Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 50
Adelaide Herrmann

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women – both overlooked and iconic – who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and also here is Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi Susan! Hi everybody.

SUSAN STONE: In this episode, we're bringing you a talk recorded over the summer. Together with our friends in Muenster, the Burg Huelshoff Center for Literature, we put on a show in our lovely Berlin venue, ACUD, with a small but perfectly formed audience.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Indeed!

SUSAN STONE: And as always, our wonderful presenters were conjuring up their chosen Dead Ladies for our enjoyment from the stage.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hmm, how funny that you would stress that word, "conjuring." As our Dead Lady is a lady magician! Her name is [SPEAKS IN BELGIAN ACCENT] *Adelaide Herrmann* – or Adelaide Herrman – and she'll be presented by our very own dear co-founder, Katy Derbyshire.

SUSAN STONE: Yes! Now, Katy is a different kind of magician – as a translator she's conjuring up the voice of the dead sometimes, or making a book speak anew.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She is! And she's also the publisher of an imprint that translates contemporary German fiction into English, called V&Q Books – as well as a fabulous dancer, it has to be said. Here's Katy on Adelaide Herrmann.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So, hello! I am going to talk about Adelaide Herrmann, who was known as "the Queen of Magic," fittingly enough. She was one of the earliest women stage musicians – uh, I *knew* this would happen [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] – she was one of the earliest women stage *magicians*, so that makes her a rare role model because there still aren't very many women doing magic on stage. She wrote her memoir in

1931, when she was in her seventies, and that was kind of discovered and published in 2012 by her fellow magician, Margaret Steele.

So I was going to open with a magic trick, as Madame Herrmann recommended in the *Women's Home Companion* in 1900. She wrote:

"Any quick-witted woman or girl can, after but three hours' practice, perform in her own parlor as many wonderful feats of magic as will make her the astonishment of her family and friends. It is as simple as the alphabet when you learn how."

However, she continued: "You see, all that is necessary is for the performer to have a few pieces of apparatus which the audience neither sees nor suspects the existence of. Concealed in the palm of the hand, to be covered by the towel, is the end of an ordinary gas tube, with a little bit of gas pipe attached. This tubing secretly runs up the performer's sleeve, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] down the inside of her waist and skirt to the floor behind her, then under a screen, seemingly carelessly placed behind her, to an ordinary gas burner concealed by the screen. Of course the performer must not move more than a foot or two in any one direction while the curtain is up for this feat, for such would reveal the gas tube, and the assistant must do all the moving about. When the match is lighted by the performer it is the signal for a second assistant, concealed behind the screen, to silently turn on the gas, and off again when signalled by a stamp of the performer's foot."

In other words, it's a little disingenuous of her to say that anybody could do it. Because stage magic takes a lot of hard work, showmanship (or showwomanship) and very reliable assistants to create great illusions. Adelaide Herrmann knew all about all three of these.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She was born in London to Belgian parents in 1853, as Adele Scarsez, but she was called Adelaide from early on. She was the youngest of six surviving children; her father was a glass engraver. And the family spoke French at home. She loved a spectacle, even as a child – she went to the pantomime, to the circus, and then she discovered ballet! She started dancing as a child (apparently she didn't tell her parents she was going to these dance classes) and was trained by the Kiralfy Brothers, who were a Hungarian dance troupe. She writes in her memoir about it already being physically exhausting.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Her first stage appearance – professional stage appearance – was when she was a young teenager. Here she is on a presentation card, age 13, looking very cute. The troupe that she danced with was booked for New York in 1868, when she was 16, and she wrote: "The New York engagement was a great success. The

dances were a distinct novelty to American audiences, since we were among the first to introduce the so-called 'high-kicking'."

