

## Is Mademoiselle Mercédès Always Julienne Mathieu? The Challenges of Using a Stage Name to Reconstruct the Career of a Parisian Belle Époque Music Hall Dancer

Mercedes Alvarez San Román 

### Introduction

Most world-famous dancers have left documented records of their professional and personal experiences, allowing scholars to conduct research on their lives and to turn them into historical figures. However, there are many dancers who have contributed to the development of the discipline without becoming widely renowned. It is particularly difficult to track the trajectories of these individuals due to the scarcity of documentary sources related to them. Nevertheless, studying the lives of these lesser-known figures can offer a broader picture of the evolution of dance in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts. The use of a stage name can pose problems for research on such dancers because it makes it impossible to identify them in civil registry records. As a case in point, this article explores the use of the pseudonym Mademoiselle Mercédès in the vibrant Parisian music hall scene of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This name is known to have been used by Julienne Mathieu (1874–1943), who would go on to become a film actress, but the research described in this article reveals that she was not the only one. How many people used this pseudonym and why did it survive for four decades?

The period between the end of the 1880s and the beginning of the twentieth century is considered the golden age of Parisian music hall. The number of new productions reached its peak, and box office takings were never bigger; the press reported on the shows in vogue, and the general public took a keen interest in them (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 5). The popularity of music halls formed part of the emergence of a “mass” culture market, a phenomenon that fostered a certain degree of globalization in the world of entertainment (Dickinson 2017, 21–22).

The new audiences attending these venues were introduced to the art of dance. At the same time, the ballet’s traditional home, the Paris Opéra, entered a period of relative inactivity in terms of the creation of new productions at the end of the nineteenth century (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 6). The familiarization of a diverse public with dance laid the foundations for the success of Sergei Diaghilev’s Russian ballets, which have been presented in traditional historiography as a dance revival from 1909 onward, after what were supposedly dark years for the art form (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 2). The music halls developed a type of popular entertainment that attracted middle-

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**Mercedes Alvarez San Román**, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain.

**Mercedes Alvarez San Román** is a faculty member at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a researcher at TECMERIN. She received her doctorate from the Université Paris-Sorbonne and the University of Oviedo, she is co-author of the book about the Spanish dancer and film actress Laura del Sol, *Traspassar la pantalla. Una fotografia de Laura del Sol* (2020).

class professionals as well as bourgeois families and members of the aristocracy, for whom the opening of the theatrical season constituted a high-class social event.

The name Mercédès appears in the press and in photographic collections between 1867 and 1910, related both to popular theaters, such as the Folies-Bergère and the Olympia, and to the Paris Opéra. During the music hall years, this name can be found sharing the stage with some of the period's most important figures, such as Loïe Fuller, La Belle Otero, Émilienne d'Alençon, Louise Willy, and choreographer Madame Mariquita. Apart from the unlikely nature of anyone enjoying such a long career, various clues point to the use of this name by more than one person. It was evidently a name that endured over time as a reflection of the French attraction to all things Spanish. One of the women who used this pseudonym was the French dancer Julienne Mathieu, who, after her career in the music hall, went on to become one of the most prolific actresses of the golden years of the Pathé Frères company (1905–1909), a world leader in the nascent film industry. Regarding the other women who adopted the name, the only clues we have to their identity are their portraits and the critics' comments in the newspapers.

Based on this case study, the aim of this research is to demonstrate that the stage name of a secondary figure showed to be more important than the performer herself. I will begin by analyzing the implications of choosing a pseudonym in France with a clear Hispanic connotation. I will then focus on the naming dynamics in the public sphere regarding women at the turn of the century. An introduction to Julienne Mathieu will follow. I will then state the reasons to establish that she was not the only person to have used this name during this period. Finally, to prove how active the name was I will focus on the performances in the main venues, such as the Folies-Bergère and the Olympia.

## The Origins of the Name Mercédès: Orientalist Spanishness

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the French took a growing interest in Spanish dance. As Beatriz Martínez del Fresno explains, “The fascination with others and the attraction to foreign cultures developed by Romanticism led [the French] to construct Spanish dance as an exoticism (whose Arab, gypsy or African roots were emphasized) feminized and generated from an ‘Orientalist’ perspective” (2011, 157). In this cultural context, European theaters opened their doors to Spanish artists.<sup>1</sup>

This admiration lasted until the Belle Époque, a time of special significance for what Daniel-Henri Pageaux (1989) describes as “Hispanomania.” Some sixty Spanish and Portuguese operettas were premiered in France between 1873 and 1914, Spanish dances and costumes “invaded” the Universal Exhibition of 1900, and the figure of Carmen was established in the collective imagination as the epitome of the Hispanic woman (1989, 466–467). Although in the first half of the nineteenth century the most popular Spanish dances were the *chica*, the *fandango*, and the *bolero* (Jeschke 2009, 45), in the latter part of the century an adulterated product targeting a foreign audience emerged: the *espagnolade*. On stage, the Spanish dancer became a “safe commercial product” not only in France but also in Russia, the United States, Belgium, Germany, and England (Cavia Naya 2013, 58). Some artists, such as La Belle Otero and La Tortajada, exploited this theatricalization of Spanish identity to establish themselves as consumable and commercial commodities (Versteeg 2019, 31). In addition to the inspiration they took from predominantly Andalusian folklore, these dancers dialogued with an alternative morality rooted in this imaginary of Spain (Cruces-Roldán 2017, 162). A few years later, in the context of modern dance, performers who challenged this artifice would emerge, such as Antonia Mercé (also known as La Argentina) and Tórtola Valencia (Murga Castro 2019; Dickinson 2017, 37–38).

