
Yvette Guilbert: A Career of Public Applause and Personal Disappointment *

Geraldine Power

Yvette Guilbert (1865–1944) was a musical performer who attained iconic status in France during the final decade of the nineteenth century. She was categorised as a *diseuse*, a term used to describe performers who gave emphasis to the texts of songs through their delivery style of half singing / half speaking. Made immediately recognisable by her green dress, long black gloves and flaming red hair, Guilbert was widely popular and commanded very high fees in prominent Parisian *cafés-concerts*.

Guilbert has continued to inspire subsequent generations of performers to recreate the repertoire for which she was famous. Yet, paradoxically, despite her popularity, fame and financial success, her writings reveal that she was disappointed, even embittered, because her *café-concert* audiences did not fully appreciate her art. In 1900 she rejected her popular repertoire and attempted to forge a new career as an ambassador and performer of the old songs of France, dating back to the eleventh century. However, Guilbert's new repertoire failed to achieve the same level of success, and eventually she had to confront the reality that the bawdiness of the songs she had performed had been an essential aspect of her audience appeal. Although her first career had brought her the considerable financial reward she craved, she died in poverty.

Why was Yvette Guilbert so dissatisfied with what seemed to be an enviable and successful career, and why, as she noted in her memoirs, did her audiences' applause 'leave her cold'?¹ While commentators have alluded to her dissatisfaction with her pre-1900 career, there has been little attempt to explain it. Drawing on Guilbert's own writings, this article provides evidence of the central role played by Realism and Naturalism in Guilbert's career motivation and choice of repertoire and performance style.

In her 1988 biography of Guilbert, Claudine Brécourt-Villars uses the word 'Realism' in her discussion of Guilbert's repertoire and delivery style, but does so without examining Guilbert's own writings relating to the influence of Realism on her performance.² Similarly,

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¹ Yvette Guilbert, *La chanson de ma vie, mes mémoires* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1927) 179.

² Claudine Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert, l'Irrespectueuse* (Paris: Plon, 1988) 95–96.

chanson historian Jean-Claude Klein makes only passing reference to Realism in Guilbert's stage presence, delivery and repertoire.³ Philippe Luez also alludes to Guilbert's Realism, writing that her characters were borrowed from 'somewhere between realism and literature for the people.'⁴ While these scholars refer to Guilbert's alignment with Realism, none points to the significance of her references to Realism and Naturalism in her *Mémoires*, or her decision to bring Realism to chanson through her choice of repertoire and performance technique.

This article begins with an examination of Guilbert's life and career, in order to gain insight into what motivated her. It reveals that Guilbert's early life was beset by poverty—a poverty that was likely to have influenced her determination to attain financial success. There follows a description of the *cafés-concerts* and *cabarets artistiques*, popular entertainment venues of late nineteenth-century Paris. This description is provided because of an intriguing question posed by this article: why did Guilbert choose to perform in the *cafés-concerts* even though the *cabarets artistiques* appeared more suitable venues for her performances? A brief discussion of Realism and Naturalism follows, preceding an examination of how Guilbert's choice of texts and performance technique was significantly influenced by both these movements. The article concludes that Guilbert's disillusionment with her career was in large part due to her frustration that her *café-concert* audiences failed to appreciate her as the serious artiste she perceived herself to be.

Struggles and Victories

Yvette Guilbert was born Emma Laure Esther Guilbert on 20 January 1865 in Paris. She experienced considerable hardship as a child, writing in her *Mémoires* that 'from my most distant memories going back to 1870, the year of the Franco-German war, I see only images of poverty.'⁵ Brécourt-Villars paints a bleak picture of Guilbert's family life. Three months after the wedding, with Guilbert's mother already pregnant with Yvette, her father began a relationship with his wife's best friend. He squandered Yvette's mother's generous dowry on failed business deals, and the family had to move house several times. Her father left them before Yvette turned twelve, by which time she and her mother found themselves in financial difficulty, and Guilbert had to work in her mother's tailoring business.⁶ Guilbert describes this time in her *Mémoires*:

(W)e got up at seven in the morning and we worked till eleven in the evening to earn five francs per day between the two of us... (D)ead seasons returned regularly and they were terrible... We sold everything, little by little, in order to eat and my sorrow was doubled when I saw my mother, whom I adored, scarcely covered in winter, crying, distressed and... struggling ceaselessly only to always end up 'in absolute poverty'!⁷

At the age of sixteen, Guilbert found more lucrative employment as a *mannequin*, but a bout of typhoid again forced her to work from home in her mother's *atelier*. Guilbert claimed:

³ Jean-Claude Klein, *La chanson à l'Affiche, histoire de la chanson française du café-concert à nos jours* (Paris: Du May, 1991) 48.