[SHOWS SLIDE] Now Kiralfys' dancers, to paraphrase ZZ Top, had legs, and knew how to use them. As you can see in these three beautiful cigarette card photos, they're practically *all* leg. And for the 1870s, that's pretty darn daring and would've been very exciting for audiences on either side of the Atlantic. Addie, as she was known, stayed on in the States after they were finished and appeared in Boston with three other girls, The Deardon Sisters, where she met vaudeville star Gus Williams, a comedian, and got engaged. So, she went back to London to get her parents' permission to get married at the age of 16-17. But once she was in London, it actually seemed a bit dull to be engaged so she broke it off. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] There she was in London. What should she do? She joined the magnificently named, Professor Brown's Lady Velocipede Troupe! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So I have a picture here of a Dutch velocipede from 1870, which looks like a very, very uncomfortable bicycle. Wooden wheels, metal tires, and you have to climb up on this not-very-well-padded saddle to ride it. But she learned from scratch to cycle and was on stage. Women velocipede groups were a big deal for decades on stage. And you can see this very grainy photo of her from a newspaper, wearing these big, flouncy bloomers, which were probably necessary to get over the big bar on the velocipede… Anyway, they went on tour to France and Belgium – and they again were booked for the States, and she sailed in 1874.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Also on board was this dude – oooh [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] – Alexander Herrmann, with his magnificent mustaches and twirly beard. At that point, presumably, his hairline hadn't receded. He was already a successful magician, and the two of them met when he played London and she went backstage with a friend. He was of Jewish-German extraction and came from France. And proposed to Addie soon after their arrival in New York. They were married a year or so later, which might have been because her parents objected to her marrying a Jewish man, or maybe they were just very busy – because they were! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] She became his assistant, Madame Addie. And as you can see, she sometimes also dressed up as a boy on stage and was called Monsieur Alexander. Later she was known as Madame Adelaide or Madame Herrmann. Her names got more dignified as she got older. Margaret Steele, the kind-of biographer, calls her "the first glamorous, athletic and erotic female assistant." So he used London theatre experience to really remodel Herrmann's show – they started to travel with custom-made backdrops of their own, they had their own musical director, they had just loads and loads of animals with them all the time, and they commissioned special music for every illusion that they did. And Adelaide and Alexander developed storylines for for the first

time for their illusions, so things like cremations, raising the dead –

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Fun!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes! Really good, fun shows… [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But very pertinent. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here she is as the "The Phantom Bride" – looking, I agree, very glamorous, athletic, and erotic with her beautiful veil on there.

So that new style of having storylines behind the illusion was very, very influential for the future generations – although they probably don't know it was Adelaide's idea.

[SHOWS SLIDE] They were incredibly successful! You can see a beautiful poster that they had here, advertising the world's greatest presti-digi-tateur?! What are those words? It just means he's good with his fingers. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Herrmann and Madame Addie – she's billed kind of second bill, also has a photo or picture – on the poster promising "incomparable entertainments." They toured North and South America and Europe. And she's quite boastful in her memoir about hanging out with all these absolutely horrific people, like the Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz [AUDIENCE GROANS] (it gets worse), the colonialist exploiter King Leopold II of Belgium [AUDIENCE GROANS LOUDER] who gave her a revolver, who knows what he thought she would do — Anyway, and the autocratic Czar Alexander III. Herrmann himself was dubbed "Herrmann the Great", allegedly by Alfonso XII of Spain. Now he didn't live long enough to do many atrocities, but he did marry two of his cousins [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], not at the same time.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So, Adelaide worked very hard physically: she would have to squeeze into tight spaces; she did this "levitating" act which requires incredible core strength; she would be "shot" from a cannon which burned the bottom of her feet; and as you can see in this wonderful picture, she would be – in quotes – "electrocuted." I love the picture with her in this so-called electric chair with the electricity drawn on, on the top of the photo. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Later on the *Boston Transcript* wrote in 1902, obviously an admirer of hers: "Her physical development is perfect, in that no one muscle is developed at the expense of another. There is a harmony of strength and beauty that tells of rhythmic movements guided by concentrated thought. Without this splendid physique it would be impossible for madame to do the clever things she does in the twinkling of an eye and with no more effort, apparently, than as though she opened and shut her rosy palm over a billiard ball and said: Now you see it and now you don't." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] She introduced dance to their shows! Now, unusually for her memoir, she actually credited this dancer you can see here, Loie Fuller, from whom she copied

this dance – which I'm going to describe for the podcast. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] It was called a "serpentine dance." So both of them, Loie and Adelaide, wore huge dresses with sticks attached at the end of the sleeves, multi-layered, and they swirled around and twirled the dresses, so it looks like a flower dancing on air. I'm not sure why it's called serpentine. And in the film, they colorized the film, but on stage, they used lighting to achieve this multi-colored effect. And another great, possible Dead Lady, Willa Cather, the writer, saw her on stage in 1894, when Cather was 21, and wrote in *Nebraska State Journal*: "Mme Herrmann's dances were beautiful, especially the last one, when all the colours of the rainbow were turned on from six calcium lights. It is a pity that more of the stage was not draped in black, for the effect would have been better. Still, it was really wonderful as it was, being by far the best dance of the kind seen in Lincoln this season." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Faint praise, indeed!