In literature, European Romanticists had spread the Orientalist imaginary of an archaic Spain. The late development of industrialization in France's southern neighbor resulted in a reputation for

backwardness that combined fierce traditionalism with inflamed emotion. Certain discourses of the time contributed to the redefinition of “Spanish culture as sensual and exuberant with the exotic oriental accent of the other, while constructing an us/them dichotomy that reinforces cultural hegemony” (Colmeiro 2002, 131). This attraction to Iberian culture was expressed in hierarchical terms as a sort of compensation mechanism: “Spain provides what we lost” (Pageaux 1989, 465).

It was in this context that the pseudonym of Mademoiselle Mercédès became popular, as Mercedes, written without the accents of the French spelling, is a traditional woman’s name in the Hispanic world. Indeed, Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes is the patron saint of the city of Barcelona. The name Mercédès thus conveyed this romantic vision of Spain in France. However, Hispanomania as a “temporary fashion” should be understood as a “theme and form of appearance” (Jeschke, Vettermann, and Haitzinger 2009, 9), i.e., the name could be nothing more than a *trompe l’oeil*, an illusion of Spanishness. Like exoticism associated with other latitudes, such as Indian dances, the dancer who used it did not necessarily have to be from the region alluded to. Cavia Naya, for example, confirms the existence of imitators of Spanish dancers in different parts of Europe (2013, 58). The Viennese Fanny Elssler and Ireland’s Lola Montez are two well-known cases.

The imaginary associated with the name Mercédès was forged over the course of the nineteenth century. It was popularized in France by Alexandre Dumas’s successful novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844). Set in Marseille, the novel tells the story of Edmond Dantès’s love for the Catalan girl Mercédès, which is cut short by the unjust imprisonment of the protagonist. She is the main female character of the story and one of the Count’s great desires.

The romance between King Alfonso XII of Spain and Maria de las Mercedes de Orléans, a young woman from a Spanish-French family, added to the name’s epic proportions. The monarch’s mother, Isabella II, opposed the marriage, which only further fueled the Spanish people’s support for their love. The union was sealed at a ceremony in January 1878, and only five months later, the young bride died of typhoid at the age of eighteen. This tragedy plunged the enamored monarch into a deep depression that ended up giving rise to a popular song (“¿Dónde vas Alfonso XII?”). These two precedents informed the reception of the artistic name of Mercédès in France.

The power of this appellation even transcended its attribution to human beings. Emil Jellinek, an Austro-Hungarian living in the south of France, decided to give the name Mercedes to a racing car designed by Gottlieb Daimler, which competed for the first time in the Nice-Castellane race in March 1899. Jellinek, who had married a Spanish woman, felt such admiration for the country, and the name, that he gave it not only to his daughter but also to two houses and a yacht (Potron 2012). He was also responsible for creating the brand that would ultimately become known as Mercedes-Benz.

In short, it is clear that the name Mercédès was commercially appealing because it evoked Spanish femininity. Although there is no record that any of the women who went by the name of Mademoiselle Mercédès were of Spanish origin, the earliest mentions found of the name are in relation to Spanish shows. The earliest of these is from 1867, in a program for the Parisian theater *Fantaisies* that included *Rumbo y Calia. Ballet espagnol en 6 tableaux*, whose cast was made up entirely of artists with Spanish names: “Miguel, Salvador, Francisco, Mlles. Pépita, Mercédès and Mariquita” (*Le Figaro* 1 June. 1867, 3). As can be seen in a photograph of the Nadar Studio, a woman with this stage name also performed in the show *Les Gitanos*, which ran at the Folies-Bergère from March 12, 1887, to May 2, 1887 (Gutsche-Miller 2015). The name also appears in Spanish-inspired shows in other periods. In 1902, a Mademoiselle Mercédès starred in *La Gran Via*, a “*fantaisie espagnole à spectacle*,” at the Olympia. She also performed in *Une fête à Seville* (1901) and *Miss Bouton d’Or* (1902), a show written for La Tortajada by her husband. Apart from these few shows, the careers of the artists who took Mercédès as a pseudonym were based not on their ability to perform Spanish dances, but on their versatility as performers. For example,

during her years at the Folies-Bergère, Mademoiselle Mercédès participated mostly in ballets that included eccentric or exotic dances (mainly bayadères), but also waltzes and polkas. At the Parisiana-Concert she was presented as a “*première danseuse*” of the “*opérette nouvelle*” *Léda*, whereas at the Olympia she also performed exotic dances (in this case Japanese).

## Naming Women

Having analyzed the implications of Mademoiselle Mercédès’s name, it is crucial to delve into some considerations related to women’s naming in the public sphere at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As Florence Rochefort points out regarding the politics of women’s names in France, “The name issue straddles a dialectic of the democratic individual and the subject, challenging the borders between private and public life, the personal and the social (or political), between equality and recognition” (2017, 104). The pseudonym thus brings together a range of issues related to the notions of celebrity and commercial profitability, but also of renouncing one’s own identity, with all the consequences that this might entail.

In her autobiography, the dancer Cara Tranders of the Empire Palace of Varieties (1892–1899) describes what a stage name meant in the new performance venues:

We all know he’s actually called William Pitcher and his dad is a shipbuilder, but he changed his name to sound more foreign because it helps in this business. You can’t blame him. Sometimes when I’m standing there in yet another tableau I dream up names I’d choose for myself. I fancy Cara Taglioni so I could keep the same initials, but there’s already been a Taglioni and I wouldn’t want people to get mixed up. (Tranders 2004, 74)

In these few lines, Tranders expresses three important ideas. The first is the commercial value that was attributed to artistic names and especially to those with exotic qualities. The second refers to the notoriety the performer sought to acquire through the use of a pseudonym, which was not only a way to present oneself to society but also a commercial identification for show promoters and press critics, as well as a brand that strengthened the connection between the audience and the artist. Third, the name had to be unique in order to underscore the individuality of the person who used it.

