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Burlesque

*edited by Shelley Scott and Reid Gilbert*



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by Shelley Scott and Reid Gilbert



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Photo by David Hawe, courtesy of CoCo La Crème

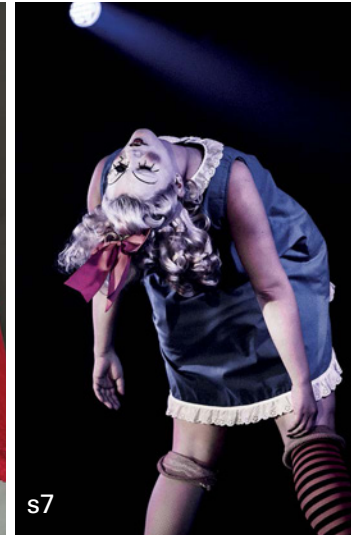


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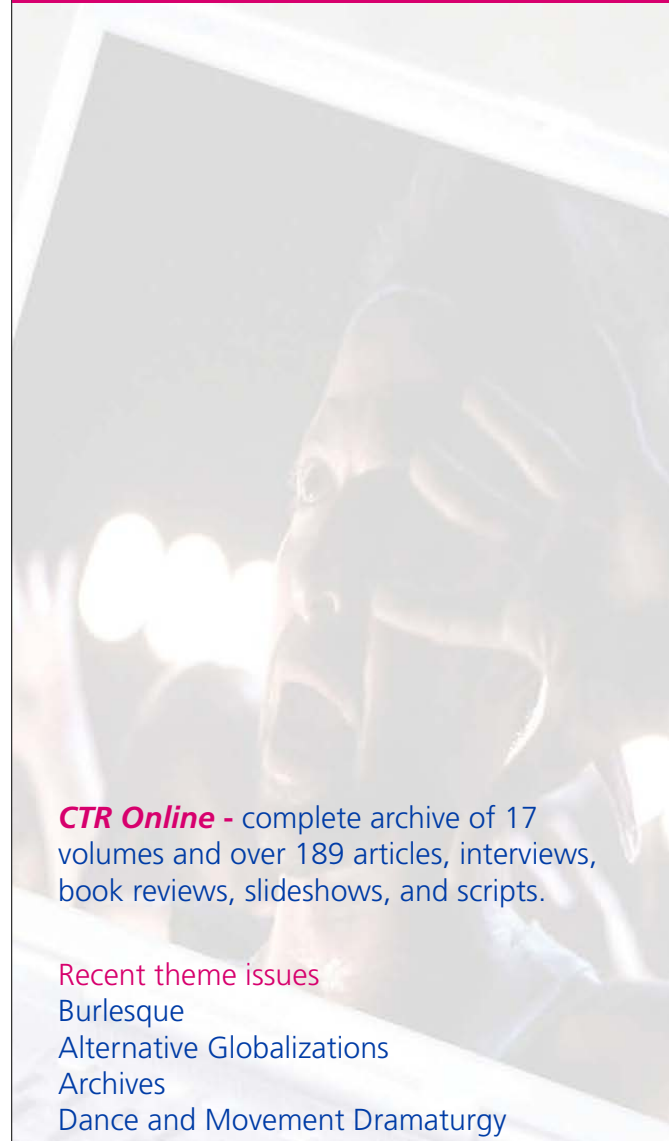
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# Teasing, Transgressing, Defining Broadening the Spectrum of Sexy

by Shelley Scott and Reid Gilbert

*The very excess of costume and campy points to a parody of gender [...] I would argue the burlesque performance must be aligned with camp, with a heavy criticism of heteronormative genders, and ultimately with the queering of identities.*

*Burlesque accommodates the circus freak, the tattooed lady, the diminutive woman, the Amazon—in short, multiple versions of what women are.*

—Claire Nally, *Grrrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-burlesque and the Performance of Gender*

Burlesque is the term used throughout this issue, although the word meant something very different before and after the year 1868, when Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes made their New York debut. While burlesque was originally an all-male performance form dating back to Aristophanes—low-culture parody of high culture—the Blondes added risqué humour and female display to the topical references, popular songs, and outrageous puns. Robert Allen argues that it was not so much the skimpy costumes that offended critics of the Blondes as much as their inversion of a number of male prerogatives (129). Lydia Thompson dressed as a male character who wooed the other members of the cast, yet she made no attempt to disguise her own femininity, and this kind of disturbing cross-dressing became a key feature of the many female burlesque troupes to follow. As Kristen Pullen explains, “Impersonating male attitudes and behavior while highlighting female secondary sexual characteristics, the Blondes (and especially Thompson) presented a blurred image of femininity to theatre audiences, one that upset traditional expectations of burlesque performers, female-to-male crossing, and binary gender presentation” (115). Allen describes the nineteenth-century reaction to this horror—“things that should be kept separate were united in grotesque hybrids” (29)—and Claire Nally reports that

early burlesque performers were described as belonging to an “alien sex” (624).

It was not just the spectacularly parodic costumes that were excessive,<sup>1</sup> but the sexually charismatic bodies of the women themselves. The Blondes were “buxom and curvy, a departure from earlier ideals of feminine beauty in U.S. culture” (Erdman 16) and a ready contrast to the wholesome and manageable Ziegfeld Follies girl-next-door (Allen 243). But the worst transgression was that burlesque women looked at and talked back to their audiences (Allen 129). They enjoyed themselves. They were aware of what they were doing, they were irreverent and funny, and their quality of knowingness was what critics found most horrifying of all.

Burlesque came to mean something different again when Middle Eastern belly dancing was introduced to America at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 and became known as the cooch dance. In the early 1900s there was a craze for the Salomé dance, and by the 1920s there was striptease. From the 1930s to the late 1960s, the Minsky style of show became the standard: chorus lines and production numbers, baggy-pants comics and humorous skits, along with burlesque dancers who employed elaborate costumes, props, and characters, but who were never entirely naked.

Just as early burlesque was intimately connected with vaudeville and minstrel shows, burlesque of the mid-twentieth century was paralleled by big carnival revues and Broadway follies. An example in Canada is the State Burlesque Theatre in Vancouver, which opened in 1946. It had a chorus line of girls that performed before and between the big acts (American singers, comedians, and strippers), accompanied by a live orchestra: three or four dances a show, two or three shows a day, six days a week (Ross 98). In her nostalgic celebration of what she considers to have been a Golden Age, Jane Briggeman emphasizes the strong sense of community, even family, inside the burlesque world. Managers, agents, comics, straight men, costume designers, as well as dancers, all lamented that burlesque as they knew it had come to an

end (234). But as David Owen points out, the revival of burlesque has also meant the re-imagining of community.

It is helpful to make a distinction between at least two streams of burlesque as they exist currently. As Alexis Butler explains, one style is historical re-creation, a kind of nostalgic retro-sexuality that revives the glamour and pays tribute to the stars of the Golden Age. This is the form most familiar in popular culture manifestations, from Hollywood films to local exercise classes. Then there is neo-burlesque, a form that Butler links back to the British Blondes, a style that aims for political and social commentary through comedy and transgressive gender parody. Nally insists that “it is important to make a distinction between the subcultural and the mainstream forms of burlesque in order to ascertain any possibility for political radicalism in the genre [...] not to make distinctions between true and false, or ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’, but rather, to tease out the commercial and subcultural forms” (630). Neo-burlesque began in the mid to late 1990s and continues to be tremendously popular, “[b]lending sly raunchiness and comedic timing with inventive costuming and satirical send-ups of female archetypes [and drawing on] traditions of vaudeville, performance art, modern dance, comedy, and circus performance, as well as elements of goth, rockabilly, punk, and 1940’s lounge culture” (Ross 239). Neo-burlesque is attended by mixed audiences of all ages, races, genders, and sexualities, often dressed in vintage or fetish-wear to reflect the performers and the venue. Nally agrees that when the audience members are also dressed up, “arguably the appeal of the show is mutual questioning, highlighting both interrogation and the possibility of identification [...] One can see that the show is less about materialist consumption, and more about active production” (638). As Bronwyn Preece illustrates, performers rarely do neo-burlesque for a living, viewing it instead as creative self-expression and community participation.

Burlesque is very different from stripping because the dancers are never completely naked—or is that enough of a distinction? Is burlesque, as Jamie Dunsdon asks in her article, really just “fancy” stripping? What about “exotic dance”—is it just a legal term, or does it evoke the long association between burlesque and minstrelsy, with performers imitating or trading on the “exoticism” of racial otherness?<sup>22</sup> Is burlesque empowering or just playing into the same old gendered and racialized stereotypes? When is it subcultural community building, and when is it sex work? Is all nude performance inherently subversive? As Becki Ross and Oralia Gómez-Ramírez ask in their article, does government have the right to stigmatize such activity in young adults?

In our hypersexualized contemporary culture, neo-burlesque works to wrest sexiness out of the hands of advertisers and back into personal experience. The performers discussed in this issue are broadening the spectrum of sexy, from Jay Whitehead’s dis-

cussion of the meanings of male nudity, to Ines Ortner’s investigation of Melody Mangler and her message of body-positivity, to women like Cherry Typhoon in Joanna Mansbridge’s article, who playfully define their own sensuality rather than play out the racialized fantasies of the dominant culture. Sarah Mann argues that, by rebranding themselves as “political cabaret,” Operation Snatch insists on the politicization of the naked body and the destigmatizing of stripping and prostitution. Is that a departure from burlesque or a return to its roots? None of these dichotomies can be reconciled in these pages, but they are definitely explored with pleasure.

## Notes

- 1 Nally writes that “the standard historical burlesque costumes of oversized fans, comically large ruffles, bustles, corsets and bows of the nineteenth century were often a clear satire of upper-class fashion, social mores and sensibilities, as well as a dramatic and deliberate display of the female body. Similarly, the modern co-option of these sartorial accoutrements implies a studied reflection on femininity” (622).
- 2 Although they did not wear blackface, early burlesquers sang songs and played instruments associated with the minstrels, and sometimes imitated African American, Native American, and Middle Eastern dances and costumes to justify their wild sexual liberation. In reference to the Golden Age in Canada, Becki Ross notes that, “Among [Lili] St Cyr’s favourite routines were ‘In a Persian Harem,’ ‘The Chinese Virgin,’ and ‘The Love Bird,’ which [...] was set in the jungle amidst a tribe of beautiful savage women.” St. Cyr was just one of the many white performers and celebrities who “traded in non-white racial markers because they could and it was profitable” (Ross 95). Women of colour could also trade on their exoticism, but they were mainly booked into a particular group of clubs and only rarely into the all-white clubs. For example, Choo Choo Williams and her husband Ernie King ran the only black nightclub in Vancouver, the Harlem Nocturne, opening in 1957 (Ross 67).

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# In Search of a Different History: The Remains of Burlesque in Montreal

by Joanna Mansbridge

*It was a different world. You sang for your supper and you danced for your dinner. And we did. And I liked it. I liked it a lot.*

—Tina Baines Brereton, *Show Girls*

*Burlesque is a place to express nostalgia for bygone eras and address important political and social issues through comedy and entertainment.*

—Lady Josephine, Interview

In her essay “Modern Drama/Modernity’s Drama,” Elin Diamond writes, “Performance is that messy, *historicizing* moment that interrupts the integrity of the written document” (4). In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider echoes Diamond’s articulation of performance’s unruliness, writing, “performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance, challenging, via the performative trace, any neat antinomy between appearance and disappearance, or presence and absence” (103).<sup>1</sup> Taken together, Diamond’s and Schneider’s hypotheses encourage a way of looking at performance as the material, embodied remains in the present that “mess up” our understandings of linear history and stable subjectivity with reminders that these are recursive processes of recollection and reenactment. The contemporary resurgence of burlesque, or neo-burlesque, is just such an “eruptive reappearance,” which explicitly complicates not only the ontological stability of gender, sexuality, and the modern body, but also the temporal notions of progress or forward movement that structure dominant understandings of social categories like gender, sexuality, and race. That is, neo-burlesque reveals these categories as continually and recursively constituted from recycled historical remains.

Over the past two decades, a generation of young urbanites has found in burlesque an archive of images and postures that revive a memory of “a different world,” one steeped in glamour, glitter, and nostalgia. Embraced by a sexually savvy generation that, in search of authenticity, is interested in all things retro and vintage, burlesque offers, perhaps, a more enchanted image

of the past, one less vexed than the more politicized history of feminism. Burlesque also offers an alternative to popular culture’s commoditization of female sexuality, technology’s digitization of social life, and heteronormative culture’s privatization of sexuality, giving women—and men—an opportunity to gather and a stage on which to develop ideas, create personas, and make fun of our cultural fixations on sex and female bodies. In this article I look at two eras of burlesque in Montreal—the 1940s to 1950s and 2012. From this dialectical perspective, we can see the history of burlesque enmeshed with changes in popular entertainment, politics, religion, sub/urbanization, and social perceptions of female sexuality. While the social and political meanings of burlesque differ vastly in these two eras, the cultural ritual of erotic parody that burlesque performs remains its most enduring feature.

Immortalized by Irving Berlin’s 1928 hit *Hello Montreal!* and supported by seven-time mayor Camillien Houde (and assisted by prohibition in the United States and Fiorello LaGuardia’s ban on burlesque in New York City between 1937 and 1956), Montreal, from the 1920s to the early 1950s, had one of the continent’s most thriving nightlife cultures. During this period, organized crime set up business in the city, while cabarets and jazz clubs flourished, featuring lavish floor shows, music, comedy—and dancing girls. The city’s nightclub scene was divided between the uptown clubs on Rue Ste. Catherine (“St. Kits”), such as Club Lido (later Chez Paree), Lion D’Or, the Gayety Theatre (now Théâtre du Nouveau Monde), Chez Maurice, and El Morocco, and the downtown clubs on and near Boulevard Ste. Laurent (“the Main”), such as Café St. Michel, the Starlight, the Terminal, and Rockhead’s Paradise, the first black-owned club in Canada and the unofficial headquarters for the illegal liquor trade between Montreal and the United States. While the uptown cabarets were patronized by and featured white performers, the downtown clubs were primarily black clubs, with both black and white audience members.<sup>2</sup> During the Depression, acts from the Cotton Club in Harlem and musicians from New York City and Chicago came to play in the thriving Montreal clubs. Dorothy Williams explains that the city became “an ideal location for a developing black identity focussed



Montreal Show Girls, 1946. L to R: Tina Brereton, Marie-Claire Germaine, and Bernice Jordan.

Photo courtesy of Concordia University Archives



"Exotic" Calypso Dancers, ca. 1946. L to R: Tina Brereton, Bernice Jordan, Marie-Claire Germaine.

Photo courtesy of Concordia University Archives

on jazz" (44). In Meilin Lam's National Film Board documentary, *Show Girls* (1998), narrator Anthony Sherwood explains that the downtown clubs were places where "everyone could come. And they did. [...] It was through these clubs that our dance, our music, became everyone's."

Montreal-born Tina Baines Brereton began working as a showgirl at Café St. Michel when she was fifteen. Both she and fellow dancer Bernice Jordan distinguish their work as *work*. "It was a business. We had to feed ourselves," Brereton states straightforwardly. Jordan adds, "You got a nice little bust, you know, and that's what men like to look at. It's all innocent. It was a job. You got a body and you made a living" (qtd. in *Show*). Brereton and Jordan were part of the first all-Canadian black chorus line, and they performed at many of the downtown clubs to mixed race audiences. The white burlesque dancers from the uptown clubs often came to the downtown clubs to see and learn from the black dancers' performances. As Brereton puts it, "If they wanted to see a good show [...] they came downtown" (qtd. in *Show*).

These black performers were also asked to enact fantasies of cultural and ethnic difference for white audiences. At the 1893 World's Fair, Little Egypt performed the "Dance of the Seven Veils" for eager Western audiences, creating an ongoing connection between burlesque and orientalist images and fantasies. Versions of Egyptian, Persian, Moroccan, and Tunisian dances were adapted as "then-scandalous danse du ventre performed in vaudeville houses, burlesque shows, and on film" (Dox 53). The belly dance, perhaps the most famous of these "exotic dances," continues to be a stock routine of burlesque. Such fascination continued in Montreal in the 1940s and 1950s, when calypso and other forms of "exotic dancing" were immensely popular. Jordan recalls, "I was the Brazilian bombshell. I was doing the West Indian Calypso numbers in rumba and conga beats. I did all those dances. The shake dance" (qtd. in *Show*).

The showgirl and burlesque dancer operated as public spectacles through which femininity could be produced as both fantasy site and cultural practice. And as striptease became the dominant

element of burlesque, club owners in Montreal capitalized with posters advertising "girlie shows." When asked about striptease, Jordan replies, "Some people looked at me like, 'She's bad.' I wasn't. To me, it was a dance." Brereton explains, "stripteasing was [...] you do your tease. You have five costumes on, you take four off. That was as far as we went. They had white girls for that. They couldn't dance as well as us, so they took their clothes off." Jordan confirms, "Beautiful white girls did the striptease" (qtd. in *Show*). While the white female body became an emblem for sex, the black female body was imagined as sensual, primitive. White and black femininities worked mutually to define one another, operating as obverse sides of the same fantasy of a female sexuality grounded in nature and opposed to a culture defined as masculine. Montreal's most popular stripteaser was Lili St. Cyr, whose performances included erotic versions of classical stories, voyeuristic scenarios set in private spaces (bathrooms, bedrooms), and orientalist fantasies of harems and sex slaves. Whether performing as Salomé or a "jungle goddess," St. Cyr's white femininity acted as the surface onto which mid-century fascinations with all things "exotic" and erotic could be projected.

In her memoir, *Ma Vie de Stripteaseuse*, St. Cyr reflects, "Montréal avait été comme moi, grouillante, pleine d'énergie, avide de liberté," and she describes her years there as "la cœur de ma vie... C'était merveilleux et magique d'une façon toute particulière" (273, 271). Journalist William Weintraub recalls several of St. Cyr's performances, including one called "Flying G," which concluded with her g-string being removed by a fishing rod and catapulted into the balcony. For her first show at the Gayety, a twenty-seven-year-old St. Cyr told manager Tommy Conway, "For my first number, I'll need a Chinese temple, with an altar. And a statue of Buddha" (qtd. in Weintraub D5). In this number, St. Cyr struggled against a chastity belt that tied her to the Buddha, eventually freeing herself to rejoin her lover; the audience went wild watching her sexual desire defeat the disciplinary force of a divine authority. As Weintraub puts it, "The patrons of the Gayety had seen them all—Gypsy Rose Lee, Georgia Sothern, Noel Toy,





Lili and the Swan. Lili St. Cyr, 1950.  
Photo courtesy of Concordia University Archives

Rosita Royce—but nothing like this new performer. This was not the coarse bump-and-grind of a Peaches or an Ann Corio, this was art—and it spoke to Montreal’s well-known craving for the sublime” (D5). St. Cyr was adored equally by men and women who were fascinated by her performances and her romantic involvements with mafia members and hockey players, like Jimmy Orlando.

Not everyone was so admiring, however. The still influential Catholic Church in Montreal was disturbed by her immense public popularity, and vehemently opposed her performances. In 1951, Jesuit priest Marie-Joseph D’Anjou wrote a full page letter in *Le Devoir*, warning that St. Cyr was a threat to public morality: “Les Montréalais ne sont pas chiens – Ce qu’est l’obscénité – Trahison! Montreal sous le règne du vice.” Conjuring orgiastic images, D’Anjou describes “un relent de frénésie sexuelle empesté



Lili St. Cyr, ca. 1946.  
Photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada

le théâtre tout le temps que dure, l’exhibition de cette heyadère” (D’Anjou 4). Along with heads of various Catholic organizations in Montreal, D’Anjou brought charges against St. Cyr for committing acts of indecency. She was acquitted, however, because the evidence was inadequate and the witness testimonies (three female audience members of St. Cyr’s shows, three police officers, and a radio censor) led the judge to conclude that there was “nothing immoral or depraving in Miss St. Cyr’s presentations” (“St. Cyr Acquitted In Montreal Striptease” 9). She performed her last show in Montreal in March 1957, and remains something of a legend in the city’s cultural history.

Montreal’s status as Canada’s capital of vice came to an end with the arrival of Jean Drapeau, who served as mayor from 1954 to 1957 and again from 1960 to 1986. As John Gilmore explains, “Drapeau swept to power on a promise to rid Montreal of vice and corruption,” imposing harsh curfews and closing times in an effort to drive “vice from public view” (185). Along with the help of lawyer and former police chief Pacifique (Pax) Plante, Drapeau set up a morality squad that would clean up the gambling, prostitution, and corruption that had proliferated in Montreal since the 1920s. Clubs were forced to close on Sundays, meaning early curfews on Saturday night, and the city refused operating permits to clubs suspected of hosting illegal activities. In a 1955 *MacLean’s* feature article titled “What Virtue Has Done to Montreal,” Herbert Manning writes, “Raffish, colourful, picturesque, slightly sinful Montreal [...] is undergoing the biggest and most ruthless house cleaning any Canadian city ever saw” (11). Manning reports that since “*Les filles* [...] around whom Montreal’s nightlife whirled gaily and amorously ever since the war have been chased relent-

lessly by the police,” Montreal was no longer the destination for big spenders from Toronto and New York City (82).

Al Palmer, critic and author of the *Montreal Herald* column “Cabaret Circuit” from 1952 to 1957, reflected on the decline of the cabaret culture in a series of articles for the *Gazette* in 1961. It was not only Drapeau’s efforts, Palmer points out, but a combination of factors that brought the bustling nightlife to an end. In 1954, a feud between the American Guild of Variety Artists and the American Federation of Musicians prevented musicians from playing for non-member dancers, and so “[o]ut went the dancing girls” (Palmer 1). Musical acts were hired to replace showgirls, but because “there was no substitute for a pretty girl,” bored club-goers “turned to a comparatively new novelty, television, for their entertainment” (1). Along with television, the arrival of rock-and-roll displaced jazz as the new sound (Gilmore 185). As Montreal’s once lively urban life shifted to a postwar suburban lifestyle, “The grand burlesque clubs dwindled to a few burlesque theatres and then nothing more than bars with strip shows” (Sherwood qtd. in *Show*). Deprived of its context and comedy, burlesque was reduced to only one of its elements—stripping.

Paradoxically, during his reign as mayor from 1960 to 1986, Drapeau condoned the strip clubs that replaced the burlesque halls, perhaps because they generated tourist dollars during the city’s two international events—Expo ’67 and the 1976 Olympics. Many of the strippers working in these clubs, such as Lindalee Tracey, remained connected to the city’s burlesque history, even as they have been largely disavowed as part of that history by contemporary neo-burlesque performers.

Decades later, amid a highly sexualized marketplace, burlesque is seen not as a threat to public morality, but as a hip counterculture that adapts past images and routines to a modern context. Montreal’s neo-burlesque scene draws from the city’s thriving performing arts, drag, and circus cultures, staging a range of extravagant spectacles, edgy avant-garde performances, and campy displays. Along with weekly shows, Montreal has two annual extravaganzas—the International Burlesque Festival and the Grand Burlesque Show—both produced by showgirl Scarlet James. Troupes such as Acme, Cirquantique, Dames in Distress, Dead Dollz, and Candyass Cabaret have collectively formed a Burlesque Arts Movement (BAM) in Montreal, which aims to build on neo-burlesque’s popularity and establish a permanent space where performers can meet, classes can be taught, and historical burlesque paraphernalia can be displayed. Leading up to the 2012 International Festival in September (unofficially designated “Burlesque Month” in Montreal), events from burlesque bowling to bump ‘n’ grind workshops were organized by the city’s performers, along with an exhibition in Old Montreal celebrating Montreal’s burlesque history. Dominating the exhibit was a veritable shrine to Lili St. Cyr, who remains a touchstone for the city’s neo-burlesque performers.

The neo-burlesque scene is located on and around the Main, where Brereton and Jordan once performed as showgirls. Shows are performed at venues such as Théâtre Ste. Catherine, Mainline Theatre, Bain Mathieu, Club Soda, and Café Cleopatra. The uptown clubs, where the likes of St. Cyr performed, are today either legitimate theatres or strip clubs frequented by straight men. Urban zoning practices in Montreal, unlike in post-Giuliani New

York City, allow these strip clubs to occupy the city’s most populated areas, such as Ste. Catherine. With names like Club Super Sexe, the strip clubs are flashier and fleshier than the cabarets and jazz clubs they replaced.<sup>3</sup> Sitting on the corner of Ste. Catherine and Stanley Street, Chez Patee, with its faded art deco façade, captures the peculiar history of burlesque, its past as one of Montreal’s most lavish venues, where Lena Horne and Billie Holiday performed, brushing against its present as a seedy gentlemen’s club.

Whether nostalgic imitations of classic routines or radically reinvented new ones, Montreal’s neo-burlesque scene includes a diversity of performance styles, from the vampy, retro glamour of Scarlet James, Seska Lee, and Mlle Oui Oui Encore to the comic counterculture performances of Velma Candyass, Lady Josephine, Bonbon Bombay, and Cherry Typhoon. Montreal’s two main teachers are Mlle Oui Oui Encore, who teaches retro-tease classes, and Velma Candyass, who teaches rockabilly burlesque. Together they exemplify the two sides of neo-burlesque—nostalgic retro-sexuality and queer counterculture—and their classes are part of an increasingly stylized approach to sexuality, in which sex is understood as an embodied aesthetic, just one part of the broader cultural life of urban hipsters. Velma puts on the monthly Candyass Cabaret at Café Cleopatra, which includes everything from lesbian drag to falsetto puppetry. She believes that, with the Cabaret’s eclectic spectacles, “we’re honouring Montreal’s burlesque history” (qtd. in Burnett).