⁴ Philippe Luez, 'Yvette Guilbert, La Diseuse fin de Siècle (1865–1944)' in Philippe Luez, ed., *Yvette Guilbert, sa vie, ses chansons* (Paris: Fortin, 1994) 3.

⁵ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 17.

⁶ Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert*, 31–47.

⁷ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 19.

'it's certainly from this environment that the most profound, human and sincere elements of my style as a singer were shaped, because I experienced all possible miseries of life.'⁸

In 1885 Guilbert met Charles Zidler, an influential figure in the world of Parisian theatre and popular entertainment (and future founder of the Moulin Rouge), and in 1887, after eight months under the tutelage of the prominent drama teacher Landrol, she made her acting debut in Dumas's *La Reine Margot*. Guilbert soon became convinced that a career in the *cafés-concerts* would bring her more financial reward than acting, and her career as a *chanteuse / diseuse* dates from September 1889, when she began a season at the Eldorado *café-concert* in Paris. It did not take long for her *café-concert* career to be established and, once it was, she became a sought after entertainer, able to launch herself successfully as an international celebrity. By the end of 1894, Guilbert had performed in the music halls of Brussels, Naples, London and New York; Holland was the only country to receive her straight away in its concert halls. By 1900, she had extended her reach into other regions of Europe and the United States.

She became friendly with the songwriter Léon Xanrof, and through him was introduced to the *cabaret artistique* Le Chat Noir, where she gave her first performance in 1890. There she met many artists and writers from the intellectual set of her time, several of whom would become long-term friends and/or collaborators. Among the prominent personalities she counted as her friends, correspondents or acquaintances were Jean Lorrain, Maurice Donnay, Francis Jammes, Pierre Louÿs, Éléonora Duse and Sigmund Freud.⁹ The poet Apollinaire wrote a sonnet about her, and George Bernard Shaw considered her: 'one of Europe's greatest performers and mime actors.'¹⁰ She was the subject of well-known artists including Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso and Steinlen.

In 1896 Guilbert met Maxime Schiller, a Romanian Jew whose family had connections in the international entertainment industry; the two were married in 1897. Schiller was an immense support to her through several bouts of ill health, including a kidney disease that required six operations between 1899 and her death in 1944.

Around the mid-1890s, when she realised that she had been typecast as a performer of bawdy songs, Guilbert determined to break from this mould and generated new projects and performance possibilities. She published her first novel, *La Vedette* (Paris: H. Simonis Empis) in 1902, and a second, *Les Demi-vieilles* (Paris: Félix Juven), followed in 1903. In 1903 she participated in the 'Montmartre en ballade' European tour with former performers at Le Chat Noir, a venture that resulted in a considerable financial loss for her. She returned to acting, appearing, for example, at Variétés in Paris in *L'amour en banque* in 1907.¹¹ Despite her disdain for American music halls and the entertainment spectacle that typified American musical importations into France, she signed contracts to perform in the United States in 1906 and 1909. Her illness flared up during her 1906 tour, during which she endured 44,000 kilometres of train travel in forty days. Then, as in 1909, the American public received her with indifference.¹²

⁸ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 26.

⁹ Guilbert's relationship with Freud is discussed in David Werman, 'Freud, Yvette Guilbert, and the Psychology of Performance: A Biographical Note,' *Psychoanalytical Review*, 85.3 (June 1998): 404-5.

¹⁰ *The World*, 16 May 1894, cited in Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert*, 175.