The artistic names of the most famous divas of the Belle Époque were often related to their personal lives. La Belle Otero, whose name at birth was Agustina Carolina, was born out of wedlock to Carmencita Otero and a Greek army officer named Carasson (Conyers 2003, 222). Her artistic name reflects her parentage. Cléo de Mérode also kept her family name, as she was born Cléopâtre-Diane de Mérode (2003, 229). Liane de Pougy, on the other hand, was born Anne-Marie Olympe Chassaige, but she adopted her artistic surname based on her relationship with the Count (or Viscount) de Pougy (2003, 225). Émilienne d’Alençon was born Émilienne Marie André, but she took the name of a kind of lace stitch as a surname. Although these last two examples involve a change of name, a connection with the artist’s personal biography is nevertheless maintained, either through her given name or through a person to whom she was connected. Although none of these divas chose exotic names, they did opt for those with noble connotations. The only one of aristocratic blood was Cléo de Mérode, who was the daughter of the Baroness de Mérode and Marquise de Treslon, a former *demoiselle d’honneur* at the court of the empress Elizabeth of Austria (2003, 229). The humble origins of Liane de Pougy and Émilienne d’Alençon are obscured behind the suggestion of sophistication inherent in the preposition “de,” a strategy intended to present them as exceptional, epic figures.

Outside the world of show business, traditions associated with women’s names were being challenged by the nascent feminist movements. The issues being questioned included the adoption

of the husband's surname upon marriage, the use of the titles "Madame" and "Mademoiselle," and the transmission of family names down the paternal line (Rocheftort 2017, 104). Feminist movements emphasized the invisibility and lack of status of female names, "particularly in professional, intellectual, artistic and political circles, where middle-class women were beginning to try to get some recognition" (2017, 106). In literature, it was common for women writers to use male pseudonyms to avoid discrimination. A well-known case is that of Amantine Aurore Dupin (1804–1876), a French writer who became famous under the name of George Sand. Not only was this impossible in the dance world, but the motivations behind name changes were quite different.

New commercial practices were developed to attract urban audiences to the recently opened music halls, some of which had a capacity for several thousand spectators. The concept of celebrity in the performing arts was leveraged in order to ensure profitable returns on the big investments in the productions and to gain the loyalty of these new audiences. The rapid rise of the specialized press, cultural advertisements, and the sale of artists' portraits all contributed to this phenomenon (Lilti 2014). The name became a visible, public means of presenting a performer to a globalized world. The assumption of a new identity had potential commercial benefits. However, as Clémence Royer wrote in 1898, "the loss of one's name means the loss of one's personhood, it leads to a reign of dependence . . ." (Rocheftort 2017, 108). Although this statement refers to the consequences of adopting the husband's surname, it can also be applied to the practice of name changing in the arts, which may contribute to the invisibilization of the person and undermine that person's potential status as a historical figure.

Another point that caught the attention of turn-of-the-century feminists was the use of "Mademoiselle" (Miss) and "Madame" (Mrs.). In 1905, Hubertine Aucler pointed out that the distinction between these two titles, which was based on marital status, did not allow for recognition of female individuality nor did it support equality of the sexes (Rocheftort 2017, 109–110). Each title carried a range of connotations that might conflict with the woman's age and lead to her stigmatization. In the case discussed here, the dancer is usually referred to as Mademoiselle Mercédès, suggesting that she was unmarried and therefore available for a relationship. Moreover, although the usual practice was to follow the title (Mlle/Mme) with a surname, in this case Mademoiselle is followed by a first name and there is no surname at all. This construction highlighted the fact that it is a pseudonym, while suggesting familiarity with a young unmarried woman, thereby encouraging a personal closeness that deprived her of her own autonomous identity. There is evidence of the use of other names with a similar structure, such as "Mademoiselle (or Madame) Celeste" (1814–1882).

Although "Mercédès" was usually preceded by "Mademoiselle," in some cases "Madame" was used instead, most commonly when several women were cited consecutively, evidently opting for the more inclusive title. Her female companions were listed with their surnames and not with a given name as she was, as can be seen in the following announcement in the press:<sup>2</sup>

Tonight, at the Olympia, first performance of La Gran Via, Spanish fantaisie in two tableaux, adapted by M. Maurice Ordonneau, music by Chueca and Valverde, with the following cast: [. . .] The other roles, by Mmes. Mercédès, Dorys, Corby, Vauclin, and MM. Hérisser, Carman, Moreaux. (Don Fabrice 10 May. 1902)

The nineteenth-century ballet was defined on a feminine basis, as had been the case since the dawn of Romanticism (Garafola 2004, 139). This trait was accentuated unambiguously in the popular music halls, where dance was a vehicle for exposing women's bodies. "For pleasure-loving Paris, dancers were the cream of the *demi-monde*" (2004, 140). The various mentions of Mademoiselle Mercédès in the press include the repetition of certain adjectives, the most common being

“charming” (*charmante*) and “graceful” (*gracieuse*), followed by others such as “exquisite” (*exquise*) and “beautiful” (*jolie*).

In addition to positive adjectives, theater critics sometimes included speculations on possible male audience reactions, such as the following:

Mlle. Mercédès, a school teacher who immediately makes you want to learn a living language with her. (Arlequin 16 Sept. 1894, 2)

The most obvious expression of admiration for the performer was made publicly in *Le Journal* by the writer Armand Silvestre, author of the libretto of *Fleur de Lotus*:

Here are the charming verses that M. Armand Silvestre sent to Mlle. Mercédès, one of the most graceful interpreters of his ballet, *Fleur de Lotus*, which is currently being performed at the Folies-Bergère:

If I were the lotus with divine pallor,

Calidasa, false youth, woman nevertheless!