Neo-burlesque performers are drawn to the form, in part, because it offers a degree of creative autonomy and includes a wide range of body types. Lady Josephine, winner of “Most Beautiful” act at the Great Boston Burlesque Expo in 2011, and Bonbon Bombay, winner of the 2009 Montreal Burlesque Festival and second-place winner of the New York Burlesque Star Search in 2011, are trained dancers who were attracted to burlesque’s blending of comic eroticism with a diverse range of performance styles, from pantomime and clowning to ballet and performance art. Josephine performs solo, as well as with Blood Ballet Cabaret, explaining, “my burlesque aesthetic is [...] conscious of gender performance, mime, athleticism, classical dance, fabric, the cultural references in music, and comedic timing.” Perhaps not surprisingly, many neo-burlesquers make a point of defining their burlesque practice as *art*, a claim that implicitly differentiates what they do from both commercial stripping and commodified celebrity images. The aesthetic of neo-burlesque owes much to camp and drag practices, with its use of incongruity, exaggerated theatricality, and humour to comment obliquely on the rituals and gestures of heteronormative culture. Indeed, the very resurgence of burlesque seems to be the work of camp. As Andrew Ross puts it, camp is a “rediscovery of history’s waste”—its remains—and “*the recreation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*” (320).

Recalling the orientalism and exoticism of early and mid twentieth-century burlesque, Tokyo-born, Montreal-based performer Cherry Typhoon parodies stereotypes of Asian femininity with an infectious comic energy. Her routines often begin with her demure entrance onstage, wearing a kimono and carrying a fan, blinking sweetly at her audience while taking the small steps associated with geisha. This orientalist fantasy is abruptly interrupted by the exuberant exposure of a g-string and pasties. Trained in Okinawan dance and theatre, Cherry left her work in profes-





*Burlesque Ballet-Clown.* Bonbon Bombay, 2011.  
Photo by Olena Sullivan | Photolena, [www.photolena.ca](http://www.photolena.ca)

sional theatre when she discovered burlesque, which she sees as a form that “celebrates” differences in “body size, disability, age, race” and promotes “freedom” and “the art of being confident.” In 2011, Cherry relocated with her husband to Montreal, where Typhoon and Lady Josephine have founded Good Ladies Productions, a collaborative theatre group that uses neo-burlesque and sketch comedy to comment on the contemporary social and political landscape.

Neo-burlesque has succeeded both because of the promotional possibilities of social media and also as a reaction to the disembodied relationships that social media fosters. Facebook, Twitter, and other Internet platforms allow performers to promote themselves and their events, forge networks, and produce online magazines. (St. Cyr even has a Facebook page.) It is because of social media and the participatory cultures it fosters that neo-burlesque continues to thrive.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, burlesque performers often proclaim to be anti-media. Hosting the ongoing Montreal sketch comedy show, *Bad Ladies and the Detective*, Miss Sugarpuss described herself and her fellow neo-burlesquers as “throwbacks” and urged the audience to “put away your digital devices and pay attention to the real bodies in front of you and around you.”<sup>5</sup> Neo-burlesque recovers a distinctly embodied form of sociality and entertainment and offers an alternative to the digi-



*Bad Ladies.* Lady Josephine and Cherry Typhoon, 2012.  
Photo by Mary Elam, [www.maryelam.com](http://www.maryelam.com)

tally perfected bodies in popular culture. As Bonbon Bombay proclaims, “in a society that is bombarded by photoshopped beauty, burlesque puts real bodies on stage in all of their (almost nude) glory for all to see! Amen for that!”

Montreal’s history of burlesque remains most evident on the Main. Café Cleopatra, which opened in 1976, marks that moment when the lines between burlesque striptease and stripping were still fluid. The sign itself, which features two naked women and advertises “strip-teaseuses,” “danseuses à go-go,” and “spectacles continuel,” harks back to another time. After narrowly escaping demolition during the city’s *Quartier des Spectacles* project, which created a cultural epicentre by building a public square, symphony hall, skating rink, and luxury high rise in the city’s red-light district, Café Cleopatra remains the only strip club that features strippers of diverse ages, shapes, ethnicities, and body types. (There are strippers in their late forties working there.) The first floor has strip shows and private nude dances, while the second floor stages drag, transgender, and fetish shows, along with Candyass Cabaret. Velma, together with heritage activist Donavon King, leads a monthly red light district walking tour, relating the cultural history on and around Ste. Laurent and Ste. Catherine. King has submitted a proposal to the City of Montreal arguing that Montreal’s burlesque history should be incorporated into its



Exposing Orientalism. Cherry Typhoon, 2011.  
Photo by Olena Sullivan | Photolena, www.photolena.ca

brand image as a tourist destination, with plaques marking historic buildings and statues representing famous performers.<sup>6</sup> Although urban planners do not see burlesque fitting into the city's cultural or economic future, the proliferation of performers, spectators, classes, documentaries, and magazines suggests that burlesque will remain. And as it both looks back nostalgically and reaches toward the new, neo-burlesque repeats the past and, at the same time, reinvents it.

## Notes

- 1 Schneider is engaging specifically here with Peggy Phelan's influential formulation of performance as that which "becomes itself through disappearance" (146).
- 2 By the 1940s, the clubs were racially integrated, with Café St. Michel leading the way with a fully integrated jazz band directed by Louis Metcalf.
- 3 Montreal strip clubs are famous not only for their ubiquity and degree of public visibility, but also for their loose laws, which allow customers to touch certain parts of the dancers' bodies (contact dances), and private nude dances that allow clients to disrobe and masturbate while watching the dancers strip behind a glass window.
- 4 My thanks to Peter Dickinson for pointing this out to me at a Women and Comedy Workshop at Simon Fraser University.
- 5 References are cited directly from the show staged on 22 October 2012 at Théâtre Ste. Catherine.
- 6 See "Growing Pains in Montreal's Cultural Redevelopment," CBC News (Montreal), 31 March 2011. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/growing-pains-in-montreal-s-cultural-redevelopment-1.1115725>

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# “Well, Melody, what is your skirt gonna turn into now?”: An Interview with Melody Mangler

by Ines Ortner

Ines Ortner interviewed Vancouver burlesque performer, costumer, writer, and teacher Melody Mangler. The interview was conducted on 21 November 2012 in the studio (a.k.a. “The Coop”) of the Screaming Chicken Theatrical Society, of which Melody Mangler is the Artistic Director.

**IO:** What brought you to burlesque dance, and when?

**MM:** About ten years ago I moved here from Alberta, where I took theatre at Red Deer College. I hooked up with my now-husband in a local punk bar where we do a kind of R-rated game show on a Monday night and we get people naked, make them do ridiculous things like shave off eyebrows and pour some booze down their pants, and my costumer was my lovely assistant at this R-rated game show. She was a burlesque dancer, and she kept dressing me in more and more scandalous costumes. Eventually she said, “Come on, join this troupe,” and I did. So I started looking up “burlesque” on the Internet and got so inspired when I saw what was happening in New York, Coney Island, and the LA scene. I was just so excited to learn about the scene—you could really just make it happen yourself and put it on stage. Really, the draw for me coming from a theatre background is, you didn’t have to go to all these auditions, you could just go and make your own show, and be in it. And now people audition for me.

**IO:** “Melody Mangler” is your stage name. How did this come about?

**MM:** It actually started as a karaoke stage name; we all had to have these funny names, and then with the game show I just took on that pseudonym. And then I did start to write song parodies, so then it took on that meaning. One of my first song parodies was “Heathens are a girl’s best friend,” where I was a nun and I was singing to schoolgirls.

**IO:** It seems that burlesque and a puritan theme always go hand in hand.

**MM:** Yeah, the parodic and satirical nature of burlesque likes to take jabs at un-sex-positivity. I think humour is a good way to tackle heavy subject matter, sometimes.



Melody Mangler's *Ode to the Rose*, 2011.  
Photo by Derek Jackson

**IO:** It is interesting that burlesque dancers are never really nude. The last layer of the costume is the pasties and the g-string or c-string or some cover. In your case it is also your tattoos and your brightly coloured hair. This is marking you beyond the stage. Where does the stage persona end and the private persona start? Is burlesque a lifestyle?



Ode to the Rose, teasing and revealing the next layer.  
Photos by Ian R. West, [www.wedphoto.ca](http://www.wedphoto.ca)

**MM:** I do answer to Melody now a lot more often than Becky, my real name. It overlaps, but it is different for each person. There is one performer, who is amazing, a burlesque host, Miss Astrid, and her character is totally different from her real self. On stage she is this very hard-hitting German woman, I think, with an eye patch and a black bob and very mean, but awesome and hilarious. But offstage she is nice and soft and flowy, she's got red hair, you know she is this very warm person, so she is very different from her stage character.

Girls that are just getting into it sometimes want a mask or a barrier between their audience or want to know how do you get to your stage persona, or how do you create something that is not just you on stage. One thing that I do tell people, and this is something that I apply to myself as well: "Imagine yourself on your absolutely best day, times a hundred, and then you find your superhero self. You've got to find your superhero stripper side, so you are just in the zone, you are awesome, and your energy is up here and you are gorgeous." Once you have this feeling then you go on stage and perform and let everything go. But then the interesting thing, that is not actually such a bad thing, is when you are performing in that feeling and you are working to get into this high-energy place, it starts to rub off on your everyday life and it's kind of an awesome thing.

**IO:** So burlesque is then quite empowering in your private life? A confidence booster?

**MM:** Definitely.

**IO:** This is going to your message of sex-positivity.

**MM:** Totally. I once had a nineteen-year-old girl tell me after she graduated the Becoming Burlesque program, "Thank you. I don't hate my boobs anymore." And I was like, "Oh, my god, you are nineteen and you hated your boobs? That is so depressing." Thank god, I can save you from body shaming; I mean, not "I saved you," but this class, and this acceptance that is in the scene and the honouring of the body, that is like: well, you see your thighs jiggling? Yeah, work it, yeah that is awesome, jiggle harder, jiggle

faster, love the fat, love the bumps, love the womanliness. It's not about starving, but if you are skinny, love your lankiness, stick out your bones, super-short people and super-tall people, it is great, the body-positivity.

**IO:** Do you have a favorite burlesque era or a favourite dancer?

**MM:** I am really inspired by Lydia Thompson in the 1800s because I think not a lot of people know about her. Her troupe, British Blondes, was the first to be described with the term burlesque around 1860. They were a group of women who would perform satirical plays, dressed as men. They played these over-sexualized, aggressive male characters. In Victorian times, showing your legs in leggings, swearing, being sexual were just so taboo and that's where I got a lot of inspiration for writing the plays.

I'll try and touch on all the eras. I almost feel I am a cross between an MGM musical and John Waters, like mixing glamour and beauty with maybe more grit and bizarre nature.

**IO:** Neo-burlesque has a strong focus on imagination and creativity, especially in the play with materials and costume pieces and the removal of layers. Burlesque seems all about costumes and the mystique and danger the dancer is able to insert in the use of them.

**MM:** And we are getting more and more scandalous, too. Even just a couple of years ago you wouldn't see girls in this town going down to merkins or a new contraption that I like to call (named by April O' Peel) the scanty. Girls would wear a full-bottom panty and then, to add danger because you had to step it up, they began taking off one layer of underwear to reveal a very small pair of underwear or the merkins. If you do it from the side it looks like you are getting fully nude and that can add this element of danger, of what is going to happen, especially as your merkin might fall off when you bend over.

**IO:** What is a merkin?

**MM:** Well, it has a different meaning now than it did. Earlier, when you were not allowed to go fully nude, some strippers would



put fake pubic hair on a little patch, so it looked like they were naked but they weren't.

**IO:** So you are faking something you are not allowed to show in the first place?

**MM:** Exactly, and that's kind of pointing out the ridiculousness of the censorship so you just find a way around it, but now merkins are used almost like the c-string. Girls would put some crystals on a little piece of fabric, and just spirit gum it down, you know, but be careful bending over, because they pop off.

**IO:** What are pasties?

**MM:** This again has something to do with censorship. Girls weren't allowed to show their nipples, so to make this a little ruder, flash up the nipples, put a little tassel on there, start swinging them around and therefore drawing more attention.

**IO:** Exaggeration, but now girls twirl the tassels.

**MM:** Ah, the tassel twirl. A few strippers featured this as a gimmick, but now, in the neo-burlesque, the tassel twirl is pretty much standard.

**IO:** What about the new contraption you mentioned, the scanty?

**MM:** Because I was working with merkins and I really like to do energetic dances at times—I do like to throw in some kicks and shimmies—if you get too sweaty, your merkin might fall off, and c-strings are sometimes uncomfortable and will shift to the side, so the scanty is basically a little diamond in the front and in the back with a strip of fabric underneath. Basically a panty with just the tiniest straps that almost looks invisible on stage.

**IO:** Do you glue it?

**MM:** No, you don't need to; it works like a panty. It is like the scandal of a merkin but the security of a panty; the "scanty," the scandalous panty.

**IO:** I have noticed them on stage; they sometimes have three little strings.

**MM:** Yes. The three strings, if it's a bit of a thicker string and you can see them, I call that a three-prong thong and if it is on a guy it is a dong-thong. I like coming up with little names.

**IO:** This is great, because it is basically new technology for burlesque costumes.

**MM:** I did not invent these new costumes; they've been around with the neo-scene for a while, but it was definitely not happening here in Vancouver.

**IO:** That brings me to restrictions. It is very fascinating that in a performance form where you have to move freely, you restrict your body with corsets and other costumes you can barely move in. Does fashion come before function?

**MM:** Well, it is just so much fun to take them off. I think it's just fetishy, like, with the corsets, it is hard to breathe and dance. Heels make it hard to dance, too. You will notice that there are a few of us in town that particularly will pick jungle theme numbers, or numbers where we don't have to wear heels. There are women, however, who claim, "You are not doing burlesque striptease unless you are wearing heels"—they are sticklers for that. Or you have to be wearing your air pumps, which basically means being on the ball of your foot the entire number.

**IO:** Air pumps?

**MM:** Or Barbie feet. It is bare foot, but you have to stay up—like you are in a high heel to keep your legs looking nice, but that is going back to the pure striptease.

**IO:** Lots of conventions that have to be followed?

**MM:** That is changing, though. Everybody now has their own opinion, but I like corsets. They are pretty.

**IO:** There is an incredible complexity in the entire transformation of the body, sometimes the entire body shape. Especially when materials move from one essential layer in a moment to another essential layer with a different story. For example, your housewife costume watering the flowers [*Garden of Hedon*], which is a very structured fifties look that turns into this light and luminescent organza twirl that reminds me of Loie Fuller<sup>1</sup>.

**MM:** Oh yes, that is exactly meant as a homage to her. I always like to try and throw a little bit of magic into my numbers.

**IO:** Organza seems to be one of your best friends on stage.

**MM:** It is so shiny, so beautiful. I mean it is not silk, but it is stiff enough to get it all up there, so that I can really reach for that fabric—there was so much of it—but it hid well. I really didn't want anyone to expect the next step.

**IO:** It did look like a blue petticoat underneath the yellow skirt.

**MM:** And I hope everybody got, you know, the joke: the best thing is to water your garden, wet flowers and all of that.

**IO:** Do you know which fabric you are going to use beforehand?

**MM:** I just go to Dressew [a Vancouver fabric store], really, and wander around. Sometimes it's price—the organza was two dollars a metre—so I was just going to buy it right up. I love buying silk when I can, but it's fourteen dollars a metre, so that's a difference. For *The Season of the Witch*,<sup>2</sup> I did a panel skirt that was three different layers, red, orange, and yellow, and the orange and the yellow were organza, and then the red was silk and that's because there was only a good red silk and there was no organza. It created an interesting flutter with this combination of the material.

**IO:** So it was not really a skirt. It was just materials layered on top of each other, so it works with the flow?

**MM:** Yeah, and then getting it onto my arms and the loops happened by accident: I was playing with them—kinda weird—and then, "Oh, I ruined it . . ." My arm got stuck, and then I am, "Oh, this is kind of neat." A lot of it is just happy accident.

One good costume-y thing I found through playing was—I was making tutus, so I just looked online about how to do an easy tutu, and I found this tulle tying technique where you cut strips of tulle and just tie it around a ribbon, and so I was making these tutus for a Christmas show we were doing and then it got all messed up and left in a corner and all bunched up and all the ties twisted around and I thought, "tulle boa." So I started tying all these tulle boas, and then I made a tulle skirt and tulle fans, and then I made the giant blue ball there in the corner, and then I rolled on that thing like an exercise ball. It is my ode to blue balls.

**IO:** Let's talk a bit more about the construction methods and techniques you use for your transformations. What are the right materials for the purpose?



*Venus in Spring*, Best of Burlesque, 2009.  
Photo by Eric Denson, flickr.com/photos/wordofmouth



*Venus in Spring*, releasing the butterflies from the corset.  
Photo by Samuel Hernandez, shphotolab.com

**MM:** Snap tape is really good. Velcro makes a bit of a horrible noise on stage, and it looks so lumpy. I've heard of people using magnets; I know that Burgundy Brixx uses magnets in her clothing, but I'll be scared of them just coming apart. With the *Garden of Hedon* act, that skirt just tucks into a big elastic and the dress is just snap tape. The rose skirt is just tied on with a bow. A lot of it is just really simple. [But] I love doing the unexpected and you know if it is a little bit predictable, I ask "Well, Melody, what is your skirt gonna turn into now?"

For example, people from Las Vegas asked about the rose skirt,<sup>3</sup> "What's inside it? Oh, you leaned on it and now you are rolling back onto it, and now you walk up it?"

**IO:** So what is inside it? Steps?

**MM:** A step ladder. It is tricky to walk out on stage. I tried to be as graceful as possible with it, clonk, clonk, hitting me in the leg. Little steps do work, little steps.

**IO:** It is brilliant. You really have to think out of the box to come up with something like that. What was the process to come to this solution?

**MM:** It was actually my husband coming up with this solution. I was working with a tool horse, and I fell off of it a couple of times; it was hard to balance on that. I thought maybe I could build something, but it is way easier to find something that al-

ready exists. With that one I wanted to have some sort of beautiful rose pedestal and then I wanted to tease the reveal of the magic where it just magically stands on its own—that's the first tease—then a little bit of pressure, that is the second tease. Then I wanted to tease the reveal out: what is under there? I am just so happy that it worked. I love it.

**IO:** The *Venus in Spring*<sup>4</sup> costume has all different methods of closures; the last panels seem to be just wrapped around your waist.

**MM:** Yes, it is just loosely tied on. Although I had things go wrong. Sometimes my panniers collapse, because I made them a little weird, out of corset boning and stiff felt and hot glue.

**IO:** Hot glue?

**MM:** I know. And they bounce but they do sort of collapse because it is just these three tiers and ribbon holding them apart and so they do "flop" if I am not careful, and it is tricky with all the weight on them. I've got the side panels covering the panniers. The front panel and the back panel to make it look like a dress when, in fact, it is just a bunch of pieces of fabric.

**IO:** You won an award for this costume, right?

**MM:** Yeah, that was my trophy, my only trophy so far, fingers crossed. Best Debut, that was a really amazing trophy to win.

**IO:** Can you make a living from burlesque?





Dressed in a tulle boa.  
Photo by Randy Pante, hamfats.ca

**MM:** Sort of. The majority of my income comes from sewing custom orders. I sew a lot of pasties. That is a pasties-sewing callus right there.

**IO:** No thimble?

**MM:** No thimble. Only sometimes when I get weak, or for particularly hard material.

**IO:** Where do you sell your work?

**MM:** Online. On any show I am involved in, I try to get a table to sell pasties and then the scanties. I am making a lot for people now. I do a lot of hand-beading work on some scanties if people pay the price, so that's a unique feature. I love doing hand beading. I just love doing any sort of tedious little beading work.

**IO:** You put a lot of love in your costumes. And your sense of colour is always right on.

**MM:** Thank you, yeah, I do really get into the costumes. Everybody makes up their burlesque numbers differently. Some people get their inspirations from a song, and that happens to me sometimes, too. Sometimes people want to do a certain dance style or have a story idea or just a visual they want to create and bring to life. I definitely go costume first most of the time; I think of a costume: What could that be? Where is the story? Where is the song?

**IO:** What is the next phase? What are you enjoying making right now?

**MM:** I really love the panel skirt, and I enjoy making different types of scanties right now. I am just getting into panel skirts. You saw that a lot in the Golden Era [1950s] and I guess in the thirties. It is another Little Egypt inspiration, and you see this in belly dance, too. It is the panel in the front and you can see the legs at either side and then you have a full circle panel in the back. People sometimes hid the panels under a ball gown and then took the ball gown off and they'd reveal the skirt and play with it: you can fluff it, you can trace it on yourself, you can grab the corners and twirl. I actually use a belly dance skirt that my aunt used to dance in the eighties. It is just so beautiful; it has a flutter, has a history to it, has a very classic look when you see it on a dancer. It is exciting—it's not fishnets and a cheap corset.

**IO:** I thank you so much for the interview.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Garden of Hedon* was performed at the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekend: 21st Annual Tournament of Tease (Miss Exotic World Contest) on 4 June 2011. Loie Fuller (1868–1928) was a pioneer of modern dance.
- 2 Melody first performed *The Season of the Witch* in the Taboo Revue Variety Burlesque Show: Halloween Edition in the Wise Hall, East Vancouver, 26 October 2012. She transforms from a black, tailored Puritan costume that includes a wide hoop skirt and a big black bonnet in which her hair is hidden into the colourful and flowing costume described.
- 3 The rose skirt number is from 2011. Melody also performed it in Sydney, Australia (2011) and Las Vegas, Nevada (2012).
- 4 With *Venus in Spring* Melody won Best Debut at the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekend Pageant (Las Vegas) in 2009. She also performed the number at the Toronto Burlesque Festival in 2011, which is available to view on YouTube.
- 5 To view some of the performances mentioned, see “BHOFF11—Miss Exotic World 4—Melody Mangler” and “Melody Mangler—Roses” on YouTube.

## About the Author

Ines Ortner (MFA Theatre Design, BA Theatre/Art History, UBC) is a trained dressmaker, patternmaker, and fashion and costume designer working for theatre, opera, musicals, and performance art. Her research interests encompass performance costumes from the historical avant garde, materiality and body restriction, and body art as site of resistance.

# Backwoods Burlesque: Off-the-Grid Tsk Tsk

by Bronwyn Preece



Jenny Vester as Lollipop.  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

*In the middle of the Salish Sea, off the west coast of British Columbia, on an entirely off-the-grid island teeming with trees, feral sheep, potholes, and potlucks, and (in)famous for its weed ... on a dark and wet, middle-of-winter night ... corsets are being tightened, garters heightened, cod pieces padded. Sassiness is meeting solar panels, whimsy, windmills, and waterwheels, girls, guys, gossip, and generators.*

*Listen ... can you hear the stirring in the woods? They say the smaller the place, the greater the politics ... but here, the tinier the place, the more tantalizing the tsk tsk.*

The Tsk Tsk Revue has become an annual one-night phenomenon on Lasqueti Island (off the east coast of Vancouver Island), population 350. Drawing a crowd of locals and travellers from the “other side” (what we islanders term the mainland), the show features a series of vignettes, threaded together by the colour commentary of hostess and creator Jenny Vester. Embodying over the years such personas as Super Wet Nurse, Lollipop from the Church of Suck and Lick, Furnice the Fervert, or this year’s Mr. Ms., Vester presides over a night that defies standardization or categorization. Born out of a community need for a safe, age-appropriate venue for expressive raunchiness, what began as a personal fundraiser has

blossomed over seven years into a small, Gulf Islands touring show. Taking bawdy backwoods humour on the road, poking fun at everyone and sparing no one, the Tsk Tsk Revue brings new meaning to localism, while offering a venue (as the only age-restricted event of the year on Lasqueti) where even the schoolteacher can participate and show up for work on Monday morning!

Placing an open call to the community-at-large to conceive and create offerings for the show, Vester assembles independent and eclectic sketches (sometimes just days before the scheduled event), underscoring the whole pastiche with a strong narrative through-line. As an avid yearly spectator, I have witnessed with amazement how Vester manages to make sense—sometimes through the very nonsense of the mix—of what could otherwise end up as a pell-mell of independent skits, creating in the end a show that she terms invariably “funny, irreverent, provocative, strange, sexy, and original” (Interview).

With the aid of the Backwoods Boys (continuously running out of gas in more ways than one!), the Jerry Can-Can Girls (always there when the boys run out of gas!), a team of flirtatious, feral sheep, or the Off-the-Grid New Age Touchy-Feely Dance Workshopers, the annual Tsk Tsk manages to make cohesive sense of an eclecticism so varied that the audience never knows just what or who to expect each time the curtain opens:

*Half-naked synchronized firewood chopping by Hot Stuff; the Kama Sutra enacted in unitards; a religious sermon and a reading of debaucherous and rude synonyms from Roger’s Thesaurus; followed by a spellbindingly sensual belly dance or an audience-judged orgasm competition. Then again, the curtain might open to reveal two of the smallest people on the island, cross-dressed in fleshy costumes that triple their size, doing a striptease to the song “Give Me Your Hard White Cum,” followed by a slow-sung love ballad; a glimpse into the activities of the sister-wives and father-husband of the polygamist community of Bountiful; or maybe this time it will be the older women of the island doing a behind-the-sheet number, with only their bare chests and feet revealed, to the lyrics “Do your breasts hang low? Do they wobble to and fro?” Then again, it might be a staged interpretive reenactment of Sir Richard Attenborough’s explanation of the mating rituals of slugs or sperm whales (complete with life-size phallic members as crucial players in the “act!”).*





The Backwoods Boys being pulled over by the cops.  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers



Jenny Vester, centre, with the Jerry Can-Can Girls ... after a hard day of work!  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers



Costume elements arriving by sidecar behind the Lasqueti Community Hall.  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

*The Tsk Tsk Revue is [about] spinning both the term sexy and the status quo on their heads, highlighting the often absurd moments of choosing to live off-grid and translating the many challenges that face the islanders into comedic fodder. In this context, what's irresistibly arousing and "hot" (although cold is a more appropriate term) are routines by competent and strong island women in gumboots and waterproof survival suits.*



Wardrobe scene: Sexually suiting up.  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

But is it burlesque? “Yes,” answers Vester adamantly, pointing out that the original sense of burlesque was that it was “funny-sexy” and “culturally relevant.” The Tsk Tsk Revue is both and more: relevant and responsive; making fun of the performers and the spectators; spinning the term sexy and the status quo on their heads; highlighting the often absurd moments of choosing to live off-grid; and translating the many challenges that face the islanders into comedic fodder. In this context, what’s irresistibly arousing and “hot” (although *cold* is a more appropriate term) are routines by competent and strong island women in gumboots and waterproof survival suits (as if they’ve just climbed out of their Zodiac, after having navigated the most treacherous body of water on the coast, and stepped right on stage), and scenes by men that turn the grunt work of remote living into a variety of more exhilarating grunts.