¹¹ *L'Amour en banque* was a 'fanciful comedy in 3 acts and 4 scenes, by L. Artus.' See the list of performances in the catalogue *Yvette Guilbert, diseuse fin de siècle* (Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi, Musées d'Aix-en-Provence, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1994) 77.

¹² Brécourt-Villars describes the tour in 1909 as 'catastrophic' (p. 242) and writes that the New York press 'assassinated her' (p. 243).

From 1915 to 1919 she lived in New York, where she established her *École des arts du théâtre* for young women who were interested in the theatre. In 1922, following the failure of her acting school venture and the sale of her property in Paris, Guilbert and Schiller were faced with financial ruin, and had to return to Paris. Guilbert was now resigned to resurrecting her former repertoire in order to relieve her financial difficulties.¹³ In 1924 she performed her old repertoire, triumphantly, at both the L'Empire and Les Ambassadeurs, venues that bore little resemblance to those that she had known before 1900.¹⁴

After 1924 Guilbert starred in seven full-length films, including *Faust*, in which she appeared as Marthe,¹⁵ as well as eleven short films. Her first autobiography, *Struggles and Victories*, was published in 1910 (London: Mills and Boon),¹⁶ a second, *La Chanson de ma vie, mes mémoires*, followed in 1927 and a third, *La Passante émerveillée, mes voyages*, in 1929 (Paris: Grasset). Guilbert collaborated with Béatrix Dussane for several series of lectures and recitals in the Salle Gaveau and later, the Salle Pleyel, where in 1927 she revived the songs of Paul de Kock. Her book *L'Art de chanter une chanson* was published in 1928 (Paris: Grasset). From 1929 to 1931 she wrote a column for *Paris-Soir* entitled 'Guilbertinages.' In 1933 her book *Mes lettres d'amour* was published (Paris: Denoël and Steele), and in the same year she wrote and directed a musical comedy, *Madame Chiffon*. Between 1897 and 1934 she recorded many chansons from her popular repertoire, using the latest technology available. She also played Madame Peachum in a 1937 Théâtre de l'Etoile production of the *Threepenny Opera* by Brecht. Guilbert was admitted to the Société des Gens de Lettres in 1929, and was awarded the *Legion d'honneur* in 1932.

As she grew older, it became increasingly difficult for Guilbert to make a living from performing her chansons, but she still made appearances at events such as the musical soirées hosted in 1938 by the Princess of Greece and, in the same year, participated in a celebration of her fifty-year career at the Salle Pleyel. Brécourt-Villars discusses the difficulties and restrictions that applied in 1939 and 1940 during the time of German invasion throughout Europe, when Guilbert's anticipated touring activities were curtailed and when she was driven to sell her stage clothes and her correspondence in order to survive.¹⁷

In 1941 Guilbert and Schiller moved to Aix-en-Provence, hoping that they would be safe there. In the same year she appeared in an acclaimed production of Daudet's play, *L'Arlésienne*.¹⁸ She also hosted a weekly radio programme in Marseilles, in which she discussed old French

¹³ Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert*, 299.

¹⁴ A review of one of Guilbert's performances at the Empire noted that 'When the curtain fell, the ovation went on and on.' See René Bizet, *Candide*, 10 April 1924, cited in Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert*, 304. Brécourt-Villars adds: 'This triumph was repeated each evening' (p. 304).

¹⁵ *Faust* by F.W. Murnau, screenplay by Hans Kyser, based on Goethe; produced by UFA, Germany (1926), starring Camilla Horn (Marguerite), Yvette Guilbert (Marthe), Gösta Ekman (Faust) and Emil Jannings (Mephisto). See catalogue *Yvette Guilbert*, 104.

¹⁶ *Struggles and Victories* was co-authored by Harold Simpson.

¹⁷ Brécourt-Villars, *Yvette Guilbert*, 340–41.