It is with an extreme pleasure

That I would deliver you my flowers! (Colin-Maillard 20 March. 1894, 3)

In addition to her grace and the desire she provoked, her talent as a dancer was also highlighted in the press:

Mlle. Mercédès showed herself, in this transvestite role, to be full of grace and suppleness; she was also much applauded. (Bridaine 1 Jan. 1891, 3)

Last night, at the Folies-Bergère, Mlle Mercédès danced for the first time and very brilliantly in one of the most suggestive roles in the ballet *Emilienne aux Quat'z-Arts*. (Colin-Maillard 17 Jan. 1894, 4)

Her artistic abilities, combined with her physical appeal, elicited the following audience response reported in the press:

And yet, to be frank, the exercising and weapons handling performance given on stage with praiseworthy mastery and precision by Mlle. Mercédès and the intrepid little soldiers of the corps de ballet was the only moment of the evening where the audience at the premiere appeared to take some pleasure. (Guy 16 March. 1897, 3)

The comments mentioning Mademoiselle Mercédès in the press thus suggest that the women using this name were dancers with a talent recognized by critics and public alike, and their exotic stage name made them even more desirable. The figure of the only known person to have used the name of Mademoiselle Mercédès will be introduced in the following section.

## Film Actress Julienne Mathieu as Music Hall Dancer Mademoiselle Mercédès

Pictures, films, and previous research all confirm that one of the women who adopted the name Mercédès was Julienne Mathieu. Although overshadowed by her partner, Spanish trick film pioneer Segundo de Chomón,<sup>3</sup> recent research indicates that she was one of the most prolific film actresses



in the biggest film company at the beginning of the century, Pathé Frères, and as such, an important precursor to the film star (Alvarez San Román 2023). Her film career lasted five years, from 1905 to 1909. She starred in some of the “blockbusters” of the time, made by directors such as Ferdinand Zecca and Gaston Velle, and she specialized in the role of illusionist under the direction of Chomón. Although dancing was not what made her a success on the big screen, what she learned in her years in the music hall as a mime and performer provided her with the skills necessary for this nascent art form.

In fact, the cinema had become a new professional outlet for stage performers. Some film companies in those early years chose to hire music hall artists who were known to the public, whereas others opted for complete unknowns. The Pathé Frères company, for which Julienne Mathieu worked, took an intermediate approach, which indicates that Mercédès/Julienne enjoyed a certain degree of fame.

Chomón specialist Juan Gabriel Tharrats has pointed out that Mathieu began her career in the music halls under the pseudonyms Mercédès and Suzanne. Tharrats provides evidence of the use of the former with a program of the Olympia of November 7, 1901, in which the name Mademoiselle Mercédès appears as one of the members of the *Paris-Cascades* ballet. This researcher also cites a photograph from the same program taken by Eugène Pirou, showing a young Julienne Mathieu, whose identity can be confirmed by comparing this photograph against her appearances in the Pathé films. No mentions have been found in the press of theater artists called Suzanne without a surname. An analysis of her filmography suggests that Suzanne, or rather the Italianized version “Susanna,” was the name that Julienne Mathieu adopted in the cinema.<sup>4</sup> Although Tharrats was aware of this pseudonym, he associated it not with the cinema but with the music hall.

In addition to the abovementioned program cited by Tharrats, I have found two other photographs of a young Julienne. The first appears in a special program for the *Revue de l'Olympia* (Photo 1), whereas the second is from a program for *Miss Bouton d'Or* (Photo 2), both from the 1902–1903 season. The *Revue de l'Olympia* photograph had been used in the previous season for the *La Gran Via* program.

Further documentary evidence can be found in civil records. Her son’s birth certificate, dated January 31, 1897, indicates her profession as “*artiste lyrique*,” which is in keeping with the information published in the press regarding the pseudonym Mercédès. She was then twenty-two years old and living with her mother at 6, rue des Martyrs in Paris. The child is registered under her surname, Mathieu, because the father’s identity is unknown (“*père non dénommé*”).<sup>5</sup>

Julienne Alexandrine Mathieu was born in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye in 1874. Her family emigrated to Paris when she was still a child. A few years later, she was working in the French capital and living with her mother, who did not practice a profession. It is not known whether the two lived alone or with one of Julienne’s siblings, after the death of their father. They moved from the 16th arrondissement to the 9th, to the lower part of rue des Martyrs. This street, whose upper section runs through the entertainment district of Montmartre, was mostly commercial. It was a humble neighborhood halfway between two worlds and a less than twenty minutes’ walk from the Olympia. It was also a safe distance from the wild nightlife and excess of Montmartre. When she began working at Pathé, Mathieu met Segundo de Chomón and they became a couple. Many aspects of her life story, such as her humble origins and her late marriage after already having had a child, are in keeping with the clichés of the dancer’s profession that Marina Nordera (2011, 118) argues were forged in the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Jean-Claude Seguin (2015) was the first scholar to delve into the beginnings of Mathieu’s career as a dancer with pioneering documentary research. As Sarah Gutsche-Miller suggests, the press can be a



*Photo 1. Mercédès. Eugène Pirou. Program of the Revue de l'Olympia (1902–1903). Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

very useful source of information for reconstructing careers that have been left out of official historiographies. She has checked newspapers when researching Madame Mariquita,<sup>6</sup> a choreographer who worked with Mercédès at the Folies-Bergère (Gutsche-Miller 2020). For this research, my intention was to compile every mention of Mademoiselle Mercédès in the press. I started with the first compilation of press mentions made by Seguin (2015), and then began discovering others. In his article, Seguin associates all references to Mercédès with Mathieu, and only questions this association in the case of mentions related to Paris Opéra performances. The results of my research





Photo 2. Mercédès. Program of Miss Bouton d'Or at the Olympia (1902–1903). Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

institution in the National Archives of France but found no trace of her there. This article focuses on the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, as this is the period in which the pseudonym makes the most appearances.