“I wanna play dirty!” Vester realized several years back. Then a Parent Advisory Committee-mama, Vester was one of the main organizers of the local elementary school’s annual Lip Sync fundraiser (an open-community event for people to airband and Milli Vanilli in style). The mid-winter event was progressively becoming more risqué and arguably inappropriate for the younger audiences and beneficiaries of the funds raised. Identifying that dildos did not match with the PAC mandate, but recognizing that eroticism and erogenous zones lurked within the nooks and crannies of many an outdoor local shower, on the trail between the cabin and the outhouse, and within the garden beds growing immensely phallic carrots, Vester in 2006 convened the first ever Tsk Tsk. Over the years, the show has continued to push the edges, extending and interrogating the elasticity of one little island’s limits, balancing silly lewdness with safety and heart. Those who make up the Tsk Tsk are your on-every-other-day-(relatively)-normal-neighbours, in a very literal sense: the butcher, the baker, and even the candlestick maker; the sawmill, the carpenter, and the gardener. The Tsk Tsk is a community (at) play! Playing up and playing into island stereotypes, the Tsk Tsk toys with notions ranging from implied bestiality to being a band of rogue, perverted pirates. Regardless of the year’s offerings, one is guaranteed a pendulum ride, always into the unexpected.

In 2012, the twenty-four members of the Tsk Tsk Revue hit the road, in one stretch limousine and four vans, doing a five-show tour on the “other side.” Epitomizing the make-it-up-and-figure-it-out-as-we-go-along nature of grassroots theatre, the traditional roles of stage manager, director, and stage hands emerged but remained unlabelled within the Tsk Tsk multiple-role-playing, organic-orgasmic organism—a group entirely without any previous theatrical training.

There were concerns that the intensely local, Lasqueti-based humour might not translate off island. This proved to be anything but the case. The show was more than raucously received, with tickets sold out days before the show even rolled into some towns.

Though brazenly backwoods, the Tsk Tsk Revue has an undeniable polish of sorts—a rough-hewn, amateur-rich, and community-fuelled polish—the result of a laidback yet dedicated professionalism on the part of Vester and the show’s participants. The Tsk Tsk not only stages innovative and striking low-tech theatrical tropes and costumes, but equally some of the most pioneering acts in blacklight burlesque, earning the company its rightful place



within the national scene of contemporary Canadian burlesque. Vester set out to create a show where spectators would have to “hold their funnybones.” She has done more than that. She has midwifed into being an alternatively powered assemblage of adult audacity, lending a new sexual hilarity to the growing interest in off-the-grid living—creatively displaying one community’s ethics of erotics.

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## About the Author

Bronwyn Preece is an improvisational performance eARThist, community applied theatre practitioner, and author. She is currently pursuing a PhD through the University of Glasgow, exploring, through performance, the intersection of ecology and disability. She recently did a series of transnational performances for World Stage Design, set within an edible stage, examining local gardening as a metre for climate change. She is the author of *Gulf Islands Alphabet* (2012) and the forthcoming *In the Spirit of Homebirth* (Seven Stories, 2015) and *Off-the-Grid Kid* (Eifrig, 2015). She will have a chapter in *Performing Motherhood* (Demeter Press, 2014). She lives in a solar and waterwheel-powered house on Lasqueti Island, BC. [bronwynpreece.com](http://bronwynpreece.com)



Blacklight burlesque.  
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

# Stuck to the Pole: Raven Virginia and the Redefinition of Burlesque in Calgary

by Jamie Dunsdon

“We are all about the jiggle,” says Calgary burlesque queen Raven Virginia. “It’s about shaking. Making your belly shake, or your butt or your thighs [...] when you relax, the muscles move, and breasts are great for that! [...] This is another way that burlesque is really different from exotic dance.”

Raven and her burlesque ensemble, The Garter Girls, have had practice vocalizing this distinction between what can be termed “revival burlesque” and the style of stripping or “exotic dance” performed at strip clubs. In November 2010, when the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) categorized both

performance styles as “nude entertainment” under their licensing guidelines, the Calgary burlesque community took to the media to make a case for the artistic validity of their performance and to address the differences between the two forms. However, despite months of press coverage, the AGLC remained resolute. Two years later, Raven sat down with me to discuss burlesque as a form distinct from exotic dancing, the source of the disconnect between burlesque performers’ intentions and audiences’ (mis)perceptions, and the impact of the AGLC’s decision on burlesque performance in Calgary.



The Garter Girls.

Photo by Patricia Rose Photography, [patriciarosephotography.com](http://patriciarosephotography.com)



## Burlesque and Exotic Dance

The burlesque revival that took North America by the tassels in the late 1990s arrived in Calgary only a couple of years later. The Garter Girls Burly-Q Revue was born in 2007, and Raven Virginia joined in 2009. Though Calgary's burlesque scene is young, The Garter Girls share the city with a number of other ensembles that perform and teach burlesque. Today, in addition to performing with The Garter Girls, Raven Virginia hosts her own revue, the Buxom Burlesque. She has also joined the international burlesque scene by performing at Kitty Nights West, in the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival, at the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, and alongside some of the world's most reputable performers in Lucha Vavoom, an internationally touring Mexican wrestling event that features curated burlesque performance.

Raven emerged as a community leader in Calgary, in part as a result of her vocal response to the 2010 AGLC decree; today, she still protests any assumption that revival burlesque is merely a form of exotic dance: "What the revival means is that it's a throw-back to burlesque before it became exotic dance. [...] It's vaudevilian: it's variety."

Preferring to think of burlesque and exotic dance as "sisters who come from the same rich and beautiful history," she differentiates burlesque from exotic dance in a few key ways: "What we do is very titillating, [but] it isn't solely for the sexual gratification of the audience. On the whole, you're going to be entertained. And good burlesque also incorporates many theatrical aspects such as detailed costuming, a strong character narrative, dance or choreography, maybe dialogue or song."

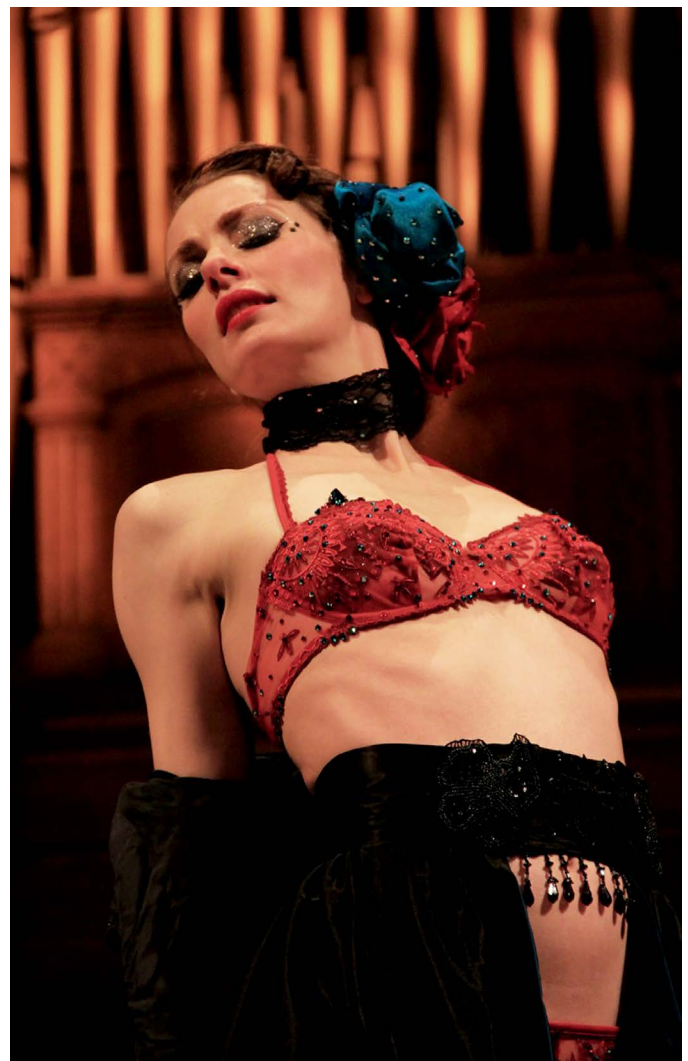
One of the most distinctive characteristics of revival burlesque identified by Raven is its inherent inclusivity of participants, both onstage and in the audience. "We talk a lot about body, but it is so important in what we do, because not only do we embrace and include all different body types, genders, ethnicities, but [all] ages as well." She contrasts this with exotic dance clubs where "you're only going to see one body type or female stereotype that is supposed to be highly desirable to men. And it's geared toward a male audience. A burlesque [performance] is geared toward a female audience."

Structurally, the most significant convention that sets burlesque apart is the focus on "tease," while a typical exotic dance focuses on exposure. After stripping (which may or may not incorporate a narrative), the exotic dancer continues to perform, now entirely disrobed, and may solicit tips from the audience. In Alberta, an AGLC-mandated one-metre barrier separates the dancer and the audience, so a common method of earning tips is to sit on the stage and invite the audience to toss loonies or toonies into a rolled up poster that is held between the dancer's legs like a cone and given away as a prize if a coin is successfully tossed. Conversely, in burlesque, the removal of clothing provides the narrative of the performance, and once the performer has stripped down to a g-string and pasties, the performance is over. Burlesque performers do not expose their nipples or genitalia. Instead, the reveal of the pasties (sometimes supported by a tassel twirl) provides the narrative climax of the piece, and the performer exits the stage.

Perhaps most unique to revival burlesque is the subgenre known as "neo-burlesque," which has also reached Calgary. Characterized by a social consciousness all but ignored by exotic dance, neo-burlesque uses striptease performance vocabulary to subvert



A stripper with a voice. Raven co-hosts a 2012 revue.  
Photo by Patricia Rose Photography, [patriciarosephotography.com](http://patriciarosephotography.com)



Raven Virginia at The Garter Girls' Burly-Q Revue.  
Photo by Patricia Rose Photography, [patriciarosephotography.com](http://patriciarosephotography.com)

and challenge heteronormative gender roles or even examine social and political issues. The Garter Girls demonstrate an interest in neo-burlesque, explaining in their mandate, “the striptease-artform allows us to create an artifice of gender, exploring what it means to possess and perform the female body in conventional and non-conventional ways” (The Garter Girls: About). The statement goes on to describe how The Garter Girls pursue a “rich comic tradition that sees satire as a force for social change” and employ “burlesque tactics to propose to our audience different ways of seeing identity and physicality.” In many ways, neo-burlesque seeks to challenge the attitudes affirmed by its sister, exotic dance.

## Addressing (Mis)perceptions of Revival Burlesque

When the AGLC saw fit to categorize both burlesque and exotic dance together under the same nudity policy, it revealed that there remains a confusion that plagues burlesque in Calgary: what if it all just looks like fancy stripping? Undoubtedly, there are similarities between exotic dance and burlesque, which may contribute to confusion between the forms. Even Raven is comfortable acknowledging that, like exotic dance, revival burlesque is part of the sex industry. In addition to the obvious use of striptease as a performance vocabulary in both forms, most burlesque performers also choose pseudonyms or stage names. As for their counterparts in exotic dance and pornography, the pseudonyms serve as extensions of the on-stage fantasy. Raven even self-identifies as a “stripper,” though she admits that was a difficult title to embrace initially, given the stigma associated with stripping: “Yeah, I think that generally there are misconceptions. We haven’t yet reached a wide audience because people are intimidated or afraid that they are going to see boobies [...] But most of the time when people come and they take the leap of faith and they watch it, they go ‘oh my god, that is so much more demure’.”

However, stage names and pseudonyms are not exclusively linked to the sex industry, having been appropriated as parts of other subcultures, such as drag king/queen performance and roller derby. Further, if attending a burlesque performance is the only requisite for understanding the artistic and socially-subversive values of burlesque (especially neo-burlesque), the AGLC’s choice to target burlesque in Calgary even after attending performances seems illogical. Is simple prudishness to blame, or could the answer lie in the performance itself?

A comparison of burlesque with its closest cousin, drag, may serve to identify the source of the confusion. Both drag and burlesque have been used for light entertainment as well as for subversion and political statement. Indeed drag kings and queens have used striptease in their acts, and burlesque itself is sometimes considered female drag, performed by females (reflected in The Garter Girls’ desire to explore the artifice of gender). However, sex columnist and queer culture writer Dan Savage has criticized burlesque for also falling into the same traps that drag fell into decades earlier:

As the [drag] scene boomed, the half talents and the opportunists poured in. Soon there were too many shows and too many queens, and a lot of it was crap. The barrier to entry was simply too low: *A guy just had to be willing to put on a dress.* When audiences caught on—when they finally admitted to



Raven Virginia.

Photo by Patricia Rose Photography, [patriciarosephotography.com](http://patriciarosephotography.com)

themselves that they were watching an awful lot of crap—the drag bubble burst and the audiences disappeared. The drag scene limps along to this day, a poorly made-up shadow of its former self. While attending burlesque shows, I’ve detected some of the same weaknesses that led to the downfall of drag. There’s the same inflated sense of cultural importance, the same hunger for attention and affirmation that is sometimes confused with talent, the too-low barrier to entry: *A girl just has to be willing to take off a dress.*

Savage acknowledges that burlesque is at the height of its popularity, but also warns that a burlesque scene “that’s too supportive and uncritical can become incestuous and closed when performers stop doing it for the audiences and only do it for each other,” a trap of which Raven is also cautious. Savage warns that the burlesque formula is overused—“Women trot out in dresses, remove their satin gloves, their dresses, we see their tits, and NEXT!”—and that predictability is the downfall of a variety show.

Perhaps the relative youth of the burlesque revival, paired with its overnight popularity, has bred a community of performers who are not held up to a consistent standard of quality. If so, misperceptions of exactly what constitutes good burlesque may be easy to form. In the handful of burlesque shows I have attended in the last four years, I too have noticed that, while most performers adhere to a particular structure of striptease (the order in which they take off their costume pieces), the way they strip varies greatly. While some dancers employ the self-reflexive, satiric, and witty methodology characterized by neo-burlesque, others simply perform a tease to music. Does this reflect the value of variety in a burlesque revue, or simply a variation in talent?



Raven points out that not all revival burlesque falls into the postmodern, neo-burlesque style. Also encompassed in the revival is “classic burlesque,” a nostalgic form that pays homage to the style of early burlesque, the same burlesque that eventually (d) evolved into exotic dance. Thus, it may be more difficult to identify the differences between a classic burlesque number and exotic dance than for neo-burlesque, which has the benefit of an additional identifier: a message. Complicating matters further, exotic dancers in Alberta are governed by the same rules as burlesque performers, and as such, are prohibited by the AGLC nudity policy from giving lap dances or interacting with the audience to earn tips. Instead, many exotic dancers in Calgary seem to focus on choreographing athletic, acrobatic, and even artistic acts that more closely resemble burlesque than the lap or table dancing performed in other jurisdictions. Perhaps it is possible that exotic dance in Calgary borrows more from burlesque than vice versa.

If it is true that a community-wide artistic standard of quality has not been set, it is also true that there are few avenues for artistic evaluation in the burlesque community. Burlesque classes are available, certainly, but like many artistic subcultures, burlesque values a DIY mentality (Murphy); after completion of classes, performers are generally expected to sew their own costumes, choreograph their own pieces, and self-assess their performances. There are no directors, no choreographers, and little room for peer evaluation. “If we want feedback, we ask for it from each other,” says Raven, but “it’s up to the individual performer to seek it.” Raven also points out that theatre reviewers do not attend or critique burlesque performances: “We want them to, but they won’t come!”

Even the educational resources available focus mostly on striptease style, rather than content and structure. Jo Weldon’s *Burlesque Handbook* focuses mostly on stripping technique, costume construction, music choice, “getting a gimmick,” and finding “what makes you special,” with only a short chapter on finding inspiration for content. Burlesque classes taught to the public are often focused more on exercise and burlesque style than on the incorporation of satire or commentary into a number.

With so little support to help performers reach a standard of quality or to find the thematic content that differentiates the form from exotic dancing, it is difficult for new or seasoned performers to improve. Raven suggests that burlesque festivals, by virtue of being curated events, set the bar for what good burlesque looks like, but she also points out that, unfortunately, not all performers are able to travel to these festivals. The best way for the burlesque community to improve, she suggests, is to see more work. As such, Raven has started her own revue, the Buxom Burlesque. This revue features two seasoned professionals from the international stage performing alongside two relative newcomers, with the aim of exposing new performers to a variety of high-quality burlesque acts and a hands-on education.

## Dressing Up to Dress Down

That Calgary burlesque has been saddled with the “nude entertainment” label may seem a symbolic or even semantic issue. However, by defining burlesque as nude entertainment, the AGLC has effectively placed a number of extremely limiting restrictions on the art form itself, potentially pushing burlesque performers even further into the realm of exotic dance.

The AGLC’s crackdown on burlesque began as a result of a minor liquor-licensing mistake, which, though rectified immediately, had the effect of drawing the AGLC’s attention to burlesque performance. Shortly after, the AGLC informed the burlesque community that they were considered “nude entertainment” under the AGLC policy—despite the fact that burlesque performers are never entirely nude—and would be expected to conform to the policy if they wished to continue performing or risk a fine.

According to the AGLC, “‘Nude’ means the exposure of genitals (male or female) and/or breasts (female), whether the person is fully or partially clothed. These body parts are considered exposed if covered only by paint or another non-fabric substance.” Because The Garter Girls adhere to the burlesque convention of wearing fabric nipple pasties or tassels—the same pasties and tassels that have been used to skirt nudity laws for a hundred years—Raven was convinced that their performances conformed to policy. The AGLC disagreed, sending her more specific details that do not appear in the public written policy. Raven explains that according to the new details, “both sides [of the breast] and under and the nipple and the areola must be covered by the fabric. It can be flesh-coloured. You can see through it, but you can’t see the nipple.” Raven, The Garter Girls, and all other burlesque performers in Calgary were faced with a choice: wear more clothes or operate under the “nude entertainment” policy.

The effects the nude entertainment policy would have on burlesque performance are not insignificant. According to the policy, nude entertainers “must not have physical contact of any kind with licensee staff or patrons,” and “during a performance, neither patrons nor entertainers may enter the one (1) metre separation between the stage/dance floor and the patron seating area.” A frequent component of a Garter Girls’ Burly-Q Revue involves bringing audience members on stage for an audience-interaction component; in one performance, I watched three audience volunteers try to “shake their booty” hard enough to dislodge three ping pong balls trapped in an empty Kleenex box strapped to their backs.

Further, nude entertainers must perform independently of each other; they may not make physical contact with each other, and two or more nude entertainers may only perform at the same time if they stay one metre apart at all times (whether clothed or nude). This regulation would prevent group numbers, kick-lines, interaction with MCs, and dance duos, including Raven Virginia’s celebrated Star Trek parody, in which she fights, dances, and strips with a Gorn. This same piece, which toured to the Vancouver Burlesque Festival, would also violate the policy that prohibits “real or simulated acts of violence.”

Other regulations forbid “the use of props or devices of a sexual nature or which have a sexual connotation,” “insertion of objects into, or extraction of object from the body of an entertainer,” or “the use of animals, birds or reptiles.” Since props factor heavily into burlesque performance, usually as comedic capital, adhering to this policy would prevent The Garter Girls from performing the majority of numbers in their repertoire, as well as limiting them to performing in venues licensed for nude entertainment. To adhere to the policy would, ironically, limit the girls to solo strip numbers, even further relegating their performances to the realm of exotic dancing.

To avoid compliance with the nudity policy, Raven and her ensemble members needed to ensure they were never “nude” as



Raven Virginia dances with a Gorn in her Star Trek parody. The Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas.

Photo by Monty Leman, lemanphoto.com/

defined by the AGLC. The simple solution was to strip down to a bra instead of pasties, thus covering the sides of their breasts as requested. “We have added flesh-coloured bras with pasties on top,” says Raven, “just like what exotic dancers used to wear back when toplessness was completely illegal. So we’re talking about doing things that were required of women in the 20s and 30s, but we’re doing [them] in 2012.” She also points out that the language of the nudity policy specifically states that only female performers must cover their breasts. Apart from the inherent sexism in the statement, she points out the language, along with the AGLC’s definitions of gender, would allow a male-to-female transsexual who has received breast implants (but not yet removed the penis) to go completely topless.

## Conclusion

Interestingly, the AGLC regulations that initiated the controversy exist in similar forms across the country. In Manitoba, the *Licensee Field Manual* details performance limitations for “adult entertainment” nearly identical to those listed by the AGLC. Winnipeg’s Miss La Muse has observed a similar crackdown in her community, and like Raven, wants to see the definition of nudity changed. “The biggest issue is that it is biased against women,” says La Muse, referring to the fact that only exposed breasts on females are considered nude. “The definition needs to be changed to just exposure of genitalia.” Raven and La Muse also point out that they have had no difficulty performing in other cities, like Toronto, Vancouver, and even Edmonton, which is technically governed by the same AGLC regulations as Calgary.

Though The Garter Girls and other burlesque ensembles in Calgary have submitted to censorship, there have been some positive results. As mentioned above, the climax of the striptease (and of the story, when one exists) occurs when the last item of clothing has been dropped and the pasties are revealed. However, since this

reveal is no longer possible for Calgary burlesque performers, they have had to look for new ways to add punch to their narrative:

What’s great is that as soon as we ended up wearing a little bit more clothing, we found that we started to get more risqué. Which is ironic, right? [...] We had been defending and defending and defending our art form, right, so we actually started to feel some real pressure to create some really amazing stuff. So that was there. But also it allowed us the freedom to do more duets or group numbers that had a more sexualized content. (Virginia)

Raven has also found that this new limitation on their art has forced them to be more creative in the construction of their numbers: “It has improved our performances. And I think really it was just that we stopped thinking about being so formulaic or thinking within our burlesque formula and we started thinking outside of it.” By provoking Calgary burlesque performers to reconsider what defines their art and prompting them to think outside the narrative box, the AGLC may have inadvertently sparked a positive shift within the community. Leaders like Raven Virginia who are undaunted by, and even interested in, taking inspiration from the new limitations to their form now have license to redefine their art as they see it and, potentially, to reposition it in territory far away from the misperceptions and stigmas that link it with exotic dance. Now there is room for play, because now, a girl has to be willing to do more than just take off a dress.

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# Are You Staring at the Size of My Gimmick? Applying Burlesque Conventions to a Different Anatomy

by Jay Whitehead

*The plan was to apply traditional burlesque tropes to male bodies, but would the tropes hold water if the bodies contained different bits?*

As an out-of-work Toronto actor, when I was first approached by theatre artists Johnnie Walker and Benjamin Paley asking if I'd like to participate in a new theatre project they were concocting, I was flattered, delighted, and hastened to set up a meeting with them. When I learned that the project involved becoming a member of a hypothetical and experimental troupe of all-male burlesque performers, I was confused. I was certainly no prude, but up to that point in life my understanding of the burlesque world consisted of a brief stint playing the long-suffering Herbie in a college production of the musical *Gypsy*. And my understanding of male contributions to the old bump-and-grind format were of the slightly less-classy variety. I was somewhat acquainted with the world of male stripping, like the men of Chippendales dressed down to sequined g-strings; similarly, as a gay man, I had been exposed to seedy gay bars where muscle-bound men with assumed names like Ramón danced routines wearing little more than the occasional foreskin. Sitting across the table from Johnnie and Ben in that Kensington Market café, it was a stretch for me to place myself in the world of either *Gypsy* Rose Lee or in the dingy basement of Boyztown. I wasn't certain where on this spectrum from tease to torrid a "boylesque" troupe would fit. But I was intrigued. As the title character in *Gypsy* learns, "you gotta get a gimmick" (Sondheim). While I was certain that we had several "gimmicks" in our troop, I wasn't certain whether a burlesque audience wanted to see them, or if we would be judged solely by their size.

I signed up, excited, yet trepidatious to participate in the experiment that would be called Boylesque TO. The group assembled was diverse, physically and racially. My serious lack of understanding of the burlesque world is best evidenced by the fact that in my audition for the troupe, I neglected to include any ele-

ment of a strip tease. The routine ended as fully clothed as it had begun, missing the point entirely.