¹⁸ 5 July 1941, Parc-Jourdan, Aix-en-Provence, directed by Marcel Provence. 'As for the critical appraisal, it gave a unanimously laudatory judgement on Yvette's acting: "a sensitive Renaude, moving and distinguished" in *le Petit marseillais* [7 July 1941], "a co-star of the same class (as Joubé) and equally committed to drawing on the pathos of the simple" according to L Ginies in *Marseille-Matin* [7 July 1941].' Catherine Camboulives, 'Entre cours et Jardins: Yvette Guilbert Aixoise,' [catalogue] *Yvette Guilbert, diseuse fin de siècle* (1994) 55–63 at 60.

chansons and her early Chatnoiresque repertoire. Later in 1941, the Germans confiscated her Paris apartment. Guilbert suffered a heart attack in 1942, and died, financially ruined, in 1944. Another book, *Autres temps, autres chants*, was published posthumously in 1945 (Paris: Robert Laffont), and in 1946 her remains were transferred to Père-Lachaise cemetery.

The *café-concert*

It was in Paris's *cafés-concerts* that Yvette Guilbert launched her very successful first career. These establishments emerged around the late 1840s from a tradition of entertainment venues that included the so-called *goguettes* and *caveaux*.¹⁹ While the authorities never considered the *cafés-concerts* to be 'theatres' in the real sense, they insisted (until 1867) that they be classified as such and be subject to restrictions that, in effect, served to perpetuate the dominance of the mainstream theatres and the opera.²⁰ Under these restrictions, costumes, dialogue, dance, stage properties and scenery were prohibited in the *cafés-concerts*, with the result that performers traditionally performed in evening dress. In spite of these restrictions, and years of strict censorship, by 1871 the *cafés-concerts* occupied a prominent position in the Parisian popular entertainment industry.

While inhabitants of each *quartier* frequented their local *café-concert*, the most impressive of these establishments—the Eldorado and the Ambassadeurs, for example—were situated in the vicinity of the Champs-Élysées. These were grand buildings whose facades were modelled on the splendour of the theatres and they attracted the most famous performers who could command salaries of 1,500 francs per night. But even these venues were subject to strict government censorship, and their powerful directors could veto a performer's chosen repertoire.

Typically, the atmosphere at the *café-concert* was raucous, and the repertoire was often coarse. Each venue had its distinguishing features and tone, and starred a particular performer with his or her own distinctive style or genre as the main attraction of the evening, the *tour de chant*. Among the genres of performer were the *gommeur* (eccentric), the *romancier* (who sang of life in the provinces) and the *diseuse*. By contrast, at *cabarets artistiques* such as Le Chat Noir, performers and audiences alike enjoyed irreverent, satirical and sometimes macabre social commentary. For many years these venues escaped the constraints imposed by the censors, to such a degree that performances were often improvised. Indeed, these venues, more than the *cafés-concerts*, seemed to be Guilbert's 'natural habitat,' since here, through her chansons, she could be freer to convey her social messages.

Why did Guilbert not pursue a career in the *cabarets artistiques* where audiences would have been more receptive to the social commentary contained in her chansons and monologues? Why did she continue to actively seek to perform at the *cafés-concerts*, especially when it became clear that her message was not appreciated by *café-concert* audiences? There seems little doubt that money was the primary reason. Guilbert's impoverished childhood and circumstances while

¹⁹ Steven Moore Whiting distinguishes between these when he writes: 'while the *caveaux* gathered professionals and civil employees in an atmosphere of epicurean conviviality, the *goguettes* brought together workers and artisans for a modest repast and forthright exchanges of political views in song ... The atmosphere of a *goguette* was decidedly more raucous than that of the *caveau*.' Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian, From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 12–13.

²⁰ For reference to the law of 6 January 1867, which had the effect of liberating the *cafés-concerts* from the domination of the theatres, see Concetta Condemì, *Les Cafés-concerts, histoire d'un divertissement 1849–1914* (Paris: Quai Voltaire, Édima, 1992) 35.

an adolescent had left her with a strong desire for financial security and this in turn influenced her career decisions. Her *Mémoires* relate several instances of her unyielding contractual negotiations and also provide details concerning her bitter rupture of contract with Musleck of Le Concert Parisien over disagreements about her right to perform at other venues.²¹

Guilbert's financial success when compared with other performers at the *cafés-concerts*, is marked. Many female performers at these venues felt the need to supplement their meagre incomes by becoming prostitutes. Guilbert's payment at the *cafés-concerts* would have been far greater than at the *cabarets artistiques*, where performers received very little remuneration. However, while Guilbert needed the *cafés-concerts* for the financial reward they offered, it appears that she underestimated both the degree to which the expectations of audiences, directors, performers, censors and government were distinctly different to those at the *cabarets artistiques*, and the extent to which these differences worked against her aspirations as an artist.