## One Name, Several Women

The identity of the performer(s) using the pseudonym Mercédès between 1867 and the end of the 1880s is unknown. The first might have been someone who specialized in Spanish dances, who was followed by a dancer with a wider repertoire. The performances at the Folies-Bergère between 1890 and 1895 cannot be attributed to Julienne Mathieu either, considering that she does not appear in any of the photographs taken by the Nadar Studio between 1875 and 1910. This collection includes over forty photographs of artists cataloged as “Mercédès,” “Maria Mercédès,” “Marie Mercédès,” or “Mary Mercédès.” These documents, which were used as postcards and other advertising material, are further evidence of a marketing strategy to turn this dancer into a commercial product. A visual examination of all these pictures has led to the identification of at least three different people. For this study, I consider the two who appear the most and are identified by Nadar and the press as having performed at the Folies-Bergère. This article includes photos taken between 1875 and 1895 of the two women called Mercédès who, according to their cataloging, performed at the Folies-Bergère. They are referred to in this study as Mercédès-A (Photo 3) and Mercédès-B (Photo 4). In the Nadar Studio collection there are also some photographs of another Mercédès dating from 1910 and labeled “Bouffes.”

In the book *Le Panorama. Paris s’amuse*, which includes portraits of the most prominent artists on the Parisian theater scene of the Belle Époque (although the exact dates of publication have not been recorded), Mercédès-B appears again under the names “Mercédès” and “Marie Mercédès” and the text relates her to the Folie-Bergère (Photos 5 and 6). The use of “Marie” before “Mercédès” therefore cannot be considered as identifying a different person.

Mercédès-A appears in a Nadar Studio photo as a participant in the show *Les Gitanos* (1887). However, both Mercédès-A (Photo 7) and Mercédès-B (Photo 8) posed for the Nadar Studio in dresses typical of the serpentine dance, brought to the Parisian stage by Loïe Fuller for the first time in November 1892, at the Folies-Bergère (Harris 1979, 15). This suggests that these particular photos were taken later and that these two artists appeared on stage around the same time.

confirm that some references—including some related to music hall performances—cannot be attributed to Mathieu. I have also classified the shows in which she did appear in order to establish a continuous time-frame for the different theaters.

I checked newspapers such as *Art Lyrique*, *Gil Blas*, *La Lanterne*, *La Presse*, *Le Figaro*, and *Le Journal*, and expanded my research by integrating iconographic sources, including the photographic collection of the Nadar Studio and the images included in the few theatrical programs preserved in the National Library of France. Because there were also mentions of Mercédès performing at the Paris Opéra in those years,<sup>7</sup> I reviewed the contracts of this



Photo 3. Me Mercédès (Mercedes-A). Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

It may have been the same woman using the pseudonym throughout these fifteen years. A dancer might have moved from the Paris Opéra to the music hall for the opportunity to play more important roles, as was the case of Cléo de Mérode. A move in the opposite direction was unusual, unless they were star dancers of the music hall, with a solid academic background, which does not seem to be the case of any of the women named Mercédès. In any case, I have been able to verify that the dancer at the Paris Opéra and the music hall artist were performing at the same time, which means that they must have been two different people.

On March 1, 1896, the newspaper *La Presse* published the schedules of the theatrical shows taking place in Paris at that time. According to this source, *Léda* was performed at the Parisiana every evening at eight o'clock, whereas the ballet *Coppélia* was performed at the Paris Opéra on Mondays (the time is not given, but because it was a weekday it can be assumed that it would have been in the evening). Both shows mention an artist named Mercédès, who would have been a prima ballerina at the Parisiana and a member of the corps de ballet at the Paris Opéra. Although the same person might have performed in two different shows on the same day, in this case it seems highly unlikely given the time clash.

In short, between 1867 and 1910 there were several women on the Parisian theater scene using the artistic name of Mercédès. Based on the Nadar Studio photographs, I have identified two dancers from the first period (1875–1895) related to the Folies-Bergère and a third from the last period (1910), about whom there is hardly any information. It has also been confirmed that Julienne Mathieu performed at the Olympia under the pseudonym of Mercédès, as will be detailed below. The references to this theater date from between 1896 and 1903. Finally, a woman with the same name was part of the corps de ballet at the Paris Opéra between 1884 and 1898, as

In 1894, it appears that two of the women using the name Mercédès began performing together. To distinguish them, the press called them Mercédès I and Mercédès II.<sup>8</sup> According to Gutsche-Miller, it was customary for dancers who were sisters to be named with Roman numerals so that a family link could be established between them. Although Julienne Mathieu's sister, Geneviève, was also in show business, she could not have been one of these two women because she was born in 1884, which would have made her only ten years old when the two began performing together.<sup>9</sup> This leaves two possibilities: that the two women appearing in the Nadar Studio photographs (Mercédès-A and Mercédès-B) were sisters, although this cannot be confirmed based on the current documentary sources; or that Mercédès I and Mercédès II were not related, in which case Mercédès II may have been Julienne Mathieu.

Moreover, between 1884 and 1898, a woman named Mercédès was part of the corps de ballet of the Paris Opéra.



Photo 4. Mlle Mercédès (Mercedes-B). Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

recorded in the press. The most confusing period is therefore the first, because it is difficult to separate the careers of the two music hall dancers who were active in those years. In the following section I will discuss the data available.





