage

persona. Even when Pape retired from VooDoo and became a bar owner, the fascination with the oriental and colonial didn't stop: like many other queer bars and clubs, he held events somewhat themed oriental, or as Dobler puts it, "exotic". He doesn't specify how these events are regarded as "exotic" - apart from their names, like "Eine Nacht in Singapore" (A night in Singapore). Dobler also quotes an account from the journalist Marion Sakulin published in 1931, who describes Pape's bar as having a Black man as an employed server working there, who Pape "picked off the street of Paris and brought to Berlin as a special attraction" (p. 132). Dobler doesn't question this account and later speculates that he must have spoken French, as the bar was advertised as multilingual (p. 135). It could very much be a fabrication of the author Sakulin – a further exoticization of an openly gay bar with an owner who used orientalist exoticization himself in his stage life.

Although Dobler addresses the fact that VooDoo, a white German, invokes orientalist stereotypes he does not problematize it further. In the subchapter "Ein Junge aus Wittstock wird Syrierin" ("A boy from Wittstock becomes a Syrian woman"; pp. 33–45), Dobler acknowledges "the exotic and connected with it the erotic" (p. 33) motives VooDoo uses and ties them to the German climate of racist violence and exoticization regarding the products of European colonies. However, he examines this not in a critical way, but by engaging in stereotypes himself. For instance, he describes human zoos in Berlin at the time as an example of the "exotic-erotic" times VooDoo was coming up in: "Young and old spinsters were in unstoppable awe of half-naked sons of chiefs at the human zoos in Zoologischer Garten [...]"; p. 33, transl. LR). This may have been the spirit of the time but without a deeper explanation for the colonial, racist, orientalist ideologies of Weimar Republic it not only trivializes the kidnapping and internment of people in human zoos but also the connection between VooDoo and human zoos falls flat.

VooDoo's use of orientalist-racist imagery comes as no surprise and can be seen as emblematic of the interwovenness of white German queerness and racism. As Laurie Marhoefer states, the invention of a white queer identity was interlinked with ideas about the sexual and gendered otherness of non-white people – specifically in the colonies (Marhoefer 2022, 86). Ideas of homosexuality were constructed by sexologists, ethnologists, and medical scientists who looked in the colonies for sexual deviancies and gender bending.

One of the most prominent scientific figures in this field, Magnus Hirschfeld, who was also involved with VooDoo, as she appeared in scientific publications of his, very much used colonial/ethnological ideas to further his theory on human sexuality. While at the same time excluding "oriental men" to be "real" homosexuals, Hirschfeld writes that Italy had an orientalist character for there being a lot of homosexual activity, but a disdain for being the receiving part of penetrative sex (Hirschfeld 1914, 571 via Çetin and Voß 2016, 10–13). Evidently, there were many colonial and racist entanglements in the German queer scene, which comes as no surprise; in the words of Stuart Hall: "colonization was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis. It was always inscribed deeply within them" (Hall 2021 [1996], 298). Not connecting VooDoo and her whole performance and persona to this background hinders the historical connection of the German queer history with the German colonial past.

With that all said, Jens Dobler's *You Have Never Seen a Dancer Like VooDoo* constitutes an important work against the forgetting of the history of queer culture with an expansive biography of a formerly unknown figure. Starting in 2003, Dobler (2003, 158) invested several years of research, even interviewing an old friend of Willy Pape still alive then. The groundwork he lays with this publication can now be used to broaden our understanding

of VooDoo's time by integrating the broader culture of racist orientalism and colonial references in the queer culture of the German Empire and Weimar Republic and by extension today.

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