In 1895, after five years in the *cafés-concerts*, Guilbert began making plans for a new, more fulfilling career as an ambassadress for the old chansons of France. In her *Mémoires*, she writes of the passion with which she devoted herself to researching these chansons for 'the service of France.'²² She unearthed, collected and published them, creating a new repertoire that, from around 1900, she took on tour to provincial France, other Western European countries, Poland, Egypt, the United States and Canada. She felt sure that her notoriety would ensure success with this new repertoire—but she was mistaken. Without her *grivois* repertoire (of songs that were crude and laced with sexual references or innuendo), her green dress and her black gloves, she was never to attain a comparable level of success.

Guilbert and Realism/Naturalism²³

From the 1850s, the Realist movement sought to represent reality as it was, not in a falsely idealised light. Writers such as Flaubert and artists such as Degas accepted the banal, trivial, sometimes distasteful and even repugnant detail of contemporary life, typically using the tools of irony, parody, everyday speech and other carefully chosen techniques to commit them to paper or canvas.

Zola's writing reflected similar tendencies but diverged from Realism in its efforts to apply a measure of scientific exactitude and to represent its characters as the products of predetermining factors. Like the Realists, Zola aimed to represent life realistically, however he tended to offer a more pessimistic, brutal and sometimes sordid view. 'Naturalism' was the name coined by Zola for his particular brand of art. While the Goncourt brothers and Maupassant were associated with the Naturalist movement, they each applied their distinctive styles to their writing.

Guilbert's writings reveal that the Realist and Naturalist writers inspired her conceptualisation of her art, particularly influencing her choice of repertoire. She had determined that her texts

²¹ Guilbert (*Mémoires*, 101–7) describes her negotiations with Musleck in 1892, during which she used Mme Allemand's offer (for *La Scala*) to bargain for a more lucrative contract for herself. For reference to the rupture of her contract, see Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 110–11.

²² Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 178–83.

²³ This discussion has been informed by a selection of secondary sources including Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), and Michael Lerner, *Maupassant* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975).

would be innovative, would deal with the realities of life, would be amusing initially, but would also contain a tragic element. She wrote that in addition to seeking ‘truth,’ she ‘looked everywhere for the repertoire of the future, that which corresponded to my expressive powers. I wanted it to be very varied, very broad, this repertoire, moving from farce to the tragic, and including an immense array of colours.’²⁴ In 1938, when asked why she had performed songs like Mac-Nab’s *Les Fœtus* (a song about aborted foetuses), Guilbert responded: ‘Good God, we were right in the middle of the realist and decadent period.’²⁵

Guilbert wrote that she deliberately conceived of a repertoire that was aligned with Zola’s Naturalism. Referring to the time she first considered a career as a *chanteuse*, she wrote:

I was plunged into Naturalism ... My taste was for writers such as Zola, Goncourt, Maupassant ... I dreamt only of *truth*. I sought to express in song what they had expressed through the novel.²⁶

Reflecting on the significance of her discovery of Léon Xanrof’s collection, *Les chansons sans gêne*, Guilbert wrote: ‘if, in that, I had found some “Naturalist” songs dealing with that “extreme poverty” that I knew so well, then my path was mapped out.’²⁷ Indeed, the ‘vérité dans l’expression,’²⁸ or frankness, that Guilbert attributed to Zola can be identified in different manners and contexts in the songs of Xanrof, Bruant, Jouy and many of the other writers/poets whose work Guilbert chose to perform.