Benjamin Paley (a.k.a. James and the Giant Pasty) recalls that in those initial meetings he asked "everyone [in the troupe] if they had seen a burlesque show before and only two or three had. [...] We were all fairly young and naïve when we started and we were kind of building the art of stripping from scratch [from] the little we knew of it." Many of those involved in the troupe in the early stages did not even come from a performance background and held day jobs in "respectable" fields. We all had our reasons for signing on, ranging from exhibitionistic tendencies, to a desire to combat gendered expectations, to simply wanting to perform, but, as Walker (a.k.a. Ginger Darling) says, "We were still figuring out what it meant to be a male burlesque troupe and what kind of work we could possibly do." The plan, as I understood it, was to apply traditional burlesque tropes to male bodies, but would the tropes hold water if the bodies contained different bits? And the question I began asking myself was identical to the one asked by friends when told of my new métier: "Do you show your penis?"

If the goal in forming the troupe was, as Walker states, "to show audiences not only that men could do burlesque, but that men could be sexy," then would our cause be helped or hindered by revealing our genitals? Boylesque TO member Christopher Hayden (a.k.a. Bruin Pounder) counters that revealing the full package in the context of burlesque is unnecessary, because "women don't typically show their vaginas or nipples in burlesque." Furthermore, as performer Dew Lily adds, "burlesque is about the tease" more than the pay off. This is, in fact, true historically and harkens back to "the Minsky's raid days when it was illegal to show bare breasts on stage [...] and pasties were a loophole" (Walker).



L to R: Bruin Pounder, Mahogany Storm, Wrong Note Rusty, James and the Giant Pasty, Dew Lily, Dick Dubois, Ginger Darling, and Corey Swelling.  
Photo by Greg Wong

For me, though, this comparison at the onset of my burlesque career seemed unfair given the contrasting cultural perceptions of opposite sex bodies. Certainly there are fewer private areas on a male's body than on a female's, and the baring of our breasts, save the nipples, hardly seemed congruent with a female performer doing the same. If we were to apply these conventions to our male bodies, then perhaps the revealing of our members' members was the proverbial "tat" to the female "tit."

With buttocks being more or less unisexual in shape, function, and social appropriateness (discussions of gendered relationships to the anal cavity aside), the penis, then, for male performers, is the only bodily protuberance exclusively at our disposal.

Given the level of popular fascination with the organ, including staged displays of "genital origami" in the smash stage show *Puppetry of the Penis* (Stephens 94), in the hit off-Broadway spectacle *Naked Boys Singing*, wherein the "singing" is billed only after the promise of male nudity, and a recent production of Peter Shaffer's *Equus* that saw Daniel Radcliffe's penis get more media attention than the actor himself (Monks 99), would our efforts be anything more than a silly curiosity to garner laughter and judgment? As Walker recalls, the goal was indeed to show audiences "that men [like us] could be sexy," but that seemed problematic if we were setting ourselves up to be the butt of penis jokes.

Male anatomy, and penises in particular, are used in pop culture today for one of two reasons it seems: comedy and shock, and often both simultaneously. It is one of this generation's remaining taboos. It is a taboo that is often disarmed with dismissive laughter. Radcliffe's recent appearance in London and on Broadway, for example, inspired some audience members to quip that one would "need binoculars" to fully enjoy the performance, mocking the perceived smallness of the actor's phallus and ignoring the core of his acting work (qtd. in Monks 99). In the movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008) male nudity is used as a comedic device to highlight how pathetic and low one character has become as he drops his towel while being dumped by his (much more conventionally

attractive) girlfriend. The actor, Jason Segel, stands naked, pale, lumpy, and flaccid; he drops the towel and the audience gasps in horror, he cries effeminately and the audience laughs, relieved at having permission to ridicule.

Contrastingly, the touted onscreen appearance of actor Michael Fassbender in the film *Shame* (2011) uses the convention of full frontal male nudity as a symbol for a character's untethered sexual appetites. It is used to highlight the depravity of an over-sexed character and is meant to repel us. Fassbender was an acting awards favourite for his bravery in the role; however, George Clooney, winning a Golden Globe over Fassbender that year, deflated his performance entirely, declaring from the podium that Fassbender "could play golf [...] with his hands behind his back," returning the offending member to its expected place behind comedic lines. This time an actor's penis was the butt of another size joke, but at the other end of the spectrum. Although more of a cultural compliment when compared to comments made at Radcliffe's expense, the body part is still held jokingly at arm's length as an object of juvenility or shame, stripped of its cultural power once revealed. It is evidence of what Elizabeth Stephens calls "spectacularization of the penis, in which it becomes visible only to be constituted as an object of ridicule or amusement, [and] is significant in that it represents anxieties about the role of the penis in the construction of masculinity" (94).

These high-profile examples of full frontal male nudity illustrate psychoanalytic theorist Kaja Silverman's ideas of male subjectivity and are contrary to what she terms "the dominant fiction," wherein "the ideology of Western masculinity calls upon the male subject to see himself only through the images of an unimpaired masculinity" or a "conventional masculinity that is predicated upon the denial of Lacanian castration" (qtd. in Savoy 3). Says Richard Dyer, "a naked body is a vulnerable body. [...] Clothes are bearers of prestige [and] status" (263). Men in a patriarchal western culture who remove their clothing publicly place themselves in a position of subjection since "the exposed [...] male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of [...] male power" (Dyer 262–263). Castration, then, occurs through revealing the biological phallus, or penis, in that it exposes "the gap between what [a man] immediately is and the symbolic title which confers on [him] a certain status or authority" (Žižek 17). Fassbender, Radcliffe, and Segel, then, have subjected themselves to this type of Lacanian castration by revealing the actuality of their biology, betraying the power that society otherwise bestows upon them as men since "why should people who look like that—so unimpressive, so like others—have so much power?" (Dyer 263).

And, for my part, as a gay-identified man, I had already surrendered some of my societal advantage as a man through effeminate behaviour. Could I afford to lose any more? Having just completed MFA training in acting, wherein my "frivolous" gay sensibilities and unmasculine behaviours, including a narrow and "swishy" gait, a nasal vocal quality, and general excitability, were by any means necessary stripped from me by faculty, I was reluctant at the time to sign on for any performance style that would make a mockery of my actor's body. In addition, I did not perceive myself as a sex symbol and my body type was, at best, average by pop cultural standards. I worried that, as a skinny, pale man with what I estimated was an average endowment, the best I could hope



for were laughs that might strip me not only of my literal clothes, but also of my dignity.

My fear was evidence of a very binary understanding of the possibility of gendered representation and interpretations of masculinity in burlesque performance, and an underestimation of the body-positive culture that surrounds the burlesque community in Toronto. I was, in fact, feeding into the culture of phallic fixation by doing it myself as I anticipated future performances. As men are wont to do, I became phallogocentric, completely ignoring the option of using burlesque to blur systemic gender norms and make statements not only about my physicality as a man but also about my experience in a queer body (thereby subverting masculine expectations).

Returning to a Lacanian read of the situation, perhaps, with my queer body and my uniquely queer relationship to my physical self, I had the opportunity to regain power by highlighting these characteristics in myself with an external phallus worn, as Žižek suggests, as “a mask which I [could] put on in the same way a king or judge puts on his insignia.” This kind of “symbolic castration” might allow me to find power in an external phallus “which gets attached to my body, without ever becoming its organic part,” rather than losing power through the perceived weakness and social hilarity of the phallus as an attached organ of insemination (Žižek 17). I had been concentrating on our dissimilarity from burlesque culture as men and what that might say about my own masculinity rather than seeking to be immersed in it as a queer-identified man. I was focusing too much on what Boylesque TO needed to offer that was different, rather than embracing the notion that by applying the sameness of their conventions to our biological otherness, we were already exploring important territory.

Contrary to the famous admonition by Mama Rose in *Gypsy* to “make ‘em beg for more, and then don’t give it to them” (Laurents 36), many burlesque artists have pushed and continue to push the boundaries of burlesque performance. There are many spectators now who fully expect the full frontal experience in reaction to the abundance of graphic nudity offered online, or perhaps as a swing away from convention to counter a perceived puritan swing further right by conservatives, or perhaps simply to sell more seats. “I’ve been told by producers that I had to expose my ass at the very least if not [the] Full Monty,” confesses Lily; so the pressure does exist even in the world of traditional burlesque. And Paley admits that he has “seen performances [...] where men show their penises,” and while many performers do so in efforts to move the art form forward, “it [is] always a bit shocking in a burlesque context.” If boylesque performers mean to take the advice of Mama Rose and adhere to the conventional tropes of the genre, then perhaps it is “better to tease” (Paley). Burlesque, really, has always been “about [...] fabulous costumes and the promise of nudity, which is even more tantalizing if you never quite get it” (Walker). Monks adds that “the erotic is established by strip-tease because it ensures that the performer [...] is absorbed in the task of undressing” rather than actually being undressed (106). By moving forward with these ideas in mind, Boylesque TO aimed to prove that “boylesquers [could] make art that is sexy, art that disrupts the assumption that a penis is the only sexual part of a man” (Hayden). We could move forward by applying existing female conventions to our male bodies without the pressure to



Bolonia Wry and Angel Whiteside set up the Mormon missionary routine.  
Photo by Greg Wong



Bolonia Wry and Angel Whiteside: The big reveal.  
Photo by Greg Wong



L to R: Dew Lily, Bruin Pounder, James and the Giant Pasty, Angel Whiteside, and Man Chyna lampoon the 2008 Toronto Transit Commission Strike.

Photo by Greg Wong



L to R: Bruin Pounder, James and the Giant Pasty, Mahogany Storm, and Angel Whiteside disrobe the men of the TTC.

Photo by Greg Wong

reinvent the art form simply because of our anatomy. While such justifications might, to some, appear to do little more than uphold the status quo, keeping certain taboos firmly in place, they did put my fears of emasculation to rest at the start of my boylesque career.

Despite our admitted naiveté, we pressed forward in those early months, booking the Gladstone Hotel Ballroom and creating characters and routines for our debut performance, which was to be titled *Boy oh Boy!* We adopted handles at that point. Ginger Darling, Bruin Pounder, James and The Giant Pasty, and Dew Lily were joined by Mahogany Storm, Man Chyna, Bolonia Wry (our lone female, and ironically our only member without a “baloney”), and myself: Angel Whiteside. Borrowing from long-standing burlesque tradition, we adopted names that were both direct and subversive. Ginger Darling, for example, was an adorable redhead, Bruin Pounder a confessed bear, James and the Giant Pasty (a take on the popular children’s novel *James and the Giant Peach*) fashioned a pouch-like “pasty” that covered his penis and scrotum and became his trademark. (The use of the word “giant” in his name effectively subjugated any fears of size-anxiety by blatantly drawing attention to it.) And by naming myself Angel Whiteside, I intended to highlight, and therefore disarm, both my religious background and my own acknowledgement of my pallid posterior, both of which figured heavily in what would become my signature act as a Mormon missionary willing to do anything to give away a *Book of Mormon*.

It was in fact this element of character that initially helped me to begin getting over my earlier body issues. As its theme, *Boy oh Boy!* borrowed from traditional male archetypes, and we were charged with creating routines centred around characters that represented average men, with average jobs. With *Boy oh Boy!*, the troupe was making an attempt at “exploring the idea of sensualizing or fetishizing the men you’d see every day [...]—the Starbucks barista, The TTC worker” (Norwich). It was here that my Mormon missionary and flight attendant characters were introduced, and they both fed into my original fears that relying too heavily on comedy would further highlight my own perceived shortcomings as a sexualized individual. Walker states, “It is something you hear a lot—that female burlesque is about being sexy [or] beautiful and male burlesque is about laughing at male bodies.” However,



Angel Whiteside strips in both languages as an Air Canada Flight Attendant.

Photo by Greg Wong

through embracing these camp characters, the aspect of role play, the disrobing of typical male archetypes (even traditional authority figures), and the literal stripping of each one’s power by way of removing their clothing (a proverbial cutting of the biblical Sampson’s hair), I began to discover an honest sense of my own sexiness.

It is also important to note that humour and sexiness are not necessarily inherently contrary ideas. And here, again, I had fallen prey to binary interpretations of the elements of burlesque performance and not the variety of subversive contradictions possible





James and the Giant Pasty performs.  
Photo by Greg Wong

within it. Sex and sexual exploration are most often intended to be pleasurable, or fun, so can sex not also be funny? “Both [male and female] bodies have hilarious things about them,” and by ignoring the possibility of this human truth, perhaps bodies cease to be sexy at all in the absence of humour (Hayden). And burlesque, at the extreme end of this notion is “cheeky, it’s silly, it’s a tease, and you were laughing so much you didn’t even realize you had a boner” (Walker). By taking my self, my sexuality, and my body so seri-



Bruin Pounder and Man Chyna perform.  
Photo by Greg Wong

aside with triumphant flair. The character was big, bold, campy, and even, dare I say, super gay. I was obviously playing a male character, but did not hide the fact that my version of masculinity was less about well-toned muscles than it was about a well-placed bump and grind. Finally, my character’s urgent desire to give away his *Book of Mormon* ultimately ended in his being left on stage with nothing on but that book to cover the phallus. I did stay true to the tropes of burlesque, leaving that one part of my anatomy to the audience’s imagination, thereby, perhaps cowardly, saving myself and my penis from the mockery I earlier anticipated; however, I was not in the least offended, as I made my hasty exit, when one of the event’s emcees made a joke of my vibrantly pale buttocks. That’s where Angel Whiteside got his name after all. Besides, the audience laughed, and that made me feel sexy.

While, presently, I am separated from Boylesque TO by two provinces and too many kilometers, I follow the continued evolution of my former castmates as a legitimate troupe of burlesque performers in the now thriving Toronto burlesque community. The company continues to evolve and make beautiful art and powerful commentary on the nature of sex, masculinity, and gender by breaking entrenched expectations in performance. The boys of Boylesque TO, which now include Wrong Note Rusty, Corey Swelling, and Mickey D. Liscious, continue to create waves and gain exposure. As Morgan Norwich notes, “The professionalism of the dancers has come a long way, with many of the guys training

*The company continues to evolve and make beautiful art and powerful commentary on the nature of sex, masculinity, and gender by breaking entrenched expectations in performance.*

ously, and by approaching a career in burlesque with such gravity, I was perhaps omitting the potentially sexiest thing about myself: the ability to make others laugh.

My early explorations in the world of Boylesque TO culminated at the Toronto International Burlesque Festival, where I had been invited to perform my Mormon missionary routine. The number was the embodiment of all things I had questioned and feared at the onset of my boylesque journey but had since cast

in [traditionally female] forms like pole dance, fan dance, [and] aerial silks [...]” (Norwich). And while the occasional costume malfunction may reveal a smallish phallus, and though my white backside or Bruin Pounder’s “curvy” figure may incite titters of laughter, ultimately through facing the myth of masculinity head on, by embracing and celebrating the reality of male bodies and exploring them through a traditionally female performance style, Boylesque TO continues to challenge audiences and performers, including myself, to “celebrate what they [can] find sexy about themselves and to flaunt it!” (Hayden).

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# Neo-Burlesque and the Resurgence of Roller Derby: Empowerment, Play, and Community

by David Owen

*A good thing about burlesque is that a wide variety of body types, shapes, and sizes are welcomed on stage—and all are considered sexy. I think that can be very empowering and reassuring to female audience members to see a more varied celebration of female sexuality.*

—Dahlia Darling/Lulu Cthulhu

*Any type of woman can be successful if she knows herself and loves her body. The only thing stopping you from being the best is your attitude. There is no cookie-cutter shape that makes for a perfect derby player.*

—Santa Muerte, Captain of the Gore Gore Roller Girls



Two jammers make their way through the pack in a Toronto roller derby bout between the Gore Gore Rollergirls and the Smoke City Betties. May 29, 2010.

Photo by Kevin Konnyu



Mz Kitty DeMure on the phone.  
Photo by MOPO Art

Having watched both burlesque shows and derby bouts across Canada, I have noticed not only similarities in the crowds but also parallels in the interactions between the performers/athletes and the audiences. The similarities go deeper than a superficial affection for tattoos, rockabilly music, and cupcakes: I discovered a very committed community around these events, expressing more than simple admiration for the entertainment. In both contemporary burlesque and roller derby, there is a two-way communication between the audience (both male and female) and the performers/athletes that celebrates what the women (and sometimes men) on stage and on the track are doing. I conducted interviews and e-mail exchanges with several performers: Mz Kitty DeMure (Hamilton), Sassy Ray (Kitchener-Waterloo), Red Herring (Toronto), and Miss Helvetica Bold (Ottawa); and several derby players: Mamasita Muerte (Calgary), Santa Muerte (Toronto), and Lulu Cthulhu/Dahlia Darling (Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, both a retired derby player and burlesque performer). I asked them similar

*Even individual acts that deal with serious issues of body image, eating disorders, or self-esteem do so in a light-hearted manner where everything seems ultimately better by throwing off inhibitions (and clothing).*

questions regarding their perceived relationship with the audience and what their activity says to women regarding empowerment, sexual expression, and gender roles. I intend to demonstrate that there is a sense of community between performers and audience, and that the art form is not about monetary gain or exclusively for the pleasure of men. I will then draw parallels to roller derby as another outlet for an audience of both women and men, paying particular attention to the acceptance of a wide range of body types, the creation of community, and a celebration of strength and skill not traditionally associated with women.

Let me say upfront that I am writing from the perspective of a straight man. With that said, attending burlesque and derby events feels markedly different for me from other forms of entertainment (like stripping) where women are presented for a consumptive male gaze—one that feels like I am taking something from the performer and/or can judge from a distance. At burlesque and derby events, I feel I play an important part through the interaction with the performers and that I am not only welcome but playfully encouraged to admire the participants and what they do. I feel like I am part of a diverse community.

### Neo-burlesque vs. Historical Burlesque

Burlesque is not stripping. The performers are never completely naked, and the show is more about the tease and the art of the reveal than about simple exposure. Michelle Carr is a major voice in the neo-burlesque movement and founder of LA's Velvet Hammer Burlesque Troupe. She says in her book about her experience at the Velvet Hammer that stripping and burlesque differ in fundamental ways:

Looking back, burlesque was nothing at all like today's cynical "boners for dollars" stripping. [...] True burlesque shows were carefully staged extravaganzas with elaborate costuming, chorus girls, acrobats, comedians, clowns, candy butchers, cigarette girls and full orchestras, presented in sumptuously voluptuous proscenium theatres. Burlesque was vaudevillian and dazzlingly sexy, carnal and romantic with a generous lashing of subversive, biting political satire. (Carr 3)

Carr's work at the Velvet Hammer during the 1990s was highly influential in the revitalization of burlesque but with some notable differences. According to Jo Weldon, founder of the New York School of Burlesque, "When the word *burlesque* is used as a verb, certainly it's understood to mean that exaggeration and parody are being used; however, for nearly one hundred years, *burlesque* as a noun has referred to shows that contain variety, comedy, and girlie numbers as well" (10). In recent productions like Nerd Girl Burlesque's *Book Club Burlesque*, featuring situations from famous literary sources; Red Herring Production's *Babes in Space the Sequel: The Wrath of Thong*, featuring Star Wars vs. Star Trek scenarios; and the DeMure Productions' show, *Stories for Grown-ups: A Burlesque Tribute to Dr. Seuss*, the parody aspect of neo-burlesque is highly important.

Even individual acts that deal with serious issues of body image, eating disorders, or self-esteem do so in a light-hearted manner where everything seems ultimately better by throwing off inhibitions (and clothing). In Maria Irene Fornes's play *Fefu and Her Friends*, Emma says, "How can business men and women stand in a room and discuss business without even one reference to their genitals? I mean everybody has them. They just pretend they don't" (Fornes 19). It seems burlesque is a realization of Emma's question and takes every opportunity to refer to the body's erogenous zones. Elinor Fuchs, in her book *The Death of Character*, refers to this same line in Fornes's play: "Emma wants to stand in a room discussing her genitals as well as business, she is contemplating not a mere breach of manners but an act of political anarchism that, if generally adopted, would lead to the collapse of business, family, and state" (125). Burlesque not only refers to those normally hidden parts of the body, but also to the social trappings associ-





Mz Kitty DeMure as Slave Leah from *Babes in Space*.  
Photo by Angela McConnell, photographybyangelaconnell.com



Mz Kitty DeMure posing with feathers from *Old Hollywood Sinema*.  
Photo by Angela McConnell, photographybyangelaconnell.com

ated with them and how they are used in proper society. Through sexual parody, the unspoken assumptions regarding gender, sexual expression, and definitions of beauty are not only exposed but exploded. In *New Burlesque*, Cecile Camart says,

New burlesque could be seen as replaying the history of male perspective in light of gender studies. There is no dominant male structure behind these shows, and the full social and economic autonomy of these women is completely unlike the commercial striptease that exists in other spheres today. Moral and physical integrity is preserved. Burlesque striptease does not attain total nudity. The pleasure and energy of “playing” a character and taking on a different identity are predominant. (84)

Kaitlyn Regehr, a PhD candidate at King’s College London studying burlesque and host of the show *Re-Vamped*, explains in an interview that historical burlesque performers “are women who went into it to make money whereas a lot of neo-burlesque performers are coming out of an arts community and are doing it because they enjoy the community—because they want to invert different gender stereotypes.” Regehr illustrates the difference this way:

I saw a performance at the Mod Club where a woman had a television set on her head and the cord of the television set

was inserted into her, and yeah, that was like edgy and cool—so sitting next to a woman who danced during the 1950s who was like sorry, how is this burlesque? Completely confused. And I thought that was such an interesting moment to see [...] the burlesque resurgence is wonderful but it is a very different movement from what was happening, you know, 50 years ago.

*Part of the attraction of roller derby is that it creates a space in which women encourage one another to be everything that society tells them not to be.*

Burlesque is not simply an exposure of skin for a male gaze but is a politically and sexually charged parody of societal norms presented to a diverse and increasingly sophisticated audience. I enjoy the titillation as well as the artistry and athleticism of the performers but having attended several shows where men were the minority in the audience, it is clear to me there is a strong homosocial and queer appeal as well. The fact that most shows

also include one or two male performers and the codification of the performance is the same—we are encouraged to enjoy their performance the same way—suggests all patriarchal rules are off in the liminal space. Dahlia Darling says, “There’s a classiness to burlesque performers—that in withholding full nudity, burlesque is more powerful, more empowering, more titillating instead of pornographic or debasing.”

## Interactivity

Neo-burlesque performances are highly interactive. The performer is continually in communication with the audience through eye contact, performer-initiated physical contact, and invited audible response. The performer is not an object without agency exposed for consumption but a thinking, reacting, and communicating subject calling the shots—even to the point of withholding the reveal if the audience doesn’t respond adequately. The performer is very self-aware of her (or his) role as the one in charge and how she (or he) casts the audience in their role to respond as prompted and, essentially, to complete the performance. In an interview, Mz Kitty DeMure explained her relationship to the audience this way:

It’s not so much a specific kind of attention, it’s more the interaction with the audience, it’s the power I have over them that—perfect example: I was in a show one time at Stratford and it was to help raise money for the veterans and I was doing my feather/fan routine—have you seen that one? Well [in] that routine I have giant white fan feathers and at one point I’m bent completely over and I’ve got them up behind me and I just looked up at the audience. I don’t even know what look I gave them but I gave them this look and they just went nuts and that was like, wow, I’m completely controlling you guys. It’s that feeling, that interaction, that, you know, I’m hooked on it. It’s an addiction. It really is—power.

Sassy Ray, a burlesque performer based in Kitchener-Waterloo, wrote to me that she always makes “a point of involving my audience in some way, winking at individual spectators, sitting on laps, wrapping my boa around a front row patron, letting my gaze linger on each and every face,” and that no matter how gorgeous you are, how flawless your costume is or how well executed your choreography, “if you can’t connect, no one cares.” She continued:

A good performer will always be in control—by showing the audience your confidence, commanding their attention and appreciating and reacting to their praise, you’re giving them permission not only to watch you but to really enjoy watching you. Some people don’t know how to react to the act of watching a stranger disrobe. You need to help them.

For Ray, the role of the performer is not just to entertain but to help the audience know how to respond. Miss Helvetica Bold, based in Ottawa, describes her interaction this way: “I am in control, of course. I love interacting with my audience. I sit on laps, tickle with feathers, share tasty treats [...] Audiences love interaction.” She states that “every good burlesque show has a ‘splash zone’ from where the lucky, enthusiastic few who get to play with the performers watch the show.” Regehr says that “[Neo]-burlesque has created a really safe space in which women can explore their sexuality quite overtly—and we get away from ideas of slut-shaming and we get away from ideas of traditional femininity in which you are modest and you are chaste.” She explains that this

safe space is created “because the community that goes to burlesque shows [is] really in tune with those ideas, typically, and will cheer for you like crazy regardless of how close your body fits in to typical mainstream ideas of beauty,” and that “[Neo]-burlesque doesn’t have the typical male gaze in the same way—in an almost penetrative gaze.”