Photo 5. *Mercédès. Le Panorama. Paris s'amuse. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

### **Mercédès at the Folies-Bergère, the Great Mystery**

The activity of Mademoiselle Mercédès was very intense between 1890 and 1895 at the Folies-Bergère. This hall became the Parisian center par excellence for creative ballet under the artistic direction of Édouard Marchand, between 1886 and 1901. During this period, in which he regularly produced new ballets that remained on the bill for six weeks to three months, Marchand renovated the facilities, raised ticket prices to attract the upper classes, and secured the best artists—choreographers, dancers, mimes—in Paris with huge profits (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 19–37).

These were years of splendor, when Mademoiselle Mercédès danced in at least a dozen ballets and ballet pantomimes (performances combining dance and mime). Most of the works were written by



Photo 6. Marie Mercedès. *Le Panorama. Paris s’amuse*. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

the composer Louis Desormes and all of them, from her first to her last performance in that hall, were choreographed by Madame Mariquita, who was in charge of training as well. Mademoiselle Mercedès also appeared in several shows with other dancers, such as Lina Campana, Mademoiselle Correnti, and Jeanne Lamothe, suggesting that she was part of the regular team directed by Édouard Marchand, referred to in the press as “Mr. Marchand’s perfect troupe” (Arlequin 22 Dec. 1894, 5). Although two different women may have used the pseudonym Mademoiselle Mercedès at the Folies-Bergère, it can be assumed that one of them was more important than the other.





Photo 7. Marie Mercédès (Mercedes-A). Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

As a character dancer, Mademoiselle Mercédès combined her talent as a mime with the performance of social, folkloric, and national dances. In 1890 and 1891, she acted in transvestite roles. In the autumn of 1890, she played the leading role in *Le roi s'ennuie* and the press gave her a positive review: “The graceful Mercédès (the king), who possesses excellent miming skills, contributes greatly to the resounding success of this ballet” (Bridaine 25 Nov. 1890). On New Year’s Eve of the same year, Mademoiselle Mercédès replaced Mademoiselle Correnti in another transvestite



Photo 8. Me Mercédès (Mercedes-B). Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

role at the last moment in *Une répétition aux Folies-Bergère*. This appearance was reported in the newspaper *La Presse*, with the observation that “she was much applauded” (Bridaine 1 Jan. 1891).

The impact Mademoiselle Mercédès had in her time is evidenced by the list of famous artists with whom she shared the stage. Among these was the Spanish artist La Belle Otero, with whom she performed first in February 1894 at the Folies-Bergère, on the occasion of Louise Willy’s debut in the ballet *Fleur de Lotus* (1894). She was also the first candidate to replace two leading performers, Loïe Fuller and Émilienne d’Alençon. In February 1894, she joined the ballet that accompanied Fuller, and she received a positive review that stressed her grace and charm:

For a few days now, at the Folies-Bergère, Loïe Fuller has been accompanied, in her last tableau, by four dancers, including the charming and graceful Mlle. Mercédès. The curtain falls on a kind of grand finale for the famous artist. (Colin-Maillard 22 Feb. 1894, 4)

This would make it easier for Mademoiselle Mercédès to replace Fuller at the Folies-Bergère on May 11 of the same year. The response of the public was very positive:

It is Mlle. Mercédès I who, as of last night, has replaced Loïe Fuller in the last ballet she created at the Folies-Bergère. Everyone agrees that the charming ballerina is quite graceful. (Colin-Maillard 12 May. 1894, 3)

As can be seen in the Nadar Studio photos, two women called Mercédès performed the serpentine dance. This may be why the newspaper review quoted above referred specifically to Mercédès I. It would be reasonable to assume that the two women had a close relationship and similar artistic skills.

Moreover, in the ballet *Émilienne aux Quat'z-Arts*, she was lauded for her brilliant performance in “one of the most suggestive roles” (Colin-Maillard 17 Jan. 1894, 4), and she subsequently replaced the star Émilienne d’Alençon in the title role:

As of yesterday, the role of Emilienne, in *Emilienne aux Quat'z-Arts* at the Folies-Bergère, is being played by Mlle. Mercédès I; the charming artist is perfect and the public has celebrated her greatly. (Colin-Maillard 12 June. 1894, 4)

In the ballet *Fleur de Lotus*, presented at the Folies-Bergère between March 25 and May 7, 1893, with a second run from February 24 to May 31, 1894, Mademoiselle Mercédès did not play the title role, which was performed by Louise Willy. However, she received special praise from the author of the libretto, Armand Silvestre, as mentioned above. At the end of July, she performed in the revue *Trianon-Concert* at the Paris-Trianon (Colin-Maillard 1 Aug. 1894, 4), but it seems to have had a short run.

Mademoiselle Mercédès ended her time at the Folies-Bergère with two ballets: *Merveilleuses et Gigolettes* (from December 21, 1894, to March 26, 1895) and *La Princesse Idæa* (from March 27, 1895, to June 21, 1895). The choreographer, Madame Mariquita, replied to the critic Arlequin about her future projects: “Right now I have nothing more to tell you, except that Mr. Marchand achieved the biggest success of his brilliant directorial career last night” (Arlequin 22 Dec. 1894, 5). This remark, offered on the occasion of the premiere of *Merveilleuses et Gigolettes*, made clear the importance of this work in Marchand’s career as an artistic director, and Madame Mariquita’s as a choreographer, as well as the history of the Folies-Bergère in general. The theater critic remarked that “Mr. Marchand served us an unforgettably exquisite dessert” (Arlequin 22 Dec. 1894, 5).