The humorous bawdiness in her repertoire that contrasts so sharply with the seriousness of the social message was considered by her to be essential for her acceptance in the *café-concert*. For Guilbert, her image and her repertoire were closely intertwined:

I wanted, above and before all else, to seem very distinguished, in order to permit me to be very daring in my repertoire, which I decided should be bawdy, mixed with veiled satire, but direct all the same. To make of all the indiscretions, of all the excesses, of all the vices of *my contemporaries*, an exhibition of humorous sung sketches, and to render them able to laugh at themselves (because none of them will cry about it). This is what was to be my find, my new contribution.²⁹

Table 1 provides a representative sample of chansons from Guilbert’s repertoire, including a description of the theme of each.³⁰ Guilbert’s writings make it clear that she felt that her choice of repertoire was constrained not only by the censors but also by the tastes of her audiences as well as those of powerful and usually hard-nosed venue directors. This was a constant frustration to her, but, as she was driven to make a financial success of her career, she felt

²⁴ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 65.

²⁵ Michel Georges-Michel, ‘Yvette Guilbert, maître et modèle’, article dated 15 June 1938, in a scrapbook of press cuttings relating to Yvette Guilbert’s career, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Arts du spectacle.

²⁶ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 65.

²⁷ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 66.

²⁸ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 150.

²⁹ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 71.

³⁰ Information in the Table has been drawn from numerous sources including sheet music for particular *chansons*, recordings and song collections: *Yvette Guilbert* [sound recording] (Paris: Musique Memoria, 199); *Yvette Guilbert, 47 enregistrements originaux de 1897 à 1934* [sound recording] (Paris: EPM, 1992); Luez, *Yvette Guilbert; Yvette Guilbert, 10 Chansons de Paul de Kock*, Époque Romantique, Heugel (Paris: éditions Alphonse Leduc, 1927); and Léon Xanrof, *Chansons sans-gêne* (Paris: G. Ondet, 1890).

Table 1: A Sample of Chansons Included in Yvette Guilbert's Repertoire

| Title | Text | Music | Thematic summary |
|--|-------------|------------------|--|
| <i>Le Fiacre</i> | L. Xanrof | L. Xanrof | A husband is crushed and killed by a carriage after he hears his wife's (and her lover's) voice inside. |
| <i>Partie Carrée</i> | M. de Lihus | M. de Lihus | Two married couples who do and share everything together, to the extent that each wife conceives to the other's husband. |
| <i>Quand on vous aime comme ça!</i> | P. de Kock | Y. Guilbert | A woman supposedly rapturously in love tells of the violence inflicted on her by her lover. |
| <i>Le P'tit Cochon</i> | E. Héros | H. Smith | Three pigs live happily in a ménage à trois. |
| <i>Ôte-toi d'là que j'm'y mette</i> | P. de Kock | Old air | Recounts tales of opportunism and selfishness. |
| <i>Les Ingénues</i> | Bessières | Y. Guilbert | Describes young women who feign innocence and naivety. |
| <i>J' m' embrouille</i> | P. de Kock | Y. Guilbert | A woman ties herself in knots trying to remember the details of the total history of her love-life. |
| <i>J'suis dans l'bottin</i> | A. Bruant | A. Bruant | A nouveau-riche who has made it into the establishment (and the phone book) speaks down to his old school chum. |
| <i>La Soûlarde</i> | J. Jouy | E. Poncin | Describes a desperate, old drunkard woman. |
| <i>Les Vierges</i> | Dalleroy | Y. Guilbert | Tells of the feigned purity of virgins. |
| <i>La Glu</i> | J. Richepin | C. Gounod (arr.) | A traditional Breton chanson about a woman who asks her lover to prove his love by bringing her his mother's heart. |
| <i>Infanticide</i> | J. May | A. Bert | A woman explains to the judge why she thought it best to kill her baby girl. |
| <i>Les Fœtus</i> | M. Mac-Nab | M. Mac-Nab | Describes very human-looking fetuses. |
| <i>Ah! Que l'amour cause de peine!</i> | Popular | chanson | Captures the humiliation and embarrassment of a gauche young man who is mocked when visiting his girlfriend. |

compelled to conform. While she found the chansons in Xanrof's *Les chansons sans gêne* to be in perfect harmony with her planned repertoire, Mme Saint-Ange, the straight-laced director of the Éden-Concert *café-concert*, forbade her to perform them when she appeared there in 1890. It is interesting, in hindsight, that Xanrof's *Le Fiacre*, with its parodical light-hearted rhythm and colloquialisms that belie the seriousness of its message, became, and has endured as, the most well-known work in Guilbert's repertoire.