[SHOWS SLIDE] So, the couple led a luxurious lifestyle. They had lavish costumes, like this fancy, silken, frou-frou one you can see here. Now she covered her legs, she was one caught smuggling silk from Mexico for her costumes. Both very much photographed, which is fun for giving a talk, actually, because there's lots of material. They had what Adelaide thought was their "own" railcar – they would travel by train in this extremely fancy rail car – although it was actually leased from the actress Lily Langtry. They had a house on Long Island called Whitestone Manor (again, it was leased), they had their own yacht, horses, dogs, and peacocks. She wrote: "In the course of our travels we had accumulated a really wonderful collection of curios and art objects – treasures gathered from every quarter of the globe. The house was practically filled with them." They had these huge parties, her nieces and nephews would come over from England for the summer, that kind of thing.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So, Adelaide dearly loved her husband, but I think he was probably a bit of a dick, actually. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] What kind of man has cheques with a portrait of himself on them? I don't know, but uh – Alexander did, issued from the Garfield National Bank, which was a real thing. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] This one was written in 1896 for about $54, which would now be worth $1,500. So he would play tricks on everyone, kings and paupers, wherever he went – which must have grated after a while. He would, you know, produce gold and silver dollars out of people's ears, but he was no good with his own money. Adelaide later said in court that she employed him and paid him a salary, but he still managed to spend, spend, spend. And he took out a mortgage on his life insurance – I didn't know that was possible. But it was very bad news then when he died suddenly in 1896.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Yes, she was distraught, but she wrote: "It is among the most pathetic aspects of the stage – of which the general public knows little or nothing – that it allows no time for the indulgence of private sorrows. Hearts may be torn, bitter tears may be shed, but we of the stage have a jealous mistress in the public, which demands that we

be gnawing at the soul." Also she needed the money.

So, she sent for Alexander's nephew Leon from Paris, who was also working as a magician, and then decided to launch their show with a bang – literally – by performing Herrmann's bullet catch trick herself. It was a very dangerous but impressive – and lucrative – trick, and she was the first woman to do it. Wearing the same costume as her husband had done, so: dark trousers and a flouncy white blouse. She wrote: "The idea of a woman doing this dangerous trick created an even greater sensation than its presentation by my husband, and I was accorded an ovation at its successful conclusion." She was 43.

[SHOWS SLIDE] And she set up the Herrmann the Great Company with Leon. And you can see she gave herself a bigger picture! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] They toured the show around the US for three seasons. "It did not seem to me at all remarkable that I should take up my husband's business and manage the complicated affairs of a travelling company; there was, indeed, nothing else for me to do. Leon was clever, but he knew nothing about the management of the business; therefore I did this entirely alone. It was an immense undertaking; but I had been undergoing a long and unconscious training for the work, my husband and I having worked out the details together in our performances year after year."

[SHOWS SLIDE] After that she broke with Leon and there followed various legal wrangles over the name, Hermann the Great, which she thought he wasn't entitled to use. And she went into vaudeville on her own. She gave up the lease on her house and sold its many, many, contents – but she kept Herrmann's very valuable stage equipment for all the tricks, and she found she was in demand as a magician herself. Now unlike her husband's endless, possibly annoying patter, Adelaide performed without speaking. It was all her body, it was all dance and motion, and a little bit of miming kind of thing. She travelled widely for over 30 years, as part of what we in the UK would call variety shows. So there would be 10 to 15 different acts: comedians, singers, dancers, and performing animals. There will have been people in blackface, and there was a longstanding yellowface tradition among magicians, including a friend and later rival of the Herrmanns'. Adelaide didn't change her facial appearance but did do a kind of "Japanese garden" number featuring a so-called "geisha girl," and you can see her looking very, very confident in this sort of faux-Asian dress. But her body language speaks volumes. She's standing with her legs apart, her arms raised, holding three billiard balls in each hand, and looks very self-assured.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She was excellent at PR. She had all these photo cards made, which she would hand out with autographs. And she defended her husband's name in court, and learned from his PR tricks and got herself in the press – there are lots of lots of press reports and cuttings about her. Writing her memoir in her seventies was another

sign that she wanted to control the narrative about her own life. And she certainly left out plenty of stuff. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] There's no surviving film footage of her, but I think we can guess at her strong stage presence. She made much in her memoir of her costumes. They were allegedly insured for $5,000 – and each finger for $1,000, but I suspect that's one of those things you tell the press that is not true. You can see here a dress that is owned by the magician, David Copperfield – beautiful, orange-y silk, quite tight fitting, with this gorgeous green bodice, everything is beaded and sequined (that would have been done by hand), and then she has this sort of orientalist waistband with bits stretching down to the bottom. I'm sure it looked gorgeous.

The Stage journal wrote in 1906, describing one particular dress: "It is figured of white liberty silk milled over silk cloth. Skirt and train are covered with jewels – emeralds, amethysts, sapphires and turquoises" – which cannot possibly have been real, I assume! Maybe? They would have been heavy! Anyway – "This matter of gowning is an important one, as it excites interest and discussion among the women of her audiences, almost equal to the admiration of Madame Herrmann's art itself." So the costumes were very much part of the PR.