This safe space is a community space. This is a culture celebrating difference and bravado and encouraging exploration. The performers, mostly, but not all, female, share the stage with comedians telling bawdy jokes with both homo- and heterosexual content, vocalists singing suggestive songs, and even, in some cases, magicians and variety acts, usually featuring adult content. This “safe” zone is for testing boundaries, revealing assumptions, and engaging in adult play. Much of this play resides in exaggerating or crossing gender boundaries. As Jill Dolan says, “sex is empirical, but gender is an interpretation that can only take place within a cultural space” (6). Neo-burlesque works to create a cultural space where gender is open for interpretation and expression of sexuality by diverse bodies is explored and encouraged. With that said, however, Ray has found that “women often remark that I inspire them because I’m not ‘skinny’—that’s wonderful. I’m glad to have a positive effect on women who struggle with body issues and self esteem. But I’d rather have someone appreciate my performance than my body shape.” Similarly Bold has noted that “I feel that there is still a lot of inherent, if not intentional, body-shaming in burlesque. Though there are many men, people of colour, and different body types seen in burlesque, the industry is strongly represented by thin, white women.” Despite the deeper underlying issues, Ray believes there is no single ideal for a burlesque performer. She feels burlesque “represents what most people in society REALLY think about women. There’s room for all of us. We are all really and truly admired for what makes us unique, despite what our culture/other women perpetuate.” Burlesque provides a place to play, at least temporarily, outside the traditional male gaze and outside the accepted gender norms. Red Herring, a Toronto burlesque performer and producer, has noted that “many women become more confident and emotionally resilient through the process of learning burlesque and embodying the stage persona they create for themselves.” This temporary respite, in itself, provides an opportunity to see how flexible society’s rules can be. DeMure explained this sense of play and the effect it has on her audiences this way:

I’ve noticed that since I’ve started performing burlesque I’ve had a lot more—we’ll reference kind of like a BDSM type thing—I’ve had a lot of women approach me saying “I’m so empowered by watching you” but men seem so intimidated. You know? I thought growing up the way I did that I’d have a lot of men be like “yeah baby come here” and that’s not the case; they don’t treat you that way. Once they watch you perform they are very intimidated. It’s almost like they’re subs, you know; they want to come and kneel before you. It’s very interesting. That probably helps me feel empowered too. [...] But women are very vocal, they come right up to you “that was great I wish ...” You get half the people saying “I wish I could do that” and the other half saying “you know, that was great but I couldn’t do it myself but I wish I could”—I think deep down inside everybody wants to be that comfortable in their skin.





Photo of the Gore Gore Rollergirls Roller Derby Team 2013–14.  
Photo by Ashlea Wessel, ashleaw.com

## Parallels to Roller Derby

For me, the sport of roller derby says that as a woman you can truly do anything, and you can BE anything. This started out as a bunch of girls that wanted to play roller derby in Austin, Texas, and it's now an international sensation. [...] It has evolved from a DIY kitschy thing that girls did for fun, into a real sport played by hundreds of thousands of women, men, and juniors. That's pretty inspiring if you ask me. (Mamasita Muerte)

According to Michael Sewall, derby's heyday came in the 1960s and 1970s. He corroborates Mamasita Muerte in that "a small revival gained traction in Austin, Tex., in the early 2000s" and that "today the Women's Flat Track Derby Association has almost 150 leagues, and [...] skaters pick their on-track personae through costumes and, more importantly, derby names that must be approved through an international registry." The revival, like that of burlesque, is due to a strong community of followers who are equally diverse in their body shape, skin colour, lifestyle choices, and gender. Maryam Adrangi says, "part of the attraction of roller derby is that it creates a space in which women encourage one another to be everything that society tells them not to be," and adds, "If women were fully embraced and accepted as strong, powerful, sexual and athletic beings, I don't know if derby would have the kind of revival it is experiencing. It fulfills a need." The need that

Adrangi indicates is one that I feel burlesque is also addressing. Derby provides a safe, supportive environment where women can explore aspects of themselves outside the restrictive parameters of societal norms. Samantha Fraser, Toronto sexpert and author of *Not Your Mother's Playground*, says that the audience for burlesque and derby "feels the same to me. Both audiences are always there to support the performers/athletes. There's a sense of unity within the audience. We are there to let the girls do their thing and entertain us. They run the show and we are lucky to be a part of it." Santa Muerte, Captain of the Gore Gore Roller Girls, feels women can play a full contact sport while still being feminine: "We can play hard and hit hard but don't see how that cannot also be feminine. We are competitive and nurturing to our opponents. We are beautiful and scary. We are more than the sum of our parts when we work together." Lulu Cthulhu, now retired, eloquently supports Santa Muerte's sentiment that being tough on the track does not detract from being feminine. Cthulhu states,

The thing I always loved about derby was the happy interaction it allows between an almost hyper-feminine aesthetic and a very physical sport that celebrates strength, power, aggression—typically "male" traits. That was the most empowering thing about it to me since, as a naturally strong, muscular woman who has a very feminine appearance, what had typically felt like conflicting traits became harmonious traits for me on the track.



Contrasting a hyper-feminine aesthetic with typically “masculine” traits challenges assumptions about gender roles and the definition of femininity. How that challenge is negotiated, however, is not always progressive. As Cthulhu points out, “I can’t count how many times I heard a derby tease about seeing ‘hard hitting girl on girl action.’ You’d never hear a football game described as ‘boy on boy action.’ So I think derby sometimes challenges, sometimes reinforces, the status quo.” However, the fact that gender definitions are being challenged at all is constructive.

Kaitlyn Regehr makes three connections between roller derby and burlesque. The first is the fact they both borrow from a “vintage, specifically fifties iconography, and they use it because [...] those are very recognizable images, they are traditionally feminine images that they can then play with and invert.” The second is that derby players, through the use of costuming and a skate-name, create a character to perform. According to Regehr, “you get to perform this character in the same way you do in burlesque.” Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, burlesque and roller derby are similar in their communities. Regehr believes

That is actually the most important part of the burlesque movement and [also] what is so great about roller derby. [...] You have this community that’s really supportive of any way you want to explore/perform/project your sexuality/your femininity [...] or sexual preference, or, you know, traditional beauty ideals or gender norms. It is a community that allows for questioning and challenging all of those things.

Ray agrees that “burlesque provides a sense of unity and community with other women, which is the first step to making tangible change in how we as women think about our bodies and ourselves.” DeMure says that both the influence of Bettie Page and the tradition of early burlesque opened “a lot of doors for a lot of people to realize, well, she can do it, so can I, right?” She concludes by saying,

Sometimes it just takes that one person. It’s like at the school dance, and nobody wants to dance; it takes that one person to get on the floor and then everyone else packs the floor so that’s pretty much it: that’s a good way to look at it.

I see this as a good summation of the two-way communication—both for support and inspiration—between the women (and men) in the audience and the women (and men) on the stage and on the track.

Burlesque is an art form and roller derby is a sport. Both, however, provide a safe environment before a supportive community to explore and celebrate behaviours that would not otherwise enjoy expression within a mainstream, patriarchal society. Gender is a fluid and constantly negotiated idea. Burlesque and derby *play* with that idea in every provocative performance on stage and every massive hit on the track.

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# Extinguishing the “Temptation of Monetary Inducements”: The State Regulation and Stigmatization of Adult Entertainment Recruiters on Post-secondary Campuses in British Columbia

by Becki Ross and Oralia Gómez-Ramírez

## The Contours of a Moral Panic

In late August 2012, Naomi Yamamoto, then Liberal Minister for Advanced Education in British Columbia, issued an unprecedented directive to all university presidents: post-secondary youth had to be protected from being lured into the “risky” business of adult entertainment.<sup>1</sup> To this end, she strongly recommended “aggressive” recruiters looking to hire exotic dancers be banned from campus job fairs.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, we examine Yamamoto’s plan to regulate, or school, the minds and bodies of post-secondary students enrolled at the province’s colleges and universities, including the University of British Columbia (UBC). We argue that the Liberal Minister’s move to differentiate “appropriate” and “safe” employment from the purportedly perilous behaviour intrinsic to adult entertainment deflects attention from the economic crisis facing most post-secondary students. We contend that exotic dancing is being used as a convenient scapegoat, a bottomless container for fear and anxiety eminently exploitable in the service of moral governance masquerading as state advocacy. Indeed, we interpret Yamamoto’s directive as part of a larger reactionary campaign to conceal persistent economic and sociopolitical inequalities in British Columbia and across Canada.

Recognizing that some recruiters from the sex industry are offering jobs and tuition scholarships, Minister Yamamoto opined, “Students, who often feel new stresses due to new living environments and managing their own affairs for the first time, may be tempted by these monetary inducements” (qtd. in Lajoie A6).

Rather than being recognized as strong, independent, and capable adults, university and college students are portrayed as weak, impressionable children susceptible to nefarious forces of evil. Our research into the coverage of the directive in nationwide media suggests that, in Yamamoto’s view, the *student* is gendered female hence especially vulnerable, much like young white women in British Columbia were imagined in the racist discourse of “yellow peril” as vulnerable to sexual enslavement by Chinese men a century ago (Backhouse). Stripped of the capacity to make their own decisions, female students are cast by the Minister of Advanced Education as innocent, naïve, and foolish dependents in need of state protection and guardianship.

The Minister’s claim that (female) students may be “tempted by [. . .] monetary inducements” rings hollow, as the alleged scourge of temptation obscures financial necessity. A recent study found that students’ employment income is the second most common source, after personal savings, used to pay for postsecondary education in Canada. While enrolment has increased across Canada (Christofides, Hoy, and Yang), almost 50 per cent of full-time students enrolled in CEGEP, community colleges, and universities have combined schooling and paid work during the academic year since the late 1990s—an increase of 25 per cent since the late 1970s (Marshall). Moreover, the same study showed that during the 2009/2010 academic term, female students were more likely than male students to engage in paid work while studying; 90 per cent of all working students, irrespective of gender, were employed

in the service sector, primarily in retail trade and food services (Marshall).

Attending a postsecondary institution is expensive—the costs of tuition, rent, books, food, transportation, and sundry expenses add up. Students need to juggle course work with paid work to make ends meet: rising tuition fees represents one of the principal factors influencing students' decisions to enter the labour force (Christofides, Hoy, and Yang; Peng and Yang). Most part-time employment pays at or near the minimum wage of \$10 per hour (in BC) and estimated earnings per student are approximately \$6,000 per year (Marshall). According to the latest available study by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, students in British Columbia with education-related debt owed an average of \$26,500 upon graduation (PRA 7).

### Already “Working It” in the Sex Industry

Critics of adult industry recruitment on post-secondary campuses point out that the skills required for the job of exotic dancer are not offered at universities and colleges in British Columbia (Luk). However, since 2006 the art of burlesque and the techniques of pole dancing have been marketed every fall to students at UBC through non-credit, six-week courses (Gómez-Ramírez). Advertised with the warning, “There is absolutely no nudity and no experience necessary!,” courses include “Pole Dancing 101,” “Pole Dancing 202,” “Cardio Lapdance,” “Cardio Pole Dancing,” “Cardio Striptease,” “Pussycat Dawls,” and “Burlesque 101,” and are sponsored by the Alma Mater Society’s Minischool.

Some of the participants in striptease, lap dance, and pole dancing training, whether offered at UBC or at commercial fitness studios, graduate and join the revival of burlesque, which has been underway across Canada, the United States, Britain, and Europe for more than fifteen years (Regehr; Ross). Vancouver has been, and remains, a mecca for burlesque experimentation, development, and growth, with an annual spring festival, headlining dancers such as Diamond Minx, Burgandy Brixx, Melody Mangler, Little Woo, and Joanie Gyoza, and the troupes Sweet Soul and VanDolls.

To date, no politician nor university administrator has told undergraduates that they cannot enrol in pole dancing, burlesque, or strippercise classes on the UBC campus, nor join a burlesque show during or after their degree. The double standard held against adult entertainers seems hypocritical given that there is very little to differentiate commercial burlesque from commercial striptease: all performers create costumes and routines, take on a stage name, strut their stuff to sexy music, play with sexual fantasy, tease the audience, and strip down to nudity or near-nudity on stage (Ferreday). While burlesquers earn considerably less money than professional exotic dancers, they aim to (at least) break even by selling show tickets and merchandise, accepting tips, and so on. Had Minister Yamamoto been serious about prohibiting students from engaging in commercial stripping in the fall of 2012, then why not ban strippercise, burlesque, and pole dancing classes on campuses as well? To be consistent, she should have simultaneously banned students’ art practice in studio classes, acting in theatre classes, unpaid internships with publishers or law firms, and journalism assignments because these might lead to professional gigs down the road.



Students enrolled in a “Burlesque 101” class at the University of British Columbia, 2010.

Photo by Alexandra Downing, courtesy of The Ubysey



Diamond Minx at “Kitty Nights,” Biltmore Cabaret, Vancouver, 2013.

Photo by Pinupz and Burlesque

Minister Yamamoto’s blanket condemnation of adult entertainment is an empty gesture that keeps the industry shrouded in secrecy, fuels negative stereotypes about the trade, and intensifies stigma against those who already work in the strip industry. Indeed, a sizeable percentage of students at UBC, and elsewhere, are employed in various sectors of sex-related business—exotic dancing, pornography, the escort business, phone sex, and cyber-



sex—all legitimate work places for adults over the age of eighteen (Trautner and Collett). Rather than easy prey for an unscrupulous club owner, students (and non-students) who choose the sex business—much like massage therapists, hair stylists, or financial advisors—sell their skills, talent, and time (Bruckert and Parent). Despite the widespread perception that no skills are required to carry out jobs in adult entertainment, or that anyone can twirl around a pole, research has consistently shown that exotic dancing demands highly skilled emotional and physical labour, stigma management, financial planning, and careful decision-making about entering, staying in, and exiting the business (Barton; Egan). Though commercial stripping (like most industries) is highly stratified by gender, race/ethnicity, class, and citizenship (Bradley-Engen; Brooks; Law), full-time, top-drawer female exotic dancers tend to earn more money and have more control over their working hours than women who do other service jobs at The Gap, Starbucks, Journey's End motels, Safeway, Scotia Bank, or Home Depot (Ross).

Facing a shortage of exotic dancers for a number of years, the Leopard's Lounge & Broil Strip Club and Cheetah's in Windsor, Ontario, have been offering student dancers \$1,700 per semester for tuition (Clancy). In an interview in July 2012 after the federal government terminated the Exotic Dancers Visa Program,<sup>3</sup> the Leopard's Lounge manager Barry Maroon noted that the club had been recruiting Canadian students for more than twenty years, and that "student dancers were required to maintain a B average in school" (qtd. in Luk A11). In British Columbia, where tuition costs are very high (and not likely to be reduced), a scholarship would help defray education-related costs, especially in Vancouver, North America's most expensive city (Canadian Press). Much like varsity athletes, exotic dancers must be very physically fit, with high levels of muscular strength, flexibility, and aerobic capacity; many enter the business having pursued formal dance and gymnastics training (Barton; Ross). In the competitive sector, marquee dancers work with choreographers, nutritionists, and yoga instructors. Moreover, in the fall of 2012, professional dancers and burlesquers joined forces as members of the International Pole Dance Fitness Association to petition the International Olympic Committee to add "aerial arts" to the official program for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

When Minister Yamamoto declared that work in the adult entertainment business is filled with potential risks, she did not supply empirical evidence of the *actual risks* associated with exotic dancing, nor did she substantiate her inference that work in adult entertainment is, in every instance, riskier than other fields of employment. Across British Columbia, post-secondary students are intimately familiar with the occupational hazards of serving alcohol at campus pubs or downtown nightclubs, as well as planting trees, cleaning toilets, driving cabs, and modelling for fashion photographers. In terms of strip clubs, contemporary research shows that bouncers, club owners, security guards, DJs, booking agents, and club managers invest in the safety and security of exotic dancers (Barton; Egan). In Canada, strip club managers and owners are careful not to hire minors because they do not want to lose their license, incur fines, or be forcibly shut down.

Upon interviewing nineteen retired, Vancouver-based exotic dancers, Becki Ross learned that the work of professional strip-

ping is not intrinsically *dirty* work, or dirtier than cleaning hotel rooms, gutting chickens, dishwashing, or collecting garbage. Rather, exotic dancing is highly stigmatized and sometimes criminalized work. "Good girls" are not supposed to sell sexual arousal or sexual fantasy for a living because of the inevitable stain on their reputation. The strip club, and the female dancers who work in it, have been and continue to be subjected to myriad social and civic controls; indeed, the inhospitable regulatory climate has contributed to club closures (Bruckert and Dufresne; Lewis). In 2010 the government of Iceland banned professional exotic dancing from the nation in response to claims by "feminist" politicians (without empirical support) that degradation and violence were endemic to the industry (Bindel). By contrast, across Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, exotic dancers (and other sex workers) have engineered drives to unionize in order to improve working conditions, pay, and benefits, all while striving to destigmatize and decriminalize their business (Gall; Ross; Warnock and Wheen). While dancers as workers have statutory labour rights in Canada, they have been denied the protection and justice to which they, as citizens, are entitled (Bruckert 68). Minister Yamamoto reinvigorated assumptions and myths about moral contamination that divide women from each other and exacerbate the "whore stigma" imposed on dancers (Tracey).

### Sexual Harassment in "Legitimate" and "Reputable" Workplaces

In her directive, Minister Yamamoto extolled the "safety and security of our province's youth" enrolled at post-secondary institutions across the province. Implicit in this statement is her support for a vast range of prospective employers who have recruited at campus job fairs or advertised their job postings to students attending UBC, including Telus, BC Hydro, Canadian Natural Resources Ltd., Goldcorp, Cactus Club Restaurants, Imperial Oil, ICBC, Scotiabank, Bank of Canada, Shell Canada, Taseko Mines Limited, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Chevron Canada Limited, Integrated Pipeline Projects Canada Ltd., Vancouver Police Department, and the Canadian Armed Forces. However, had the Minister been genuinely concerned about students' well being during and after their studies, she would have prohibited the RCMP from setting up recruitment booths on campuses. In 2012, Corporal Catherine Galliford, a sixteen-year employee of the RCMP, became the first Mountie to sue the force, citing widespread sexual harassment and intimidation in the workplace (Kennedy; "Police Officers"; "RCMP Issues"). Months later, Galliford's legal action inspired a class-action suit by retired RCMP constable Janet Melo on behalf of more than 150 women employed by the RCMP (Goar). Why encourage female university graduates to don the force's iconic red serge, given the tales by female Mounties of suffering in the context of a toxic and punishing work environment?

Were she genuinely committed to shielding female students from harm, Minister Yamamoto should ban fire fighters, police officers, longshore and mining executives, and the armed forces from future recruitment on Canadian college and university campuses. All of these male-dominated careers have proven to be exceedingly dangerous for women who have been, and continue to be, made to feel like unwelcome trespassers. In 2006, veteran

labour mediator Vince Ready concluded that female fire fighters had endured a “juvenile and hostile” climate of sexual harassment at their Fire Rescue Department in Richmond, BC (10). Similarly, in 2009, Ready detailed evidence of “extreme sexual harassment” sustained over many years by female longshore workers at the Vancouver Ports, including “vulgar and offensive” graffiti in women’s washrooms and stories of women being offered money for sex by co-workers or asked by foremen to trade sexual favours for desirable work (Ouston and Dalton). Whether they encounter emotionally, psychologically, and physically unsafe work on the docks, in policing, mining, or fire fighting, women are testifying about their experiences of intense and lingering trauma at the hands of male co-workers and bosses (Slaughter).

If Minister Yamamoto and her governing Liberal party truly cared about the sexual health and safety of young women, her government would not have slashed funding to twenty-three sexual assault centres across the province in 2002. These cuts reinforced the message that education about, prevention of, and treatment for rape and other forms of non-consensual sex are frills in a neo-liberal climate of belt-tightening and fiscal prudence. In 2008, further cuts were made to the remaining victim assistance programs. Five years later, the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia responded to the BC Liberals’ spending priorities: “While the [provincial] budget includes an additional \$5 million to address problem gambling and an additional \$52 million for increased RCMP costs including costs associated with gang activity, there are no increases to ensure victims of domestic and sexual violence have access to life saving support services” (Ending Violence Association). Clearly, ruling state officials are more concerned about rehabilitating the shattered reputation of the RCMP than funding feminist anti-violence organizations that provide front-line counseling and life-saving sociolegal assistance to survivors of sexualized violence, as well as educational campaigns to prevent violence in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

## Sanctimonious Bluster vs. Hardcore Support for Fruitful Futures

Instead of condemning adult entertainment job recruiters and students who work in this industry, the BC Liberal government could offer students partial or full loan forgiveness, elimination or reduction of the interest rate on student loans, more bursaries and grants, increased income for tutorial assistants and students doing co-operative work placements, or a reduction in tuition or the elimination of tuition altogether—a demand made by post-secondary students in Quebec in 2012–2013 and a reality for undergraduates in Sweden (Kilian). The Canadian Federation of Students has calculated the total student debt load across Canada at over \$15 billion (1).

We urge the Ministry of Advanced Education in British Columbia to withdraw its ill-advised and misinformed directive to university and college presidents immediately. Moral intervention under the guise of defending naïve young women against the purportedly inescapable malevolence of adult entertainment reeks of cheap posturing: it does nothing to assist students to achieve their dreams and goals. Until, or if ever, post-secondary enrolment entails free tuition and reduced costs of living, the majority of students will need to balance their studies with work to pay

the bills. Pondering the prospect of exotic dancing, and of tuition subsidized by a strip club, seems like a perfectly rational strategy for young women faced with poorly paid, less flexible alternatives. The hollow platitudes embedded in the BC Liberals’ self-serving directive are sadly reminiscent of early twentieth century social purity campaigns to “rescue” poor, fallen, and wayward women from ruin. More than a century later, the Ministry’s message to university and college presidents in British Columbia reads as a cynical, desperate ploy to exploit fear for political gain and to obfuscate the grave, deepening crush of debt shouldered by post-secondary students.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 In September 2012, Yamamoto was replaced by John Yap. We found no evidence of industry insiders’ intentions to set up job fair booths on any campus in the province.
- 2 Naomi Yamamoto also expressed her agreement with officials at the Vancouver School Board who elected to prohibit recruitment on or near Vancouver public school campuses.
- 3 In the summer of 2012, the federal Conservative government headed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper passed Bill C-38 to disallow temporary visas for “foreign” women to work as exotic dancers in Canada. In the aftermath of this legal change, strip club operators in Ontario complained that dancers were in short supply. See Battagello.
- 4 In 2009, the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia, in partnership with the BC Lions of the Canadian Football League, launched a multiyear campaign, “Be More than a Bystander: Break the Silence on Violence Against Women.”

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# Re-Vamping History: Neo-Burlesque and Historical Tradition

by Alexis Butler

Burlesque emerged in North America in the 1860s as a supremely parodic form that blended feminine sexual display with critical social commentary. While it has come to be practically synonymous with striptease, strip was not actually a part of burlesque until the 1920s. Burlesque has seen such variation in form over its century-and-a-half life that it is problematic to consider it a single or unified genre at all. Neo-burlesque, a movement that emerged in the mid 1990s, provides a compelling site in which to consider this extraordinarily varied historical style because it does not draw from or emulate *one* distinct dramaturgy at all. Considering two performance trajectories, as epitomized by superstar Dita Von Teese and by Toronto collective The Scandelles, I will demonstrate how neo-burlesque can usefully be divided into that which deploys burlesque as a verb, and that which approaches burlesque as a noun.

When used as a noun, the term *burlesque* denotes a dramaturgy that can be recreated; its contemporary performers are either historical recreationists, or they are stylistically riffing on an historical genre. Neo-burlesque recreationist Dita Von Teese is popularly perceived to be a purist for her aesthetically faithful renderings of past burlesque. Rather than containing an implicit critique of any kind, Von Teese's act recreates actual 1940s and 1950s burlesque routines that resemble rather lavish, highly choreographed striptease: the fan dance, the bath in a giant martini glass, and so on. The Scandelles, on the other hand, base their work in *the act of burlesquing*—the verb. They deploy irony as a form of theatrical commentary and are, therefore, not bound to any particular aesthetic or historical dramaturgy. Their performance style does not typically look like any one past genre at all, and, when it does play with the historical, it tends deliberately toward palimpsest and anachronism. While their work almost always toys with gender and sexuality, and usually includes nudity, it does not always incorporate strip. They are often described as pushing, or even exceeding, the bounds of neo-burlesque because of their emphatic deployment of camp and irony to socially critical ends. While The Scandelles' dalliance with pornography and social criticism has, at times, caused them to be referred to as avant-garde performance artists, the traits that are said to tie them to the avant-garde are



Dita Von Teese performs at a Playboy party in Belgrade, Serbia, May 2005. Photo by Marko Rupena, courtesy of Shutterstock.com



also those that hearken most directly to the spirit and form of some of the earliest, and least contemporarily familiar, years of North American burlesque: the rowdy, subversive, and gender-bending burlesque of the mid to late nineteenth century.

Although the generalization is, perhaps, reductive, most scholarly writing on nineteenth-century burlesque refers to the form's central dramaturgical device as "inversion." The inversive devices of burlesque, according to cultural historian and *Horrible Prettiness* author Robert C. Allen, manifest as insubordination and subversion of mainstream propriety, historically propagating much uneasiness and resulting in the firm entrenchment of the genre within "low" culture. Sexually aggressive and excessively corpulent female bodies, degrees of cross-dressing, parodies of both "high" culture and of gender, the use of improvisation, the blurring of the ontologies of actor and role, and an impudent, ironic self-consciousness on behalf of the performers are some of the most frequently cited examples of burlesque's inversion of so-called normal and acceptable female behaviour in public space.

In her study of the female nude, Lynda Nead discusses the role of art as a regulator that delimits and contains form, ably transforming the naked female body into the female nude, while obscenity and the "low" remain defined by excess, or form beyond limit (29). Similarly, Allen asserts that the moral and social discomfort presented by the woman on stage is lessened when contained within a scripted dramatic character, but emphasized in roles where the self and/or the body comprise the spectacular focus. Spectacle, he states, "reminds us that what is staged is staged for us to see" (81). As such, spectacle points a finger at the spectator's desires, where the context of "art" might obscure or, at least, sanction them. "The Historical" now provides just such a cultural context for the contemporary spectator and promotes the notion that neo-burlesque is somehow "classier" than contemporary strip. Certainly, recreationist Dita Von Teese encourages this notion and exploits it lucratively, while The Scandelles reject it outright on political and artistic grounds. The divisive issue in this case, it seems to me, hinges on the decision either to suppress or hyperbolize variance: burlesque, the noun, as a containing narrative and guarded dramaturgical border under the auspices of liberal humanist historical accuracy, or burlesque as an active verb: a dramaturgical device, designed to exceed and to explode tidy boundaries.