Similarly, at the Moulin Rouge later in 1890, although the director had given Guilbert freedom to choose her repertoire, Guilbert's assessment of the audience was such that she decided to perform a bawdy English song about a nurse. It was not until her season at the Divan Japonais in 1890 that Guilbert felt comfortable enough with both the director and the audience to present her preferred repertoire.³¹

An examination of Guilbert's repertoire reveals characteristics that have become associated with the Realist tradition. Characters are unidealised, and speech patterns are drawn from banal, realistic, everyday usage, often including slang (*argot*), as in *J'suis Pocharde!* This text, written by Guilbert herself, is laden with slang and colloquial turns of phrase that are meant to parody the speech patterns of the protagonist, who has drunk too much champagne at her sister's wedding.

Furthermore, in line with Naturalism, many of Guilbert's chosen texts are black, pessimistic, bitter, crude or starkly brutal in the images they evoke, sometimes to a degree that Guilbert's audiences found to be uncomfortably confronting. Guilbert's desire to use her chansons and monologues as vehicles to prick the social conscience is a point of similarity with the Naturalist performer Aristide Bruant. Guilbert's intent, as well as her frustration at her audiences' reaction/misinterpretation, is clear when she writes: 'the colourful joke of my venture was that, from my couplets which only dealt with their turpitudes, their defects, they found reason to accuse me of licentiousness!'³² She lamented that in their reaction to the chanson *Le P'tit Cochon!* the public would not look beyond the superficial image of the amusing cork-screw tail to her message that humans who engaged in *ménages à trois* were behaving like base animals.

Realism in Guilbert's performance technique

Guilbert's commitment to Realism extended to her performance style. Her book *L'Art de chanter une chanson* illustrates the care that Guilbert took to match her performance technique with the reality represented in particular chansons. This care mirrors the quest of Realist writers such as Flaubert for techniques appropriate to their artistic purpose. Guilbert's techniques were chosen to highlight the meaning and messages behind her texts. Even the words themselves, or the music, were modified if the meaning of the text would be enhanced as a result. Variations of facial and vocal expression, timing, choreography, wardrobe, comic expression and the use of realistic pronunciation were all fastidiously chosen by Guilbert as vehicles to communicate her texts.

³¹ See Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 90–91. Guilbert explains how the approach of the director, Sarrazin, and the nature of the audience at the Divan Japonais contrasted sharply with those at the Moulin Rouge, and how this influenced her choice of repertoire: 'at the Moulin, between 8 and 9, the clientele was composed of clerks from the *quartier*, and I dared not risk the same couplets that I performed for the artistic clientele of painters, sculptors, writers who came together at Jehan Sarrazin's' (p. 91).

³² Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 71.

In *L'Art de chanter*, Guilbert details many of the techniques she used to portray her texts as realistically as possible. She discusses, for instance, her attempt to express agony in each utterance of the 'lonlonlaire, lonlonla' of *La Glu*, a chanson that relates the story of a young man who kills his mother and delivers her heart to his lover in order to prove his love for her. Her technique is clearly illustrated on her 1918 recording of *La Glu*, where she hastens or slows the tempo of the 'lonlonlaire, lonlonla', according to the text.³³ When the young boy rips out his mother's heart and runs with it, the 'lonlonlaire, lonlonla' is fast and frenetic. When the mother's heart calls out 'did you hurt yourself my child?' fearing that her son has injured himself in the fall, it is slow, pained and faint like a howl. Guilbert writes: 'what terror to hear the heart speak, groan! ... modulating its lonlonlaire of agony ... so merciful, so anxious!'³⁴

Guilbert often used her 'speaking' voice to parody character types on which she wanted to pass judgement. On her recording of *Le Fiacre*, for example, the unfaithful wife sounds relieved, even delighted, when her husband is crushed and killed,³⁵ and, in *Partie Carrée*, her representations of the voices of the two unfaithful husbands are overflowing with bonhomie, certainly without any sign of remorse when each announces to the other that his wife is pregnant.³⁶