She was very proud to have been invited over here to Berlin to play at the Wintergarten venue for 4 weeks in 1901, but she was a bit disappointed – she thought the revolving stage was too small [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. I don't know what she would have thought of ACUD. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She also played London, where she entertained the later Nazi sympathizer Edward VIII (as a child), and Paris, where the rats at the Folie Bergère killed her rabbits. Very sad. She then, unfortunately, on her travels got stranded in Cuba in 1908 when her manager ran out on the show, and they have to kind of auction things off to get back to the States.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So I've covered her hard work and her showmanship – showwomanship. So it's time for the reliable assistants! She's not quite as vocal in the memoir about her assistants as she is about herself and certainly about her husband. But this was an important one, who you can see here, Adele Dewey, kneeling adoringly at her feet for the photo. She was Adelaide's niece, and she performed on stage and assisted backstage. There's a lot of photos on the internet that say they're Adelaide Herrmann but it's actually Adele doing this levitation act. So you see a woman with long dark hair "floating" on stage, that's actually Adele. She left to marry an architect, but it was her who inherited the manuscript; Adelaide didn't have any children. She tried to find a publisher, but it didn't work. It was the Depression.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So the Herrmanns also had a series of Black stage assistants, which horrifically they all called them all by the same stage name of "Boomski" – and the memoir is actually full of racist ideas and clichés. The guy you can see here is Milton Hudson Everett, who joined the Herrmanns as a boy when they played his small town

in Georgia. He was often the butt of Herrmann's jokes on stage, but Adelaide portrays him as a loyal servant. What she doesn't mention is that he was arrested for stealing her jewelry and went to prison for 18 months. And also revealed some of the secrets behind her tricks to a journalist, but he is supposed to have attended her funeral. So, I'm not sure at all what kind of relationship that was.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Adelaide Herrmann, she had a very successful career into her seventies. And she was thinking about going into pictures, she said – here we see her with Mary Astor from *The Maltese Falcon* – until a major blow came along: in 1926, a fire destroyed the warehouse storing all her equipment and animals. Again there's a lot of difficult moments in the memoir. Without that it was very difficult for her to perform, but she did continue.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She died of pneumonia aged 79. She was buried with Alexander, who has a better grave than hers, which just says "WIFE". [AUDIENCE GROANS AND LAUGHS] And her birth and death dates.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She wrote early on in her life: "Let no one select stage life as the sphere of idleness and dissipation. Let no one be deterred from it because of its ways of hardship, for they lead to fame if followed." She was rightly proud of her stage achievements. In 1931, a newspaper wrote that somebody else was the first woman magician, and she wrote an indignant letter, saying: "I am, as far as I know, the only woman who has ever performed that most dangerous of all feats, the bullet catching trick – a trick which has left in its wake a trail of blood. (…) I made my debut in vaudeville as a magician thirty-two years ago. (…) I think that I may rightfully claim that honour (of being the first woman magician) and my title as the "Queen of Magic"." And I think she was right.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She's becoming much better known these days as young women seek role models. Adelaide Herrmann is included in Elena Favilli's *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls (100 Immigrant Women Who Changed the World),* and she's also the hero of Mara Rockliff's *Anything But Ordinary Addie*. So I'm looking forward to seeing a lot of women coming onto the stage as magicians in the next five or ten years. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But I have to come back and say "thank you" to Margaret Steele for her tenacity in seeking out this role model, for magicians at least, and in finding the manuscript and publishing Adelaide's memoir. And she's flanked it with all other sorts of material, which gives us extra content and points out where there are a few little gaps.

I'm really glad that Adeliade Herrmann is here for us to discover and to inspire other women to go on stage, not just as assistants but in the full glare of the limelight. Thank you very much!

[APPLAUSE]

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire on Adelaide Herrmann. What a fabulous life. Florian, does it make you want to try out a few tricks of your own?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I don't know, I've always wanted to be sawn in half, you know. But I'm not sure if the magician saws themself in half? Generally they don't, right? It's somebody else, it's an assistant.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, you need a beautiful assistant, but frankly Florian, I don't think the world is ready for two of you!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: [LAUGHS] Well, that might also be true.

SUSAN STONE: Well, thanks everybody for listening, and I hope you enjoyed learning about Adelaide Herrmann. I did! You can see fabulous images of her and learn more about her tricks, trials, and tribulations on our website, deadladiessshow.com and on our social media, @deadladiesshow.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thank you to Anneke, Maximilian, and Joerg and the whole team at the Droste Festival and Center for Literature in Muensterland.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN And thanks to our sound engineer at ACUD, Simone Antonioni, thanks to Katy and to you Florian. We'll be back next month with another story of an amazing Dead Lady. Bye-bye!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Good bye!

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE: This episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast was created as part of the Droste Festival 2021 - Dark Magic by the Burg Hülshoff Center for Literature. Funding came from the NEUSTART KULTUR program of the German Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media, through the German Literature Fund, and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia.

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