## 1868

Usually cited as the first female burlesque troupe to perform in America, The British Blondes arrived in New York led by Lydia Thompson for their run of *Ixion*. *Clipper* journalist Richard Grant White writes in 1869:

The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system. It is out of *all* keeping. [...] [B]urlesque casts down all the gods from their pedestals. (qtd. in Allen 25)

Performing in cross-dress in a stage genre that had originally been performed by men, the burlesque bodies of The British Blondes were highly self-aware, physically voluptuous, and a challenge to the very notion of textual containment through the use

of pun, parody, and a distorted classical narrative. Comical grotesquery, defined by its disruptions of class and gender hierarchies, embodied as it was in an aesthetic of pleasure and diversity, called into question all that constituted the stability of the culturally elitist identity—in particular the nineteenth-century construct of the "True Woman." The Blondes quasi cross-dress both underlined and hyperbolized their female, anti-feminine sexuality and mocked masculine swagger and authority simultaneously. Critic W. D. Howells in 1869 writes that "[t]hough they were unlike men, they were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both" (qtd. in Allen 25).

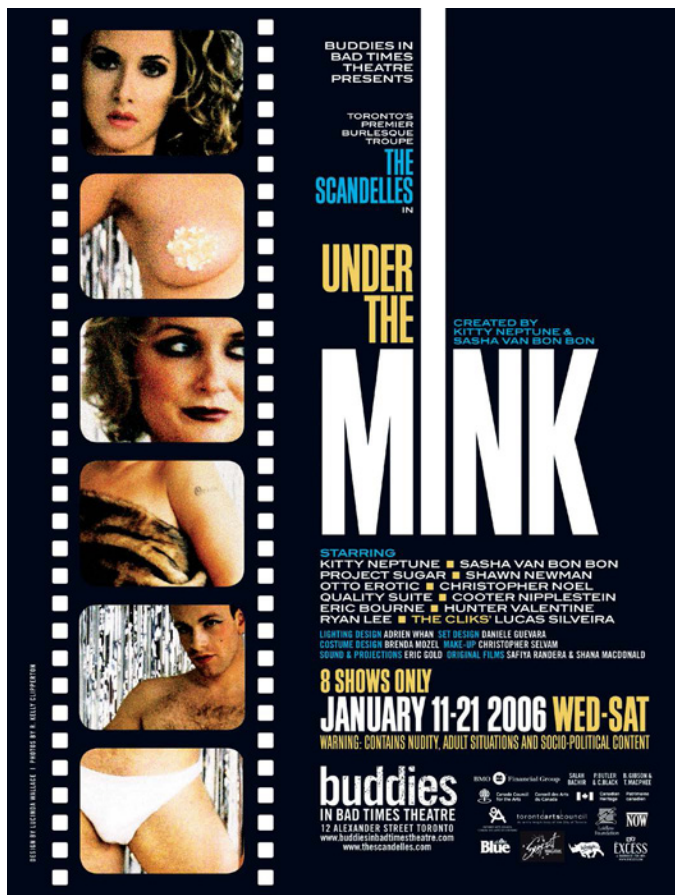
## 2007

The Scandelles' 2007 venture *Under the Mink*, mounted for a two-week run at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, is a tribute to truculent women of film, from *noir* to porn, and hinges upon the troubling of essentialist hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, and desire in a primarily queer cultural context. The mechanisms of irony and camp become central dramaturgical devices as The

*Sexually aggressive and excessively corpulent female bodies, cross-dressing, parodies of both "high" culture and of gender, the use of improvisation, the blurring of the ontologies of actor and role, and an impudent, ironic self-consciousness on behalf of the performers are some of the most frequently cited examples of burlesque's inversion of so-called normal and acceptable female behaviour in public space.*

Scandelles use burlesque to interact with, and dismantle, various Hollywood constructions of "the prurient woman" and her role in heteronormative film narratives.

The central thematic trope in this work is achieved through the intertext of film clips and live performance episodes. The performance episodes burlesque the historical archetypes of femininity present in the selected films. The dialogue between these two results in a third metanarrative that could only be achieved through an intertextual reading founded in camp, thus rejecting a monovocal, closed dramatic structure. Feminist scholar Pamela Robertson describes camp as "a form of ironic representation and reading" that is "doubly coded in political terms; it both legitimates and subverts that which it parodies" (267). In this sense, camp is what she calls "productively anachronistic" (267). "Camp redefines and historicizes" cultural objects of the past that have "lost their power to dominate cultural meanings," and does so "not just nostalgically, but with a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia, rendering both the object and the nostalgia outmoded through a critical laughing distancing" (Robertson 267). In *Under the Mink*, this effect is directed not only at con-



The Scandelles' January 2008 poster image for *Under the Mink*, staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto. Photo by David Hawe, courtesy of Buddies in Bad Times



Poster image for The Scandelles' *The Death Show*, staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, July, 2010. Photo by David Hawe, courtesy of Buddies in Bad Times

structions of gender, but at History (with a capital H) itself. The result is that both are shown to be mutable, discursively rendered categories open to renegotiation and subversion. This strategy bears striking resemblance to that employed by the early ladies of American burlesque, The British Blondes.

Allen writes that after Lydia Thompson's burlesque, the genre underwent a gradual process of suppression that aimed at separating its explosive combination of female sexual allure and "inversive feminine insubordination" in order that it might please, rather than threaten, its increasingly male audience (271), thus promoting its commercial viability within the semi-mainstream. By the 1930s, the striptease became *the* defining element of a burlesque that little resembled its nineteenth-century progenitor. Although many argue that burlesque ultimately died out by the end of the forties, still others refer to the mid forties through late fifties as burlesque's Golden Age. This is critical to this discussion of neo-burlesque since this "golden age" coincides chronologically with the emergence of a post-war, neo-Victorian sexuality that Elaine Tyler May indicates pacified the previous decade's sex symbol—"bomb-shells" and "knockouts"—into "pets," "bunnies," and "chicks." She goes on to state that women at this time were highly encouraged "to catch a husband," but to do so "with bait rather than a net" (qtd. in Schaefer 53). It is no coincidence, then, that as burlesque made its way out of the working-class theatre and into the (almost) mainstream of the night club, the sexuality and physicality of the stripteaser came to resemble commercial, mainstream

beauty ideals such as those embodied in the Playboy bunny. The dramaturgy of Golden Age striptease is what most envision when they think of burlesque, yet it actually employed very little in the way of active "burlesquing."

As a recreationist, Dita Von Teese uses this Golden Age as a text from which to draw the parameters of both her performances and her public *persona*. As she has been known to be obsessively meticulous in her faithfulness to such recreation, it may be said that the tradition from which she draws operates as a closed narrative in which she seeks to eradicate any detail excessive to the perceived historical frame. Through her reproduction of gestural and sartorial markers broadcast as historically accurate, she invites the reception of a supposed authenticity in the performance in which the spectacle of her body is not only socially contextualized, contained, and gendered, but offered up as evidence that such characteristics are historically abiding.

As such, Von Teese strips as a "neo-burlesque artist" not as a contemporary stripper, a classification that lifts her into an entirely different cultural context. She is invariably referred to as "classy," "sophisticated," "refined," and "always a lady." Her cosmetically enhanced physique represents the epitome of contemporary beauty standards and the height of glamour. As an international star, she has graced *People Magazine's* "100 Most Beautiful" list, *Italian Vogue*, and the centrefold pages of *Playboy* magazine to name only a few. Von Teese is also emphatically heteronormative. She is quoted as saying that women should not discuss politics (Smith





Kitty Neptune burlesques contemporary striptease in The Scandelles' *Neon Nightz*, staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, October, 2008. Photo by David Hawe, courtesy of Buddies in Bad Times

13), and, when her work is criticized as anti-feminist, she responds that she “finds it pretty liberating to get \$20,000 for ten minutes [of work]” (qtd. in Dam 58). Her public persona provides context for her performance and neither bear any trace of irony, suggesting that such statements are not to be read as a metanarrative or burlesque, as it were, of her image. Von Teese’s brand of neo-burlesque has created a highly lucrative, mass-market commodity contingent upon mainstream notions of tasteful sexuality largely bolstered by perceptions of historical tradition that safely set her apart from contemporary strippers. By aligning herself with past tradition, she cements herself within the present realm of the publicly acceptable.

Poststructuralist feminist historiographer Nicole Beger writes that “engaging in a discussion about the meaning of gender in the past is at the same time an engagement in reproducing or contesting meaning about gender in the present” (18). In this sense, neo-burlesque performers can be said to be engaging in just such a discussion by dramaturgical means. If, as I have suggested, burlesque for The Scandelles remains largely a verb—a mechanism of irony and subterfuge—then the complex relationship of their work with historical material enacts a poststructural historiography. Rather than seeking any “true” past, such discourses are



The Scandelles' *Who's Your Dada?* staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, February, 2008. Sasha Van Bon Bon with three Daniel MacIvors!

Photo by David Hawe, courtesy of Buddies in Bad Times

frequently the target of their active burlesquing. What is most striking is that it is because of, not despite, the implicit critique of monolithic discourses present in their work that the burlesque of The Scandelles is remarkably similar to the genre’s earliest innovators and, by extension, speaks to the abiding potency of the burlesque mechanism.

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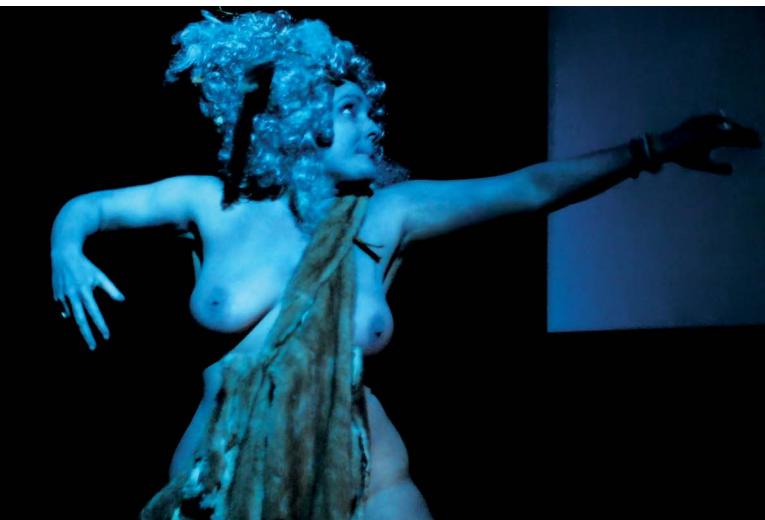
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Alexis Butler is a PhD candidate, ABD, at the University of Toronto, an actor and theatre educator, and now the founder and editor-in-chief of a national “green” lifestyle magazine. The title of her dissertation in-progress is *Undressing Toronto the Good: Burlesque on the Toronto Stage*.

# An Interview with Alex Tigchelaar, Formerly Sasha Van Bon Bon of The Scandelles

by Alexis Butler



*Dirty Plötz*, a cabaret created by an ensemble of female performers and curated by Alex Tigchelaar, examines the historical exclusion of women in art and social justice movements. Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto. February 2013.  
Photo by Tania Anderson

**AB:** While the work of The Scandelles is regularly referred to as “neo-burlesque,” you’ve made a concerted effort to distance yourselves from that label. What brought you to burlesque in the first place and how (or why) has that initial impetus changed over the years?<sup>1</sup>

**AT:** It was 1998 or 1999. I had just moved to Toronto. I met this woman named Megan who was working at the Bovine Sex Club and she said, “Hey, I’m thinking of doing burlesque with this live band called Jack the Ripper and the Major Players. Wanna be my partner?” We started a little duo called the Dangerettes. We would perform at the Pilot in Yorkville and it quickly became the place to be. We had some amazing talent in that band. I just loved it. It was truly so much fun. The energy in those early days was unbeatable.

The impetus to distance ourselves from the term neo-burlesque was multilayered. When you do some type of performance

that’s trendy, corporations will seek you out for their functions. [The Scandelles] would get requests from big companies to do “Moulin Rouge Cabaret” style stuff. Clearly these people had no idea what they were talking about and clearly they had no idea what they were going to get with us. We really liked to party and often found ourselves in situations where we were all lit like firecrackers far before it was time to go onstage and oh, look there’s David Miller, then Mayor of Toronto, “Hey David Miller, look at my vagina!” So we felt it was fair to warn people that we were not going to do some Moulin Rouge or *Chicago* thing because

1. They are from totally different continents and eras and [require] costumes and choreography that cost thousands of dollars;
2. We were a little more rowdy than that, both for real and as a group policy. Our slogan was: “If you’re not part of the party, you’re part of the problem.”

I guess another reason I wanted to distance us from this term was pure amateur performer snottiness. I really did believe us to be a cut above the typical neo-burlesque fare in terms of ideas and talent and so on, and this clearly went to my head a little.

But underneath all the bravado was the simple fact that we had this stage and that provided an opportunity to do more than just shake our shit around. We really needed to get away from the label in order to explore the kind of work we wanted to do, despite being burdened by a total lack of experience. I think there are a couple of people in me: one is a Depression-era snake oil huckster, bursting with slogans and spins, and the other is someone who truly wants to bring important ideas to the stage in unique ways. Also, I’ve said before, I didn’t like that people were always talking about burlesque being more classy than contemporary strip-tease—that just made my blood boil. Classier? Why, because there wasn’t any nudity? IS MY VAGINA NOT CLASSY? That sort of thing. When people say stuff like this, it just makes me want to pull feather boas out of my pussy and wave them in their faces. Which I did end up doing, with a gorilla mask on. Classy enough for you?



**AB:** The Scandelles have drawn on a lot of historical materials and styles to very productive ends. Why and how were you drawn to the historical, and what has this mixing of eras and images meant for your work?

**AT:** I am drawn to historical elements for a variety of reasons, but I think the number one reason is that I am in awe of social renegades. For example, Mercedes McCambridge's character in *Touch of Evil* was a huge inspiration for the Butch Noir character in *Under the Mink*. I doubt Orson Welles intended to sexualize this character to the degree he did; more than likely he wanted her to be perceived as grotesque, but McCambridge just oozed pure bull dagger sexuality in the role and I found her irresistible. I want young gays to be aware of their intrepid forefathers and forebrothers, and I want to be part of that narrative myself so I steal shamelessly from their courage in my own work.

I also like to take stuff and queer it up, though I cannot stand the term *queering things* but I have no better term for it. The Massengil douche box number in *Under the Mink* is one perfect example. As a child model of the seventies, I am drawn to the soft, feminine qualities of the era's advertising, yet at the same time I absolutely adore the feminist performance art from this time, which tackled, often with that grim, liber perspective, oppressive marketing. I took those two loves and put them together in this piece; two dichotomous interests merged together. Burlesque!

On an aesthetic level I am drawn to the look of mixing eras and ideas. I cannot resist overreaching visual and political themes. For me the idea of placing chance alongside rigour is also illuminating. When I began putting [*Who's Your*] *Dada* together, I just sat down and smashed together a whole bunch of things that were preoccupying me and tried to find a common thread. I took contemporary political issues and used the tenets of Dadaism and Fluxus to explore them because I had a lot of respect for those non-conformist creative traditions, despite the patent misogyny expressed, particularly by the Dadaists.

**AT:** Alexis, I guess something else that is relevant is the fact that for many years (almost 30 in fact) I struggled with drug and alcohol addiction. I've been sober for six months now and it has certainly changed a lot for me. To a large extent I never wanted to take my work seriously because I was afraid to. I am now embracing that with a much different attitude, which takes a huge amount of bravery, I'm finding, to demand to be taken seriously as an artist.



Alex Tigchelaar in her February 2013 show, *Dirty Plötz*.  
Photo by Tania Anderson

**AB:** Did the clean start require the new project, Operation Snatch?

**AT:** I really had no choice. My creativity was suffering due to my addiction. I had to face the fact that I simply wasn't smart enough to manage an addiction and a creative life, that I needed all the brain cells I had to get at the work. Basically I felt that The Scandelles was a name that suggested burlesque and Operation Snatch says more political cabaret theatre to me. It wasn't totally necessary, but I did want to make the shift for a clean break from our past as a burlesque company. We are also using our real names now instead of our campy burlesque ones. At 44, I feel that maybe it's time to leave Ms. Van Bon Bon behind.

## Note

- 1 This interview was conducted as an e-mail conversation and took place over the course of several months: from 31 Jan. 2012–13 Aug. 2012. The text here is an abridged version of that conversation.

# “You’re Just a Stripper that Came Out of a Time Machine”: Operation Snatch’s Queer World-Making and Sex-Working Class Politics

by Sarah Mann

I first encountered Operation Snatch, the present iteration of the Toronto burlesque and cabaret troupe that became known under the name The Scandelles, in my work as a journalist. I was assigned to review their 2012 production of *Les Demimondes*, a cabaret about whores, and, already familiar with some of co-founder Alex Tigchelaar’s writing and activist work in the sex worker scene, I readily agreed. I walked into the show with no idea of what to expect from Tigchelaar’s performance art. After ninety minutes spent feeling increasingly moved by the naked and nearly naked women on stage, increasingly perturbed by my own inability to interpret many of the movements and images I saw in the dancers’ performances, and increasingly warm in the cheeks over both responses, I knocked on the dressing room door to ask for an interview. Tigchelaar told me in no uncertain terms that her show was political: intended to critique the stigmatization and criminalization of sex workers by mainstream society, and their exploitation in the culture industry. Performance was her way of articulating her politics, effective because if you “entertain people with a fucking idea, [...] they’ll cotton on” (Tigchelaar qtd. in Mann). For my own part I tried to pretend I wasn’t checking out her tits (though I did later write about them, and about Tigchelaar’s own theorizations of the political and performative functions of nudity). I left the whole thing thinking it had been a pleasurable, but queer, experience.

This essay explores the queer world of Operation Snatch more deeply, focusing in particular on two of their sex work-themed productions, *Les Demimondes* and *Neon Nightz*. In cabaret performances adapted from their burlesque roots, Operation Snatch leverages affect to engage their audiences in the composition of a queer “world” that critiques popular and burlesque images of sex workers. Operation Snatch’s performance-based politics engage with those of classic and neo-burlesque, adapting the techniques

that facilitate articulation of their ideas and critiquing the ones that do not. After detailing the performances under examination in this article, I consider how Operation Snatch’s articulations of queerness and solicitations of audiences’ affective responses help to create a “world” in which their critical self-representations as sex workers can come to life.

## Operation Snatch’s Adaptation of Burlesque

Burlesque scholar Jacki Wilson posits classic burlesque as an already politicized genre. The burlesque performer “winks” and even talks directly to the audience, often making political satire a part of her performance, and, through the burlesque performer’s engagement of the audience, the spectator is “implicated as the desiring subject and the vulnerable object” (37). Burlesque satirizes objectification and, in doing so, “thwarts and pulverizes” the power of the audience’s anonymity and remove, the distance from the performance offered by the fourth wall of traditional theatre (37–38). Unlike the passive nudes of the artistic and corporate cultural canons, argues Wilson, burlesque performers are the active “authors” of themselves as spectacles, appropriating as “low” women a position of power and control typically occupied by the middle and upper classes and men (38).

But Claire Nally (citing Diane Negra’s reading of post-feminist nostalgia) remarks that the “retrosexual” aesthetic of neo-burlesque reflects ambivalence about the future of feminism: that is, an aesthetic of looking “back” because the way “forward” is unclear (631–632). While Nally points to a possible identity crisis for women in the absence of patriarchy as the foundation of “instability”—and I am more inclined to point to labour’s precarity under neoliberal capitalism—her point remains suggestive that post-feminist burlesque might have “reclaimed” “the ideal



feminine image vaunted in history” as a way of accessing “security based on gendered behaviour” (632). But Operation Snatch is an overtly feminist act. Even in their burlesque-only performances, they critique the depoliticizing and normative nostalgia that sometimes appears in burlesque shows. (As for example in their “Guerilla Girls” number, in which Tigchelaar and Nimmo, wearing gorilla masks and fluffy black pasties and thongs, dance aggressively to punk music before finally stripping down, pulling yellow feather boas out of their vaginas, and miming pissing on the audience.) Operation Snatch’s critical engagement with neo-burlesque differentiates their work from this depoliticizing and potentially regressive post-feminist performance of nostalgia, and perhaps helps to explain why the troupe so quickly adapted burlesque-style striptease to a cabaret mode.

Within a few years of their 2000 founding, The Scandelles turned to cabaret, having grown tired of an act Tigchelaar describes as “indulging nostalgia and doing the same ten acts (really the same one just with different costumes)” (“Bare-Assed Defiance” 28). In 2011 they changed their name to Operation Snatch to reflect their new identity as a cabaret company (30). Tigchelaar began work in 2002 on *Neon Nightz*, which documents her experiences as a stripper in the 1980s and 1990s in Montreal (28). “I actually remember jolting upright from sleep and coming up with the idea,” she says of her inspiration to write (Personal communication). The show “examines concepts of worship and contradictions of intimacy in the sacred yet profane places we explore desire and shame” (Tigchelaar “Bare-Assed Defiance” 28), demystifying exotic dancing labour through its presentation of Tigchelaar’s memories and tall tales. Tigchelaar performs as emcee, her humorous monologues introducing Nimmo’s dance numbers, which combine contemporary dance and burlesque techniques with acrobatic pole dancing.

In a 2009 production of *Neon Nightz*, The Scandelles transformed the performance space at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre into a 1990s strip club. Patrons entered to find a smoke-filled room (a trick of the fog machine; Toronto prohibited smoking in public buildings in 1999), a bar serving alcohol, and a series of small tables arranged around a strip club’s characteristic thrust stage, complete with neon green rope lighting around its edge and two brass poles. Guests could choose a table in the club space, or they could sit immediately in front of the stage, looking more closely at the dancers’ bodies and offering tips. Live strippers performed before the show and did, in fact, take tips. While the billed entertainment was by The Scandelles, at the cabaret, as Shane Vogel writes, “the performing has always already begun before the billed performers make an entrance” (35), and in this show, the audience “performs” as strip club patrons.

*Les Demimondes*, a cabaret production that employs striptease in some of its scenes, was workshopped throughout 2005 and 2006 at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre with a large cast of sex workers and performed most recently as a small-cast production by Tigchelaar, Nimmo, and hired contemporary dancers Jesse Dell and Andrya Duff (Mann). In *Les Demimondes*, Tigchelaar, as Prostitution Herself, plays emcee, critiquing a selection of representations of sex workers in popular culture.

*Les Demimondes* is a response to a statement by Dorothy Parker: asked to use “horticulture” in a sentence, Parker re-

sponded “you can lead a whore to culture, but you can’t make her think” (Tigchelaar, “Bare-Assed Defiance” 29). For Tigchelaar, the culture industry has “profited quite directly off the cachet of sex workers and yet sex workers themselves remain criminalized and marginalized” (qtd. in Newman 67). Meanwhile, sex workers are both misrepresented by and unpaid for their representation in art. Prostitution Herself, a figure who embodies all prostitutes and prostitution throughout history, remarks that whores are culture. Through Prostitution Herself, the show brings 3,000 years of prostitutes’ collective memory to “life.” At the same time, *Les*

*Operation Snatch’s performance-based politics engage with those of classic and neo-burlesque, adapting the techniques that facilitate articulation of their ideas and critiquing the ones that do not.*

*Demimondes* draws the popular figure of “the prostitute” out of her passive place in media. The show gives her space to “talk back,” burlesque style, to her creators and consumers. Given an active presence, this re-presentation of sex workers makes a forceful case against both criminalization and culture industry exploitation of sex workers. Tigchelaar states that “my deepest passion is to create art around sex work that is positive and honest and takes the sex worker out of a victim framework and tells a truer story” (qtd in Newman 67).

## Queer World-Making in *Neon Nightz* and *Les Demimondes*

Operation Snatch’s productions convert the theatre to a space in which a new “world” for sex workers is collectively composed by performers and spectators through exchanges of affect. Affect theory attempts to account for sensations, experiences, habits, and events beyond the scope of theories of discourse and representation—things that take place before (or without) cognition and interpretation, and that make up the “background hum” (Anderson and Harrison 7) of life, the milieu from which subjectivity is produced. Affect is related to emotion, but occurs as “gut feeling”—affects (such as desire or disgust) are pre-cognitive sensations, interpreted only *after* their occurrence (Seigworth and Gregg 1). Beyond the straightforward messaging of *Les Demimondes* and *Neon Nightz*, the productions use affect to enact “queer world-making” as political resistance to the stigmatization of sex work.

First, this reading takes Operation Snatch’s performances as queer. When I indicated to friends that I intended to research Operation Snatch as queer performance art, I encountered an unexpected reaction. Regarding Tigchelaar’s sexuality, one gay male activist complained, “She’s in, she’s out. She’s a lesbian, she’s straight.” Despite Tigchelaar’s longstanding service to the Toronto queer community, others’ biphobia still imposes a reading of fragility on the queerness of her work.

While many sex workers (who may be transgender or cisgender women or men) are queer, gays and lesbians have a recent history of hostility toward sex workers. As clashes between sex

workers and gay men in Vancouver (Ross) and in Buddies in Bad Times' own neighbourhood in Toronto (Houston) show, sex work may even be too "queer" for newly gentrified or gentrifying gay spaces. This speaks to the "normalization" of some gay and lesbian identities, a term Michael Warner, in an interview with Annamarie Jagose, uses to describe gays' and lesbians' assimilation into the dominant (previously only heterosexual) practice of "normal" sexuality. By contrast, queer politics resist normalization, posing a continued challenge to and disruption of "normal" life (Jagose and Warner, par. 23). By this definition, sex work, which disrupts the "normal" life in newly affluent and increasingly privatized

*By adapting burlesque's ironic "gaze back" to the "world-making" capacities of cabaret, Operation Snatch produces sex work-related performances that can critique sex workers' marginalization in both popular and burlesque culture.*

gay neighbourhoods, can be read as queer, despite individual sex workers' practices of ostensibly "heterosexual" sex for money.