At the end of the 1894–1895 season, Mercédès stopped working at the Folies-Bergère for reasons unknown. What we do know is that in 1896 she played a leading role in the operetta *Léda*, at the Parisiana-Concert theater, beginning on March 1. It was an impressive show, with a corps de ballet of twenty-five dancers, which was a big success in Paris. *Gil Blas* reported: “The great highlight was the marvelous ballet masterfully directed by Balbiani and exquisitely danced by Mercédès the charmer and twenty-five enchanting ballerinas” (Turlupin 2 March. 1896), whereas *La Presse* noted:

The success of *Léda*, the new operetta of the Parisiana-Concert, grows every evening. Apart from the graceful ballet so beautifully danced by Mercédès and her charming companions, the excellent interpreters of the fantasy of Beissier and Clérice were

greeted with applause from the public, who laughed at the play's amusing quips.  
(Des Planches 5 March. 1896, 3)

In the usual newspaper advertisements, the name of Mademoiselle Mercédès was prominent: “Every evening, concert show—*Léda*, new opera in 1 act. Ballet directed by M. Balbiani, danced by Mlle. Mercédès and the whole corps de ballet” (*La Presse* 1 March. 1896, 3). These references to Mademoiselle Mercédès suggest that she was a well-known artist, although unfortunately the limited data available makes it difficult to determine which of the dancers named Mercédès the press was referring to. This is not the case for performances at the Olympia, as will be detailed.

## Julienne Mathieu at the Olympia

As indicated above, the only known person identified with the pseudonym Mercédès is Julienne Mathieu. Notes in the press mention that Mademoiselle Mercédès had been performing at the Olympia since 1896, and although evidence suggests that it was the same person, it is only possible to confirm Mathieu's presence there as of 1901, when Eugène Pirou's photograph was taken. She continued to perform at the Olympia intermittently until 1903. This theater had been founded in April 1893 by a businessman from the Spanish city of Terrassa named Josep Oller, a promoter of other important Parisian venues, such as the Moulin Rouge, Le Nouveau Cirque, and Les Jardins de Paris. In 1896, he handed over the direction of the Olympia to Oscar de Lagoanère, who directed it for two years before delegating the responsibility to the Isola brothers. Also taking over the Folies-Bergère upon Marchand's death in 1902, the Isolas ramped up the theatrical productions and variety shows, which became increasingly spectacular until revues began to monopolize the Olympia's programs in the early 1900s (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 28–29).

The information on Mademoiselle Mercédès's transition from the Folies-Bergère to the Olympia is not very clear. In the 1895–1896 season, the artist performed at two different theaters: the aforementioned Parisiana and, starting in May, the Olympia. Her first appearance in the latter hall was in the show *La folie de l'or*, whose program lists her as “*première mime*.” The following month, in June 1896, she performed in the operetta *La Demoiselle de magasin*, an adaptation of the English play *Shop Girl*. The critic for *Art Lyrique*, Valérien Tranel, opined that it would not be a success (Tranel 21 June. 1896, 4). Tranel praised Julia Duval's suppleness while deploring the clumsiness of Mercédès, whom she described as “heavy and ungraceful” (Tranel 21 June. 1896, 4). This would seem to suggest that Mercédès did not start off on the right foot at the Olympia. If this was in fact Julienne Mathieu, one possible explanation is that she would have been in the first trimester of pregnancy, which may have had an impact on her performance.

At the beginning of the season in September, Mercédès performed in the “*divertissement japonais*” titled *Nousima*. Julia Duval was the prima ballerina and was accompanied on stage by three partners: Mercédès, Weiter, and Régina, according to *Gil Blas* (Intérim 18 Sept. 1896) and *La Presse* (Des Planches 19 Sept. 1896, 3). Her participation in the “*revue à grand spectacle*” *Tout Paris à l'Olympia* garnered praise from critics and audiences alike, as it continued for more than fifty performances. According to *Gil Blas*, this show was “the most amusing [revue] that we have yet been offered,” and therefore “triumphed brilliantly and noisily” (Strapontin 9 Jan. 1897). *La Lanterne* described it as a “very luxuriously produced” show (Guy 16 Jan. 1897). Mademoiselle Mercédès was one of the principal dancers in its two ballets, *Fleurs en papier* and *Jarretières et jarretelles*.

During this time, Julienne Mathieu would have been working while pregnant. She gave birth on January 31, 1897, just three weeks after the press reviews cited above. Economic precariousness may have been one of the main reasons why she prolonged her work activity until the last weeks of her pregnancy. It is also possible that the child was born prematurely. The length of her absence from the stage at this time is unknown, but on February 13 and 14, 1897, on the



occasion of the fiftieth performance of *Tout Paris à l'Olympia*, her name was again mentioned in the press: "... the two pretty ballets, *Jarrettelle et la Jarretière* and *Fleurs de papier*, so impeccably danced by the lovely Julia Duval, Régina, de Riska, and Mercédès" (Turlupin 13 Feb. 1897; Les deux masques 14 Feb. 1897, 3; Pédrille 14 Feb. 1897, 3).

This revue was followed by *Deux baisers*, a work of "*divertissement en un acte*" that premiered on March 12, 1897. Julia Duval was not mentioned as prima ballerina in this show, and Mademoiselle Mercédès was named first in *Gil Blas*, implying that she may have acquired greater importance at the Olympia. On the very day of the premiere, the show was presented as being "danced by Mesdemoiselles Mercédès, Régina, de Riska and all the corps de ballet" (Turlupin 12 March. 1897), whereas the following day another reviewer for the same periodical observed that "with their graceful choreographic movements, Mesdemoiselles Mercédès, Regina, and de Riska knew how to bring the best out of the pleasant score" (G.S. 13 March. 1897).

After this last review, four theater seasons would pass before the artistic name of Mercédès would appear again in music hall shows, in 1901. One possible reason for this may have been a change of direction taken at the Olympia, as the Isola brothers may have decided to do without some artists when they took over. Her new situation as a single mother may also have affected her career. Another possibility is that the artist named Mercédès who performed at the Olympia between 1896 and 1897 was not Julienne Mathieu, but one of the dancers named Mercédès who had performed at the Folies-Bergère. However, if that is the case, where did Mathieu begin her career?