Guilbert's recordings exhibit a multitude of performance techniques. In *Ah! Que l'amour cause de peine!* she can be heard using pronunciation typical of a country boy.³⁷ In *J'suis pocharde!* she combines her *diseuse* style with the use of everyday speech patterns in an attempt to instill the text with realism. There are sections where she half speaks the text and even slurs words as one would were one drunk.³⁸ Through her slow, lifeless delivery, her recording of Donnay's Naturalist monologue *Le Jeune homme triste* highlights the sense of tragedy in this poignant tale of a young man set since birth on a predetermined path of sadness and pessimism.³⁹ Her recorded rendition of *La Souûlarde* is also moving,⁴⁰ and it is interesting to note that, according to Guilbert, when he witnessed one of her performances of this chanson, Edmond de Goncourt was moved to write: 'the *diseuse* of little ditties showed that she was a great, a very great tragic actress, causing a harrowing tightening of the heart.'⁴¹

Guilbert's delivery often made use of the tools of irony and parody in order to make a statement about a farcical situation or abhorrent social practice or behaviour. Her recordings illustrate the use of an ironic or sarcastic mocking tone to deliver texts already laden with irony, parody and sarcasm, in order to expose and ridicule the characters described. She writes that when she performed *Les Vierges*, she used a discreet (but effective) cough to highlight the words excised by the censor (as well as to point up the absurdity of the censor's decision).⁴²

³³ All recordings referred to can be found among the forty-seven original recordings on the collection, *Yvette Guilbert, 47 enregistrements originaux* (1992). This version of *La Glu* was recorded in 1918. See CD 2, Track 22.

³⁴ Guilbert, *L'Art de chanter*, 95.

³⁵ CD 1, Track 1, recorded 1934.

³⁶ CD 1, Track 6, recorded 1934.

³⁷ CD 2, Track 24, recorded 1918.

³⁸ CD 2, Track 4, recorded 1918; CD 2, Track 13, recorded ca 1897.

³⁹ CD 2, Track 8, recorded 1907.

⁴⁰ CD 2, Track 9, recorded 1907.

⁴¹ Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 154.

⁴² Guilbert, *Mémoires*, 94–95.

She often used an exaggerated sing-song vocal style to deliver already very simple and repetitive melodies, the effect being to set the serious nature of her subject matter into relief. The sing-song delivery heard on her recordings of *Partie Carrée* and *Le P'tit Cochon*, for example, suggests subjects of a much more trivial nature than those actually dealt with in the text: the hypocrisy of marriage and decadence in *fin-de-siècle* France.⁴³ But the use of irony and parody also rendered Guilbert's chansons superficially humorous and often highlighted any sexual connotations. It was this aspect of her delivery, in particular, that resulted in Guilbert being labelled a performer of bawdy songs, a label that in time she came to resent.

Conclusion

A better understanding of Yvette Guilbert's motivation and decisions concerning her career and repertoire, as well as of her frustrations, emerges from an examination of her writings, in particular those relating to Realism and Naturalism. It becomes clear that these movements occupied a central place not only in her conception of her work, but also in her own perception of the success of her performances. The prominence of the roles played by Realism and Naturalism in Guilbert's career appears to have been previously largely overlooked.

Guilbert's attempts to use the *café-concert* stage to convey social commentary and serious messages about some of the unpleasant realities of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian life met with little success. Ironically, her parodying of the behaviour and mannerisms of her subjects seems to have backfired, in the sense that it contributed to her audiences' titillation at the sexual references and innuendo. Her failure in this regard could explain her determination to set the record straight in her *Mémoires*. Despite her efforts, Yvette Guilbert is remembered not as a serious artist inspired by Realism and Naturalism but as the *diseuse* who performed bawdy chansons. At a more general level, this study of Yvette Guilbert might also be seen as a case study of the tensions and frustrations that can arise for a performer when aspects of musical performance that have audience appeal and/or financial reward are incongruent with what the artist herself finds fulfilling.

⁴³ CD 1, Track 6, recorded 1934; CD 2, Track 14, recorded 1897.