"Queer world-making" is the process by which queers collectively produce the possibility of a life outside of heteronormativity. World-making is a collective practice of contributing to the milieu of life: physical, historical, emotional, ontological, and relational contributions to the "stuff" from which persons can develop a sense of themselves, or subjectivity (Anderson and Harrison 8–9). My use of *stuff* is purposefully indistinct, reflecting my own gloss of the notion of a "world" as the "stuff of life." This is a common, intuitive use of the word *world*: when we refer to the "world of theatre," we are referring to a physical environment as well as all of the mundane conditions of possibility that give rise to the subjectivities of and interactions among its inhabitants (Anderson and Harrison 9). Warner describes *queer* world-making as the formation of "the background against which [queers] understand ourselves and our belonging," which cannot be done within heteronormativity (Jagose and Warner, par. 38). He argues that the composition of a world is not necessarily intentional and never the work of any one individual, and the world composed is always subject to change as new histories and practices add to its milieu (38–39).

Performing cabaret content related to sex work as queer world-making negotiates a careful balance between creating an alternate "world" and engaging audiences in what Shane Vogel calls "staged 'transgression,'" a collective performance of the appearance of transgression (33–34). Vogel describes how an audience can be interpellated into a scene with all the visual trappings of queer sexuality, but without its challenge to the dominant order (33–34). Many of Operation Snatch's performance spaces run similar risk, providing privatized space for non-normative sexualized performances while, just outside the theatre doors, disruptive sexuality is increasingly unwelcome in the neighbourhood.

*Neon Nightz* manages this risk, and delivers politically, by leveraging affect as disruption of the dominant world and *stuff* of a queer one. For productions of *Neon Nightz*, affect comes

into play in the blurring of boundaries between appearance and the real. The space doesn't just *look* like a strip club—it employs actual strippers. The economic exchange is a material, not merely symbolic, blurring of performance and the real. The song to which the strippers dance, "Sex and Candy," engages spectators' senses with the lyrics "I smell sex and candy" (Marcy Playground), placing a suggestion that among the myriad odours that accompany any gathering of people, spectators might detect evidence of others' arousal. And as a necessary condition of entering a "strip club," they might sense their own physiological and affective excitement.

For Tigchelaar, the presence of actual strippers is "part of the humour; it's part of the spectacle; it's part of the beauty" of the strip club (interview). The environment is distracting—the relation between those at the table is always mediated by the comings and goings, the performances, and the nudity and desirability of the strippers on stage. The world-making of the strip club is a composition in which the stripper's erotic labour is fundamental to the background milieu of life; distraction, titillation, and arousal—the sensation of being "moved" by the dancers' performances—are woven into the fabric of every relation. The stripping performances in *Neon Nightz*, *Les Demimondes*, and other Operation Snatch shows evoke titillation and arousal as affect, beyond (or below) the level of cognition and interpretation—the strippers' performances of nudity are simply arousing to watch. This engages spectators in an encounter with the performers and the show, an affective relation in which we begin to move (or are "moved" by physical and emotional sensation) in their queer world. But the show draws once again on burlesque's ironic reversal of gaze, reminding spectators of their own performativity. Even as the pre-show music helps to interpellate spectators as strip club patrons, it repeats, "this surely is a dream" (Marcy Playground). For the patron, both the sameness and the dissonance between performance and reality are a part of the show's affective world, calling out more a desire for true queerness than an appropriation of transgression.

While Operation Snatch casts their audiences as co-conspirators in their world-making, Tigchelaar knows her audiences will commonly include "left-leaning" but affluent and normalized spectators—the population of the gentrifying neighbourhoods that house Operation Snatch's performance spaces, a population directly implicated as media producers and consumers in the culture industry's use of images of sex workers (Interview). Some audience members will be hostile to any sex work-positive politics. "I can tell it makes some people uncomfortable right off the bat," Tigchelaar explains.

[B]ut they're uncomfortable with the ideas to begin with. They don't want to hear anything about sex work other than it being trafficking and exploitation. That's what they want to hear. So it does make some people angry to have to listen to you tell them a different story. (Interview)

At the level of emotion, the audience members feel angry and reject *Les Demimondes*' politics, but Tigchelaar's performance still insists on their affective participation. Modern sex-working bodies are constructed as "low," diseased (physically and morally) bodies, corrosive to those they encounter (McKay 48–50). Every encounter with a sex-working body holds the potential to become "infected" with disgust, shame, and desire—to become



affectively entangled. Leveraging this potential for entanglement, even with a hostile audience, Tigchelaar asks, “Does a vagina have to be a certain way on stage? Can’t it be vulgar?” Where stripping leverages nudity to seduce the audience, Tigchelaar uses it in *Les Demimondes* to “curse the audience” (Interview). Prostitution Herself, in her opening monologue, lifts her dress, showing the audience her pussy and soliciting their disgust and desire, which she may then add to the composition of the “world” in which she and her distorted mirror image, the culture industry’s sex worker, can come to life and talk back.

Operation Snatch also responds to the abjection of sex-work politics within the burlesque subculture. For Tigchelaar, a part of *Neon Nightz*’s aim is to respond to the argument that burlesque performers are not strippers because they “tease” rather than getting completely naked: to say, “Yes, you are a stripper. You’re just a stripper that came out of a time machine” (Interview). The idea that burlesque is “classier” than stripping, for Tigchelaar, relies on disgust for women’s bodies: belief that “my body is not as classy when it’s naked.” In a carnivalesque embrace of classlessness, Tigchelaar declares, “Not only am I not going there, I’m going to pull a feather boa out of my pussy.” For the performers’ safety, the boas for the “Guerilla Girls” number are packed in unlubricated condoms, an idea for which Tigchelaar credits her skills gained as a sex worker (interview). As the carnivalesque imagery marks Tigchelaar’s body as “low” and classless, the mechanics of her performance draw specifically on sex workers’ collective knowledge and memory as a condition of possibility for low performance. The mixed arousal, revulsion, and surprise it solicits from the audience, and their desire to see the trick again and more (Interview), articulates and celebrates working-class resistance to control of women’s bodies and sexualities.

By adapting burlesque’s ironic “gaze back” to the “world-making” capacities of cabaret, Operation Snatch produces sex work-related performances that can critique the marginalization of sex workers in both popular and burlesque culture. They cast their audiences as performers, soliciting their affective responses to non-normative sexual displays as raw material for a queer alternative to the hegemony that makes sex workers—strippers and prostitutes alike—available for artistic, legal, and labour exploitation.

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## About the Author

Sarah Mann is a Master of Arts student in Literary Studies at Athabasca University and in Social Justice and Equity Studies at Brock University. She has published on sex workers’ rights, gentrification, and precarious labour in *Briarpatch Magazine* and *rabble.ca*. Her current research is on sex workers’ autobiographical writing.

# Neon Nightz

by Alexandra Tigchelaar



Cat Nimmo as Mercedes Lee  
Photo by Alex Russel, [WhoDoYouLovePhotography.com](http://WhoDoYouLovePhotography.com)

## Cast List

Sasha: Alex Tigchelaar

Mary Magdalene, Girl in Budweiser Bikini, The Catholic School Girl, Mercedes Lee, The Husband, Sister Marie-Claude, The Virgin Mary, St. Stripper: Cat Nimmo

Sister DJ: Babs Vermeulen

## Production History

Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto, 2009/2010 Season; The Wildside Festival, Centaur Theatre, Montreal, 2011

## Production Artists

Director (Buddies in Bad Times): David Oiyé

Set and Lighting (Buddies in Bad Times): Andy Moro

Head of Production and Tour Manager: Charissa Wilcox

Dramaturge (Centaur Run): Mariko Tamaki

Lighting (Centaur): Michelle Ramsay

Costume Designer: Marnie Sohn

Head Technician (Centaur): Shanna Miller

## About the Playwright

Alexandra Tigchelaar is co-artistic director of the cabaret theatre company Operation Snatch (formerly The Scandelles) and has been creating work for the group since 2000. Notable productions include *Under the Mink*, *Les Demimondes*, *Neon Nightz*, *Who's Your Dada?*, *The Death Show*, and the films *Give Piece of Ass a Chance* and *Creative Trafficking*.

## ACT ONE

*St. Stripper is on stage in her Mary Magdalene attire, dancing quietly to "Dance Me to the End of Love." Sasha is in the audience watching her, enraptured. Suddenly Sasha stands up and begins clapping wildly.*

### SASHA

Bravo, bravo! Madame, you are truly spectacular! Really. And Leonard Cohen? What a perfect choice. You are wow! Just, remarkable!

*(Turns to the audience.)*

Oh come on! Is that the best you can do for Patron Saint of Whores, Mary Magdalene? We're very lucky to have her here in our club tonight. This is the first time she's ever done anything quite so audacious.

Oh. You don't believe me. Okay well uh, has anyone in here read the Bible? Perhaps you may have noticed then that the one trait that has come to define her is never explicitly mentioned anywhere.

The story about her dissolute life and her inevitable atonement was cooked up by Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century and it's kept real whores in a place of manufactured shame ever since.

I was a whore. For almost ten years I danced in the earthy temples that define Montreal's landscape as much as its more traditional places of worship. Here's what I think *(begins marching towards the stage and leaps on)*: if Mary Magdalene had been a working girl, she would have had some things to say about her life as a merchant of carnal knowledge that don't service the notion of inescapable contrition with such ease. And therein lies the most powerful tool in her invention: the fact that she wasn't one and therefore a perfect scapegoat by which to set an example *(Mary Magdalene puts hand over mouth, eyes, and ears)*. The slut who was never a slut. Sound familiar?

You learn some very interesting things when you trade sex for money. This exchange, having someone try to map their desires on your body, it's not always simple. It's not always bad. People confess their secret needs to you, things they don't even tell their best friends or lovers. I believe it is precisely because the sexual identities presented by Christianity are so deeply inadequate that these places flourish. If you stifle peoples' desires long enough they will find ways, using the very limitations that you set to satisfy them. Oppression is the mother of invention and the strip club is this action made flesh. *(Dances around a bit while saying...)*

*(St Stripper exits.)*

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I loved being onstage, holding a nocturnal congregation captive. For me, it was like starring in a Whitesnake video directed by Orson Welles.

What attracts a girl to this decadent order? Money, of course, money money money. Attention, attention, attention. Money, attention, money, attention.

I was in my early twenties when I began stripping and all my indie rock idols had been strippers: Kat Bjelland, Jennifer Finch, and, yes, even that crazy bitch Courtney Love. I wanted to join this pantheon of riot grrrls on the pole but my friend Sabie was a stripper and she bent over for a client once and he stuck his finger right in her ass. This wasn't allowed of course and he was thrown out, but I didn't want to risk anyone sticking their finger in my ass, and at that time, not just at work. So I thought it would be a good idea to try a club that catered to lesbians. I don't know where I got the idea that dancing for women was going to be some sublime, respectful, yet wildly profitable experience, I guess I had just bought into all the early nineties theories about women's sexuality and how they hated the obvious, the crass, and the pornographic and loved erotica. Women loved the erotic and I was a very erotic young lady. I pictured them clamouring to have me table dance in a sea of skinny, kumquat-coloured bimbettes in Budweiser bathing suits. "Oh thank Goddess!" they would say, "There's a real woman in here and is she wearing a crepe satin cut on the bias slip from the 1930s?" I know right? Because lesbians are also faggots. "Sophisticated, stylish. What is this alluring temptress doing amongst these Philistines? I simply must have an extremely erotic table dance from her." I probably wouldn't even have to take my clothes off at all, I'd be that compelling.

As it happened, there was a brand new club in Montreal that hosted an all-female clientele. It was called Lulus. I went in one crisp autumn afternoon and applied for a job. Lulu told me to take off my coat, she looked at my tits, and said, (*as Lulu, old, smoking, cross-armed*) "Retourne ce soir à huit avec ta propre misique et uh, si t'a pas fait ça déjà, arrange ta nounne." Arrange ma nounne. Best job interview ever. Lulu was also the first transsexual business-woman I'd ever met. I thought I was going to die of the sudden ultra-subversiveness of my life. Not only was I nearly officially a stripper but I was working for a fucking tranny. Who was this enigmatic demimondaine I was becoming?

I called Sabie and told her I was going to strip and asked if I could borrow some of her clothes, just in case I needed a few options. She said, "Ben sûr ma chum mais premièrement on les appelle les costumes," and also her friend Nancy was at her house. She was a stripper too and they would teach me some moves. They'd been up all night doing coke but it was totally cool. Awesome. I could just see them clucking and fussing over me, waving breakaway g-strings in my face and laughing at my coltish attempts on five-inch heels. Sisterhood!

When I got to Sabie's house there was a taxi out front (*Sasha looks at a taxi, confused*). Sabie was hanging out the second floor window shrieking at the top of her lungs. She looked really strung out. "Nancy, j'arrive ostie!" she hollered at the vehicle. I looked in the back seat. There was a woman with the most unbelievable bleached blond mullet holding a Hard Rock Cafe beach towel to

her nose. Presumably this was Nancy. Something dropped to the sidewalk beside me. It was a scuffed gold faux alligator skin stiletto. The other one landed on the roof of the taxi and was followed by a black, lacy stretch dress made by the Papillon Blanc company.

"Prends ton costume, Sasha," yelled Sabie. "Je dois amener Nancy à l'hôpital. Elle a cassé son nez tabernac."

"Oh ... à cause qu'elle a fait trop de coke?"

"Eh," said Sabie, who was now at the front door struggling into a tiny leather jacket. "Où est-ce que tu vas danser ce soir?"

"Oh, j'ai pas mais uh ... a LuLus."

"Ben j'ai jamais entendu de ça. C'est à Repentigny?"

"Non, c'est sur Beaudry. C'est pour les femmes, et les hommes selects."

Pause, looks at me. "Vas donc chier! Eh Nancy, as tu entendu ça? Sasha va danser ce soir pour les grosses mangeuses de plottes!"

Nancy, who was probably in a great deal of pain, still managed to laugh at this and made the classic French Canadian onomatopoeia for disbelief: "HEILLE!"

"Quoi? C'est quoi le problème?" I yelled.

"Ha rieennn," Sabie trilled and, as the taxi was pulling away, Nancy yelled out the window, "Lâche pas la patate ma chum! T'es ben cute!" and off they went.

I made fifteen dollars that first night dancing for lovers of erotica. Five of it from some butch who yanked me into her lap so hard that I felt like I'd landed on the crossbar of my bicycle the next day, and ten from Nancy and Sabie, who came to visit me after they were done at the hospital. I then spent twenty dollars buying them drinks. Sisterhood.

The night wasn't a total waste for everybody. One girl did make quite a bit of money. More than the rest of us anyway. Elle était blonde, petite, bronzée et elle portait un maillot Budweiser.

*(Walks back past St. Stripper then sits stage left reclined. St. Stripper dances in her Budweiser bikini to "Rock You Like a Hurricane." She finishes dance, exiting to thunderous applause.)*

## SASHA

She was also a pretty good dancer.

There are certain unavoidable truths to any profession. When you become a stripper (*stands and walks forward*), you will eventually meet your father. Not your real father, at least you hope not, but I can practically guarantee you will run into a male authority figure from your past. I danced for my grade-eight math teacher once. I never had the teacher fantasy thing, so I guess it was weird.

When I first spotted him in the club, Lena was dancing for him. Lena had started working at the age of forty. Before that she worked at the watch counter at Simpsons two blocks over. Not the career change you see a lot of in adult education advertising. Tick tock time to become a stripper! Lena was terrified of being recognized by old Simpsons patrons or employees so she used to

wear this wig that was a full three inches longer than her real hair and exactly the same colour. Cunning disguise.

Lena's table dancing routine consisted of massaging her large, pendulous breasts back and forth, tick tock tick tock, with her head cocked slightly and a sweet, shy smile on her face. The thing that was funny was that the men she danced for would end up with the exact expression when she was done. Mmmm, boobies. Lena finished up and Mr. MacDonald was craning his head, looking for another dancer, and believe me there were plenty of choices because the hockey game hadn't let out yet. But from across the room he wanted me. (*St. Stripper comes out with table dancing box dressed as a schoolgirl.*)

I had two choices. To go over and say, "Hi remember me! You taught me math in grade eight! Remember all those Ds you gave me? Well I'm sure making good use of them now! Wackity schmoo! Yuckity yuck!" Or I could just plop my box down and hope he wouldn't recognize me.

So that's just exactly what I did. Over I went and thrust my box up against his chair. "Hi," I yelled making obfuscating Vogue-like gestures in front of my face. "I'm Sasha." He looked startled by this spastic greeting and introduced himself by his first name, which turned out to be Jim. Remember that funny feeling you got when you found out a teacher's first name? Combine that with the fact that you were about to dance nude not two feet from their face. It's pretty awkward. The music started, and I scrambled to my feet on the box and began showing him a lot of the backside. Look at my lovely calves! Have you seen my shapely buttocks? I felt like I was going to pull it off, but two thirds of the way through the song (*Turns around and stares at St. Stripper, who is in the audience table dancing dressed as school girl*) I felt him recognize me. I turned around and tried to look as though I was just a little sexpot doing my little sexpot thing, but clearly the pleasant, innocuous fantasy had taken a turn for the worse. Mr. MacDonald had five dollars out on the table and his eyes were fixed on the tatty velvet-rotoped exit, his face filled with pained discouragement.

(*To St. Stripper as she gets off the box and approaches.*)

It wasn't hard to guess what he was thinking. I had watched Lena dancing for him, watched their easy exchange, watched him feel pleased and desired. Watched Lena smile at him, letting him know it was perfectly normal to look at her and want her. It was safe for him to feel these things in this snug little world that was an eternity away from anybody who knew him. Or believed they did.

I stepped off my box and said thank you. He shot up like a top and made for the exit. I made for the bar to arrange myself with a drink (*starts walking back when Sister interrupts*).

**SISTER DJ**

Whoa little lady. Where do you think you're going?

**SASHA**

To the bar

**SISTER DJ**

I don't think so.

**SASHA**

Why?

**SISTER DJ**

Story's not done.

**SASHA**

Oh no, story's done.

**SISTER DJ**

No, it's not.

**SASHA**

Yeah, it is.

**SISTER DJ**

No, baby girl, it's not.

**SASHA**

(*Standing in spotlight uncomfortably.*) I knew right away that he would recognize me.

**SISTER DJ**

I know. This wasn't about him at all. It was aaaaall about you.

**SASHA**

What do you mean?

**SISTER DJ**

Well he was ashamed, wasn't he? Of being exposed as a freaky dude who likes to look at naked ladies.

**SASHA**

Oh no, it wasn't his deviance he was ashamed of. It was this, like, innocence, transparency, you know. Just a man, like any other man. No authority, no façade. Just a guy and his penis.

**SISTER DJ**

Exactly. So why did you take it away from him? You took Lena away from him, too. You knew he would never come back after that. Why'd you do it? Why didn't you just give the man some privacy? Go up to the dressing room and ask one of the girls to tell you when he left?

**SASHA**

Because I didn't want to be ashamed of my job.

(Interlude with Sister DJ singing “Your Mommy Don’t Know.” Sasha dances, shirt off, spins around pole to next piece.)

## SASHA

You know that dream where you go to work naked? Well you’re never really naked—it’s always more like you just forgot to put your pants on. Because this, this is the area right here, eh? This is where everything gets all fucky. I stopped having that dream when I started stripping and instead starting having one where I would come out onstage in a giant zippered snowsuit that I couldn’t get off.

What could it possibly all mean? Such a mystery.

I had a party once and I invited some people from work, George the doorman included. George came over early ’cause he had to work that night. Amber, one of my friends from the club, was in my kitchen drinking a glass of wine and I was in the bathtub and George walked into the bathroom and I freaked out. He was all like, “What the fuck’s your problem weirdo? I see you naked all the time!” And I said, “George, work naked is way different than home naked. I’m not really naked at work.”

Amber totally agreed. “Your girlfriend is a stripper, George, you should know that.”

“My girlfriend may be a stripper,” he replied, “but she doesn’t have a problem being naked.”

Oh really.

See, that’s interesting because I met George’s girlfriend way before I met him. She was a stripper, it’s true, but not just any stripper. She was a feature dancer and her name was Mercedes Lee. Mercedes Lee. That’s how you got your feature dancer name in the eighties: by taking a really expensive or sexy car, and adding Lee as your surname.

I met Mercedes in a club called the Harem, which was in Ville St Laurent. This was one of those clubs where you had to do your make-up in the girls’ bathroom because there was no real dressing room. This is not uncommon in some clubs. It’s not ideal, but the Harem had a tanning bed elegantly located in the beer empties closet, and this was a big draw for the girls. Who cares that it was secondhand from the Ukraine around the time of Chernobyl as long as you had a nice glow when you hit the stage, right?

For weeks on end the club had been advertising Miss Lee, who held such illustrious industry titles as Miss Petite Nude World 1988 and Miss Daytona Hot Nipples 1987. The DJ would announce her impending arrival each night with the *Rocky* soundtrack playing behind him. I couldn’t help but get caught up in the excitement. I had never worked with a feature dancer before and judging by the posters—“Up to seven different costume changes per night! Pyrotechnics! Triple X Polaroid show!”—it was going to be fucking amazing.

The night she was to debut I walked into the club and noticed off to my left a half-open door leading to a room I had assumed was a storage closet. The lights were on, and I saw mirrors and some feathered and sequined apparel.

“What’s in there, Cookie?” I asked the doorman. “It’s the feature dressing room,” he said. “Well why don’t we get to use it?” I asked. “Because it’s for the features.”

I was actually too beside myself to make a stink about this blatant injustice. I mean there I was standing not fifteen feet away from the woman who had the hottest nipples on Daytona Beach in 1987. Let’s not kid ourselves people. If there was an era of “The Nipple” it was the eighties, the decade of the wet t-shirt contest, and hers were some of the best.

The rest of the girls couldn’t have given a shit. They’d all seen a million features. They told me all it did was bring bunches of yahoos into the club for half an hour stretches. Then they’d all leave when her show was done and they got their Polaroid of her with her legs wide open and them pointing to her business end, making that stupid “Whoops there it is!” face. We were all crammed in the bathroom vying for mirror space when Cookie burst in. “Who’s got a tampon for Mercedes?” “I do,” I replied and I sprinted across the club with it like a relay baton.

The first thing I saw when I walked into the dressing room was a giant kind of like Tupperware container on the floor. Then I smelled cedar chips. Then I saw guinea pigs. Why were there two guinea pigs in a giant Tupperware container on the floor of the secret feature dressing room?

“Hey doll,” said Mercedes, who was sitting at her make-up counter, slathering her gynormous breast implants with glittery cream. She was so tiny with stringy platinum extensions, popular-girl face. She looked like a child pageant model all grown up. And those breast implants were the size of those grain storage units. Any second they might tear away from their precarious mooring and plop into the guinea pig Tupperware container, smothering one of them.

Mercedes beckoned me forward with a hand tipped with American flag nails, the pinky nail pierced through with a gold ring. Ca-lassy! “Come on in,” she said.

“Are those part of your act?” I asked nodding towards the guinea pigs and handing her the tampon.

“No,” she replied all testy all of the sudden. “They’re my buddies. I TRAVEL with them. They keep me company.”

“Oh God. Of course. I’m so sorry,” I apologized, moving out of the room backwards like she was the Queen. “They’re cute.” It’s true it was kind of a rude question. What did I think she was going to do, pull them out of her pussy? Well of course, that’s exactly what I thought she was going to do. I mean come on, “Up to seven different costumes changes per night!”

Later on I bought her a tequila shot to smooth things over and somehow or other we ended up getting shit-faced together and fucking in her tour van. And by tour van I do mean cube van with piles of costumes and posters everywhere and Bill and Ted the guinea pigs snoozing in their Tupperware container on the front seat. Having a most excellent adventure indeed. We were lying in the back on the sequined cape she used for her matador-inspired number and I just thought, I gotta ask her about those implants. They were insane. I mean I didn’t say it that way, like “What’s



with the giant knockers?” I just said, “Why did you choose such a generous size?” And she said, “I know this is going to sound totally weird but when I’m up there onstage being Mercedes Lee they make me feel less naked.”

*(St. Stripper does feature piece as Mercedes Lee; Sasha sits down. When the piece is over, Mercedes scampers off.)*

### SISTER DJ

Gentlemen, don’t forget to get a Polaroid taken with Mercedes Lee sidestage after her show! Ten dollars for a mammary you won’t soon forget!

### SASHA

Most of us danced for tips. Some of us danced for extra credit. The Simone de Beavers: an irresistible epithet for the women who took up stripping to round out their Women’s Studies degrees at Concordia University’s Simone de Beauvoir Institute. The Beavs began occupying the clubs in the mid nineties and in my opinion it was no coincidence that lap dancing became popular at exactly the same time. Many of you will not remember, or even know, that just fifteen years ago there was no touching permitted in strip clubs whatsoever. And not just as some “official” policy.