The stage name Mercédès reappeared at the opening of the Olympia season in September 1901. Both Tharrats (1988) and Seguin (2015) identify this Mercédès as Julienne Mathieu. The show in question was the ballet *Paris-Cascades*, which would continue its run at the Olympia for at least two months. The other two female roles were played by Louise Willy and Lina Campana, performers who had previously worked at the Folies-Bergère. In the Olympia program dated November 7, 1901, recovered by Tharrats (1988, 61), Mademoiselle Mercédès was listed among the main performers in the first number of the evening, *Paris-Cascades*, and the last, *Une fête à Seville*, also starring La Belle Otero. The show closed with a "*phono-cinéma-théâtre*," reflecting the connection between music hall and the nascent art of cinema, which would begin to offer professional opportunities for artists like Julienne Mathieu.

In the spring of 1902, Mademoiselle Mercédès had a supporting role in the pantomime *En tournée*, which opened at the Olympia on April 5 (Don Fabrice 5 April. 1902). The following month she performed in *La Gran Via*, but not in a leading role. She seems to have regained prominence with *Frégolnette*, the Olympia's opening show for the season in September 1902. Mathieu also appeared on the music hall stage in October 1902, in the role of Hortense in *Miss Bouton d'Or*, a play that also featured La Tortajada (Don Fabrice 14 Oct. 1902). At least until June 1903, she performed in the *Olympia-Revue* at Chat de Belleville and Mimi-Pinson. It would be her last performance at this venue. The last written mention found of Mercédès is in the Parisiana program for October 27 and 28, 1905, in the revue *Ça sent la femme!*, in which she played different supporting roles such as the gypsy and the soldier of love. It was precisely this year that she played her first role in a Pathé film.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed the implications of the use of a stage name for the reconstruction of a dancer's career. The starting point was that Mademoiselle Mercédès was the silent film actress Julienne Mathieu. However, an analysis of the press and photographs of the time has revealed that this pseudonym was also used by other performers. Based on this discovery, Mathieu's career has been delimited to the Olympia period, given the documentary sources that support it.



This study highlights the value attributed to the artistic name in emerging mass culture and how this was linked to tropes present in the sociopolitical context of the time. For example, the use of pseudonyms in this case reveals a strategy to capitalize on interest in Spain in nineteenth-century France. It has been concluded that, in at least one case, the dancer who adopted a Hispanic pseudonym was French (the origins of the others are unknown) and actually exhibited great versatility in the performance of different dances. This dancer did not actively embrace the *espagnolade* phenomenon or become a native imitator, but she did exploit the imaginary that the Spanish pseudonym evoked to present an amalgam of exotic dances. In this sense, the hybrid identity of Spanish Orientalism permitted this flexibility with a name that carried fewer connotations than Carmen.

If it is difficult for us today to discern who was behind this name, it is logical to assume that the same problem would have arisen at that time. It is therefore worth asking whether there was some commercial interest in keeping the name alive, like a kind of brand name adopted by different individuals. In other words, was there some kind of agreement among the dancers and/or among the theatrical promoters to exploit a certain degree of fame that the name had been developing over the years? This article points out that the name and its connotations seemed to be more important than the performer herself.

Regardless of who Mademoiselle Mercédès was, it is evident that the women using this stage name participated in the transition toward modern dances in this period, through both their collaboration with important personalities such as Madame Mariquita and Loïe Fuller, as well as the variety of shows in which they performed. This research has confirmed that Mademoiselle Mercédès was a key figure in the intense experimental years of the Folies-Bergère. It has also been possible to further define Julienne Mathieu's career as a music hall dancer for future research on her.

This study sheds light on a phenomenon associated with dancers who were not always headliners but who nevertheless enjoyed a certain degree of fame in their time. For these performers, the use of the pseudonym actually became a double-edged sword because it contributed to their celebrity but may have been detrimental to the perpetuation of their historical memory.

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1. See Plaza Orellana (2013).
2. All newspaper quotations have been translated from the original French by the author of the article.
3. Although she was very active, Julienne Mathieu has for a long time only been studied in relation to the work of her husband, Segundo de Chomón (Tharrats 1988, 1990; Sánchez Vidal 1992; Minguet Batllori 2010; Seguin 2019; Salmon 2019; Malthête 2019; Núñez Alonso 2021).
4. In *Le boudoir mystérieux* (Chomón, 1907), also known as *Le miroir magique*, she is presented with the following caption: "Mademoiselle Susanna, illusioniste." The structure of the title "Mademoiselle" followed by a name with exotic overtones is thus reused.
5. More than two decades later, this birth certificate would be amended following the acknowledgement of paternity by Segundo de Chomón on August 25, 1925.
6. The artistic name of this woman seems to have a Spanish inspiration and it has a similar construction to that of Mademoiselle Mercédès, because it combines the title ("Madame," in this case) with a diminutive first name (Mariquita is a diminutive form of María). The respectability suggested by the "Madame" title, combined with a more uncommon name in the French popular imagination than Mercedes, contributes to its uniqueness.

7. The name Mercèdes is mentioned in references to shows at the Paris Opéra, such as *Le Cid* (Vitu 1 Dec. 1885, 2) or *Étoile* (Turlupin 31 May. 1897), and it appears in the list of members of the corps de ballet of the Académie Nationale de Musique (Colin-Maillard 11 Aug. 1898).

8. Because these two women cannot be assumed to be the women in the Nadar Studio photos, I have chosen a different nomenclature for the latter (A, B).

9. For Geneviève Mathieu-Lutz's career, see Seguin (2015).

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