Despite all their reverent palaver about sex work being a labour issue, the Beavs brazenly railroaded working girls who had, in the more traditional style of labour activism, banded together to keep standards to their collective satisfaction, the primary one being no touching. And then along come the Beavs with all their precious little theories about how tits were the same as elbows and how ludicrous it was to sexualize one body part over another. Really, Salomé? Because you see Brandy over there, the one who has been dancing for eighteen years? She probably won’t find much financially comparable employment at the age of thirty-nine with nothing but Super Sexe and Chez Maurice on her résumé. She also has a condo at La Cité to pay off and five Persian cats to feed and she doesn’t need some pink-haired bluestocking waving that Peggy Morgan essay in her face as she watches her earnings evaporate because HER tit is most definitely NOT the same as her elbow.

See, Jezebel, in the world of strip clubs outside of your Contemporary Whore in North American Culture class, the implicit understanding that we are all one body needs to be observed. If one girl is getting finger fucked, well then we must all get finger fucked. We are all one pussy.

I’m not saying lap dancing wasn’t bound to happen. After all, if you stifle peoples’ desires long enough they will find ways, using the very limitations that you set, to satisfy them. Oppression is the mother of invention. And it wasn’t like there weren’t plenty of strippers who weren’t TAs getting their T & As groped. It’s just that their reason for doing it—greed—was way less irritating than sermons about tits and elbows.

### SISTER DJ

Oh yeah, the Beavers, soooo annoying, such a pain in the ass for you. Oooh don’t look at me, I’m just this riot grrrrl who just got into stripping way before it was cool, such a proletariat, such a

woman of the people. Not some middle-class girl from the West Island looking for some edge.

### SASHA

Fine. I’ll say it. The Beavers are my fault. In Montreal, I was Beaver Zero. I was in a Fringe play with this girl named Tara, she asked hey what do you do, I said I’m a stripper she said, oh that sounds interesting, I said you should give it a try and then she brought all her friends out in droves.

### SISTER DJ

So you were the reason they were in the clubs in the first place.

### SASHA

Yeah. And believe me, I got a lot of shit for it from the other girls. “Eh Sasha, ton amie Willow? Elle est une cris de salope. Et c’est quoi le problème avec sa toon? ‘Don’t ask me why I’m crying I’m not going to tell you what’s wrong. I just gonna sit on your lap for five dollar a song?’ C’est quoi cette merde? Je comprends pas ça! C’est meme plus pire que ton punk.”

### SISTER DJ

Ooh, Ani DiFranco. Wow. Bold choice. Very...dichotomous.

### SASHA

Ya think?

### SISTER DJ

Better than Bikini Kill.

### SASHA

Fuck you.

### SISTER DJ

Suck my left one.

### SASHA

Touché.

Anyway, what they all, the Beavs and the Philistines and uh, Ani DiFranco, failed to grasp was that lap dancing was bad for many sectors of the sex trade. Prostitutes now needed to contend with strippers offering their services at cheaper rates and in free clubs, and strippers now needed to contend with their boundaries being constantly renegotiated. You couldn’t just relax into a table dance, now you were haggling over your body parts like you were in some market in Marrakech. However it got started, lap dancing changed the business forever. Certain beautiful little exchanges were lost.

I used to table dance for this older couple named Pierre and Marie-Claude. To look at them on the street, you would think maybe they owned a little hardware store in Rosemount and that’s just what they did. When I met them they had been together for forty-two years, one of those exquisitely French Canadian couples—all

tarte à sucre and Old Orchard Beach and pressed slacks in complimentary male female jewel tones. Perfect.

They began coming into the Harem, which was far from where they lived and worked but they certainly didn't want people whose keys they cut and paint they shook to witness them exploring their fantasies so openly, so every couple of weeks they would drive their little celery green Dodge Dart across town to have a gander at the concubines. When I first noticed them I was onstage and they were scrutinizing my act very carefully. At this time I was still trying to set myself apart from the usual fare and was cultivating some sort of Stevie Nicks meets Ava Gardner look, oh god don't even ask, you know there was stretch velvet involved, and I was dancing to Jan Arden (the Bikini Kill was not going over well), but again, let's just let it go, but I was putting a lot of energy and a real narrative into my routine and they obviously appreciated it. When I stepped offstage, they pressed a nicely folded two-dollar bill into my hand and Marie said, "Wonderful performance, Sasha."

After a number of visits spent conferring very seriously over the selection of ladies, they finally asked me to table dance. I went and got a box and tried to place it right between them, as you do with couples just in case one of them is in there under not so willing circumstances and Pierre said, "Oh non thank you, not for me. Pour Marie, pour Marie." Marie looked at me with candid anticipation and so I got up and did my thing. And as I did my thing she literally trembled with excitement. As I danced, Pierre never once took his eyes off her. It wasn't that lascivious, yeah two chicks together awooga thing, but a manifest pride that this woman he had chosen and had spent over forty years of his life with, his woman, was a splendid, sexual creature. Every once in a while, as her chest heaved and droplets of perspiration would bead at her brow, she would look over at Pierre and he would wink. It was absolutely gorgeous.

They came and saw me every couple of weeks, very deliberately handing me twenty dollars each time in advance for four songs like I was some superstar at the club that they needed to reserve or I'd get snapped up. There was such respect to this gesture, an acknowledgement that I was a skilled professional.

After a couple of months I finally asked Marie if she'd been interested in women for a while.

She looked at me and smiled, then she looked at Pierre and he smiled. (*French Canadian accent.*) "For many years, yes. But when I was younger it was not an option, especially coming from the family I did. There was no question I would be married to a man, have as many children as I could, and be a good and faithful wife. That or become a nun, like two of my sisters. Though the nun thing appealed to me, it would have been for the very wrong reasons."

They clearly thought this was hilarious, the idea of Marie being a nun. "Oui, elle ferait partie de l'Ordre de Nos Dames des Causes et des Culottes Perdues," Pierre said and they both laughed.

Marie continued: "As you know, Pierre and I have been married for many years now and when we were younger, we knew very little about sex. Except that we liked it. A lot. I wouldn't say something was missing for me but I would have certainly said I could

have used ... some more gravy. But you know how it goes, first children get in the way, then grandchildren get in the way, and the next thing you know you're almost sixty: passionate and experienced, but a little old for the game. And then I get breast cancer."

At this point, Pierre put his hand over hers. I sat down on my box and covered myself a little.

"It was very difficult. I lost everything, my hair, my pubic hair, my breasts. I lost my breasts, Sasha. This was very hard for me. My breasts were so beautiful."

"C'est vrai," said Pierre. "Tu pouvais les mettre chacun dans une coupe a champagne."

"Ben voyons donc, Pierre. Un peu privée ça, no? But it's true, they were very beautiful. I kept them so beautiful even after five children. My secret was to bathe them in ice water every morning. Not the children, I mean, the breasts. You should do the same Sasha, it keep them very firm."

"It was a very hard thing to go through and of course I am grateful to be alive but before the cancer we had been looking at clubs échangistes ... swingers clubs. Now it is too hard for me to contemplate being seen nude by people, being touched by strangers. After much discussion, Pierre and I decided we would come to see dancers. There is a distance that allows me to feel sexual again, without extending myself too much. I can keep my fantasy of myself and what we would do together in my head, without feeling judged by you. Maybe this will give me the courage to make love to a woman one day."

"Well, I would make love to you," I offered, "And I wouldn't even charge you."

She looked at me and laughed. "Oh Sasha, you may be an exceptional exotic dancer but I have thirty years on you in the bedroom. And that would cost you more than twenty dollars."

## ACT TWO

### SASHA

I've never had a husband myself.

### SISTER DJ

But I bet you know some things about them don't you?

### SASHA

Yes I do.

(*Walking across stage addressing women.*) I have taken off all my clothes in front of your husband. Your husband gave me twenty-five dollars to let him smell my dirty shoes. Your husband wore lingerie to the club, your lingerie, in fact, under a business suit, and we spent hours talking about how he'd love to be a stripper named Cindy, which I know—is your sister's name.

That's not all I know. I know your name, too. Beth. Maryanne. Regina. I know that you haven't had sex in over three years, not with this man anyway. I also know that despite that, your husband

loves you deeply. Because along with the endless perversions they bring in to sort out, men talk to strippers about their wives all the time. Lovingly. Fondly. Boastfully even. Your husband gave me 400 dollars just to sit and talk about your hysterectomy and when I had to go onstage he asked me to dance to “Unchained Melody” because that was your song.

Still, this is not what either of you signed up for is it? This holy contract is not supposed to change, isn't allowed to change. This man in your house feels he would betray you, lose you, if he revealed his true needs and desires. He feels that sniffing shoes or wearing panties is not what a real husband does and he is certain you would feel the same. So he creates a secret life, where he shares these things with naked twenty-five-year-olds.

We have names for many of the significant unions in our society: husband and wife, doctor and patient, priest and penitent. What would this relationship be called?

**SISTER DJ**

Sacred and Profane.

**SASHA**

Huh?

**SISTER DJ**

Sacred and Profane. You know, the Emile Durkheim theory about the sacred/profane dichotomy.

**SASHA**

You know his work?!

**SISTER DJ**

Sure! Fascinating stuff. See, Durkheim believed that these two things were not equivalent to good versus evil and that the sacred could be good or evil and the profane good or evil as well.

**SASHA**

I'm not really following you.

**SISTER DJ**

Look at it like yin and yang but not really. There's a little yin in the yang and a little yang in the yin. The profane can be sacred and the sacred profane. Your relationship is both sacred and profane. Deep stuff man.

**SASHA**

Pssst. Please. Husbands come to the ad hoc confessional of the strip club not to be told they could be good if they only stopped coveting this fucked-up thing that gives them peace and allows them to carry on in their day to day, but to be told that they are good just the way they are.

One of my favourite clients was a man who was christened the MLC, the Miserable Little Cock. Another dancer named Sandy

had given him this name, which he loved, and I was free to entertain him when she was out of town.

The MLC was the most amazing pit of masochism I had ever met. He confessed to me that he became a masochist after he'd been in a car accident where he was trapped and lay twisted and roasting for ten minutes before fire fighters were finally able to pry him out. His left leg had been burnt horrifically from the calf down and he walked with a pronounced limp. I could never understand how this experience opened up the door to him embracing sexual pain so zealously, but there it was.

Perhaps it was just the thing he needed to make it feel acceptable.

If you asked the MLC why he didn't just go to see a dominatrix, someone who he could really get into the nitty gritty of it all with, he would tell you such physical intimacy conflicted with his marital commitment too deeply. So with this restriction in mind, Sandy came up with a brilliant way of fulfilling his needs. She would call him at a preset time, give him curt instructions on what she wanted him to do, and he would take a Polaroid of himself doing it. These photos would have had any third-year art student or hipster lifestyle magazine editor creaming in their fucking pants. The MLC was a travelling salesman so the backdrop was often some dreary hotel room in Syracuse or some such place, his face always carefully concealed, his body such a clichéd profile of perversion: lily white, hairy, flabby, no ass whatsoever. He would bring this evidence to the club and we would talk for hours about how it felt, did he enjoy it, did you enjoy looking at him in such a way. How did he manage to pull off such a spectacular stunt? His own personal affirmation.

My personal favourite was when I got him to stick a hot curling iron up his ass. This took some effort because of course I needed to see that it was plugged in and lit up but he managed with a compelling triptych. The best part of this story was that he returned the curling iron to the store afterwards. “It was twenty dollars,” he shrugged, “and it's not like I was going to use it again.”

One day I called the MLC on schedule and before I could start barking out my list of demands—one which included chopsticks and rubber bands in case you're interested—I hear a child's voice on the other end. The MLC materialized quickly on the other line, “I've got it Casey,” he said and the kid put the receiver back like kids do, clunk, clunk, clunk. And then in the background a woman's voice, “Michael, who's that on the phone?” And silence.

**SISTER DJ**

Sacred, meet Profane.

(*St. Stripper and Sasha dance to “Latex Dominatrix.”*)

**SASHA**

Believe it or not, stripping can be very monotonous. Weeks will go by where you'll just go into work, take your clothes off, pretend you're interested in golf, make some money, go home, eat a pork chop, and go to bed. And then one night, just a night that seems like it's going to be like any other night, something spectacular happens. Something that you can't believe the whole world doesn't



get to see. Something that makes you say, “Not that I would ever work a nine to five job, but here’s just one more reason why I don’t.” Take for example the night I was working at the Chateau du Sexe and these two women came in claiming to be feature dancers. You all know what feature dancers are now, right?

First, a bit about the club. The Chateau was, back in the mid eighties, one of the favourite targets of picketing women’s groups because the entrance was particularly offensive to them: two massive legs bordering either side of the door, with a giant pair of panties that you could look up at the top. By the time I had begun working there in the early nineties the legs had been retired to the dressing room and rather perilously at that. Girls were forever tripping over them, and running their stay-up stockings on the ragged fiberglass edges. The current Chateau sign was some sort of clannish crest—a race car flag, a rooster, a frosty beer mug—some attempt at suggesting the club had heritage and legend and was very masculine, I guess. Showcased in the middle was a woman in mid fake orgasm. But no matter how many external renovations they went through, the Chateau was, in the language of film noir, a dump.

Anyway, I walked in to do my shift one night and noticed photocopied eight by tens around the club of these two completely unremarkable looking women. I asked Lena what was going on and she said these two came in and convinced Robbie the manager to let them put a show on that night. I was all like, “Oh my God what now?” At this point I’d worked with a few features, too, so I was also all full of that premeditated apathy. I mean, if these were features, who the hell were they?

### SISTER DJ

Toyota Lee and Lada Lee, I’m guessing.

### SASHA

Anyway, whatever, I got busy dancing for Alain, this redheaded regular who looked exactly like Wayne Kramer from the MC5 and the next thing I know on comes a country version of the “Macarena.” These two features leap to the stage, toy guns a-blazin’. Their costumes, without exaggeration, were sweatpants trimmed with ultrasuede fringe and liberally bedazzled. They were both wearing grimy sports bras and clompy old men’s boots, and please excuse me if I’m making this part up, but I think one of them was wearing a miniature cowboy hat. One of them had what would be considered even by classy strip club standards a flawless body, while the other had ... well it seemed as though she had recently given birth, and was a bit flappy out in front and her nipples were really dark. They high kicked, paddy-wacked, and whooped as we all stood watching them, every one of us speechless except this one guy in the back who kept yelling ...

### SISTER DJ

(As Guy in the Back.) “What in the FUCK is this?”

### SASHA

Even after one of them kicked a client clean in the forehead spinning around the pole, they didn’t stop.

Don’t get me wrong. (*Wearily.*) I had been privy to many, many madcap diversions at the Chateau du Sexe. One girl who smelt horrendous, whom we later discovered had gangrene or some such thing on her foot, a girl jumping off the stage and beating two guys in the front row for starting a chant about her ass pimples, to name just two, but this was different.

Yes, they had that thrilling inbred quality about them that middle-class people love to laugh at, like none of them are inbreds or have any photos of themselves in tasselled, appliqued athletic wear. But what really made these girls so goddamn glorious was their unbridled enthusiasm. Where did they come up with this Vaudevilian concept? On the bus over from Habitibe? Were they kissing cousins, on the lam? Sisters, the one helping the other through a tumultuous pregnancy and single motherhood? And if that was the case, where was the baby? Did they leave it in a cheap motel just for a few hours? Or was it in that gym bag upstairs? I watched them, utterly enraptured, and thought to myself, you know what? No matter what you hear and read and see from most mainstream news sources, there is optimism and determination and creativity in people who sell sex.

As I was busy cultivating this unusually generous attitude, I noticed around one of their necks, and then the other’s, a pendant with what looked like a spinning star of David. Jews. Huh.

### SISTER DJ

Nope (*exhaling cigarette*), Raelians.

### SASHA

What?

### SISTER DJ

Sure. UFO religion. Made in a petri dish by aliens, gonna come back to Earth and get them real soon blah blah blah. Tons of them in the clubs.

### SASHA

Huh.

Of course, we all ganged up on them after their show and threw them out of the club when they started offering half-price table dances, though. I mean Jesus we all knew we were working in a shithole. We knew the Chateau was considered the lowest of the low, but this was beyond what any of us were willing to tolerate. I don’t care what planet you’re from, like I always said oh so knowingly to the Beavs, “Ladies, it’s a job, it’s not a field trip.”

(*Interlude with Sister DJ singing “Macarena.”*)

### SASHA

Section 167 of the Canadian Criminal Code deals with immoral or indecent performances. One example of an immoral or indecent performance would be a sex act that is simulated but is so realistic that a reasonable observer could not determine that it is simulated. A rather unnecessary provision, if you ask me. Strippers

in the room will know that authenticity is not exactly a priority in our job.

And maybe these laws are new to the rest of you, but one thing we all know is that straight men lose their fucking marbles over lesbians. But not real lesbians, the kind who go home without a guy and sleep together for their own selfish pleasure, possibly not even bothering to make sure their nails are nice and long and sharp and pointy, but the kind of lesbians whose desire is determined by how many men are watching them. It's the power of the male gaze that makes them gay. Must. Take. My. Clothes. Off. With. My. Friend. Chanelle. And. Flick. My. Tongue. Around. Her. Labia. Area. Can't. Stop. Myself.

In the clubs here in Montreal, this display of wooden, soulless sapphism was called *La Couple Erotique*, the Erotic Couple—note how any reference to orientation is cleverly evaded—and it followed the same prosaic pattern each and every time, world without end. One girl comes out onstage, lays out a wildly inappropriate children's blanket with some Looney Tunes character on it—never the genius Bugs Bunny—don't ask me why, but strippers love those fucking Looney Tunes, I guess it sets the scene for the afterschool teen slut shenanigans to follow. She then makes her way over to the pole, leaving the blankie mysteriously in her wake. What's going to happen? Why did she just lay the blanket out on the stage and walk away from it? Is she crazy? No, no, she's just waiting for her girlfriend to come over, also wearing a bikini and stilettos, just like we all did when we went over to our friends' houses after school. Oh hello girlfriend, would you like to come over and writhe around the pole with me for a bit? And then my favourite stripper move ever. She looks down, touches her crotch, looks up at the audience with limpid eyes, as if to say, "Oh my, look what I have here. I brought my pussy with me tonight, my very best, special pussy, also my very best special friend. I also just happened to leave this idiotic baby blanket lying over here. You wouldn't mind if we ...?"

*(St. Stripper and Sasha do Couple Erotique to "Song Instead of a Kiss.")*

## SASHA

*(Still wrapped in blanket at end of stage after Couple Erotique.)*  
Lot of people are going home to fuck after that.

I'm not sure if this was a dream I had or if it really happened.

I was working at one of the many small clubs I worked at on Sainte Catherine. In this case the Chateau de Sexe again. I had to go to the bathroom but rather than go to the one in the dressing room, I went to the bathroom hidden in the back of the club up a flight of stairs. It was an amazing place, a bit shabby but completely untouched décor-wise since the mid twentieth century. Like so many businesses in Montreal, the Chateau was lodged in a building that was much larger than the space it actually took up. Nobody ever bothered to move the vestiges of the former businesses out. They simply built around them. History is always so close in this city. It is with us everywhere and always.

As I was washing my hands after I peed I noticed another door at the end of the stalls and of course I had to open it. It revealed



Cat Nimmo as Mary and Her Immaculate Heart.  
Photo by Alex Russel, [WhoDoYouLovePhotography.com](http://WhoDoYouLovePhotography.com)

the contents of an abandoned workroom: there were old sewing machines, gun-metal grey steel tables, a dusty adding machine, old clothing racks, a punch clock. A space formerly bustling with purpose now left to inspire a different kind of wonder.

In this room was a calendar with a picture of the Virgin Mary on it. A pin-up calendar of sorts, like the ones you'd see in a garage with one single image and a little booklet of the months stapled to the bottom. A little more chaste but with the same intention: to inspire the employees, to assure them that their toil wasn't all in vain. Her face was reassuring, warm, and benevolent. Not a trace of remorse. Her actions always pure.

Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary Magdalene. Icons, providing a sense of solidarity to the women who work in these places, but they

don't tell the whole story, the real story of the sacred and the profane. They don't tell their own stories at all actually. Their histories are cobbled together by men who need soothing and simplistic visions of womanhood to ease their uncertainties about the great paradox of intimacy.

*(Wind sound, lights go dark and then come up again.)*

## SASHA

The Ice Storm in Montreal was very much how I imagined the Protestant version of Heaven to be. It was as if the great bony hand of Jean Cauvin had swept over the pious yet prurient city and said, "Montreal, *calme ton sexe*." It was really still and bright. Suffocating yet simultaneously desolate. When the wind would blow through the paralyzed trees it sounded like hundreds of broken wineglasses shifting around in cardboard boxes.

Night brought an altogether different celestial atmosphere. Just about everything was closed downtown to conserve power, but it being Montréal, of course nobody expected the strip clubs to shut down even for a second. Montreal: famous for its places of devotion. You'd come in from this dark, abandoned crystal universe into a peaceful sanctuary gleaming with cheap disco lights. You'd walk through the nave, past the altar of the stage, and upstairs to the tabernacle of the dressing room where the tanning beds hummed and glowed and the entire space was misty from girls taking showers perpetually. Many of them were without power so they would come in early to prepare or just have some respite from the dark, cold silence of their homes.

It was 1998 and I didn't know it then but it would turn out to be the last year I danced.

I retained power throughout the entire storm but I was in early because my regular client Neil had emailed me and told me had something really important to tell me. What would be an appropriate introduction to Neil?

You know that stout, crabby guy who works at your photocopy store? The one you and your friends laugh at secretly because he probably, at the age of forty-seven, still plays Dungeons and Dragons? The guy whose fingers are perpetually yellow not from smoking but eating Doritos?

Neil used to come in once a week, usually Friday, straight from work. He always had a little something for me, usually photocopies of things he thought I'd find funny. I told him I liked comics so he'd often bring in *Cathy*. You know *Cathy*, the ordinary, perpetually single, sexless gal who works a mundane office job with idiots and wears her heart on her top.

Neil also brought in perfume samples from Eaton's and for special occasions like Valentine's, Christmas, or your birthday, a hand-painted lead figurine—a unicorn or maybe a cat.

By the time of the ice storm I had been dancing for Neil for three years. Two dances a week for three years. Twelve dollars a week for three years. Usually I'd spend a few more songs talking with him, free because I really liked him and we did have some kind of friendship, albeit a strange and stilted one. He would say things like, "I've had a pip of a day," and I thought that was funny.

I learned about Neil from other dancers too, before I began dancing for him. Shawna had also been dancing for him for a long time, almost a decade actually. Once she asked him to write her a sex story just for fun. Something about what he'd do with her if he could. He brought it in one day and told her only to read it after he left. We bolted up to the dressing room to have a peek at it as soon as the door closed behind him. It was unbelievably sexy and I still think it's one of the best pieces of erotic fiction I've read.

As I prepared to go downstairs I wondered what Neil wanted to talk about. Maybe he wanted to tell me he wouldn't be coming to see me anymore. Clients often did this as a way of trying to gauge your commitment to them, a weird break-up of sorts.

I handed my music to the DJ and when I did, I saw Neil was waiting at his usual seat in the back, his grey hair glowing under the black lights, his fingerprint-smearred glasses catching the light.

So Neil, what's up? I said, sitting on my box and looking up at him.

And out it all comes:

*(As Neil.)* "I was very shy when I was a teenager. I lived in a sort of a rural area with my family and I never asked any girls out and none of them seemed interested in me anyway so I was pretty surprised when I was fifteen and this girl who lived a few doors down asked me on a date. I said alright. The date part of it was alright. We went to a movie, we went out for a hamburger afterwards. When I took her home, with no expectations, she suggested we go to the woods behind our houses. Things went faster than I expected. It was exciting. We kissed and she let me touch her breasts. We kissed some more. Then we both went home alone.

Three days later, her two older brothers showed up at my house, took me to the woods, tied me to a tree, and beat me, especially you know where. They told me if I ever went near their sister again, they'd kill me."

And so Neil never went near their sister again. In fact, just to be sure, he stayed away from women altogether. He focused on his career. He worked hard in school, studying technical drawing, and became someone sought after in his field. He got a good job. This is good for a man's self-esteem, a good job and respect at work. Neil began to feel that maybe he might start looking into women again. Maybe try one of those dating services you see in the newspaper.

Then along came computer technology and with it the end of Neil's essential skills. And Neil had himself a nervous breakdown.

It took him three years to recover from this blow and, really, never fully. He started working in a copy shop making multiples of peoples' small hopes for success and connection and recovery: 'zines, poems, business proposals, posters for lost pets, keys, wallets. Working at a mundane job with idiots, sexless, carefully hiding his heart.

At a certain point he started thinking that maybe he'd like to experiment with the idea of women again. There are women in strip clubs. Eleven years later here he is, paying girls to dance and talk and like him. Eliminating the risks involved in real relationships and along with them the pleasures.



Neil told me all this and all I kept thinking was I'm not going to fuck him.

Neil didn't know anything about my life outside this club. Didn't know about my boyfriend, didn't know about Pascale, the girl I slept with at work, my apartment, my cats. To him, I existed in this box, for his devotion and his pleasure and his comfort alone. What was I doing in here, sitting in the dark with a middle-aged virgin who gave me twelve dollars every week hoping that at some point it would add up to a relationship? I wanted to scream at him. It's a fucking fantasy okay? All of it. None of this is real. This place where you come and worship is not a panacea for despair and I'm not going to save you from a life of loneliness.

Neil felt that we had a connection and because of this I would absolve him of his virginity, this monumental shame he felt around his castrated manhood. I couldn't do this. I wasn't qualified to deal with this. Who was? A priest, another virgin? Was this what it was like to be in that position, to have someone trust you with their deepest, most secret need and to look at you for reassurance and realize that everything you have to offer will never be enough?

So I looked at him and I smiled one of those crunchy, chin down-turned smiles, and he looked at me and I could see that he understood the limitations of our relationship and I said, "Neil, I don't think this is the right place to talk about sex." And I got up. And I started to dance.

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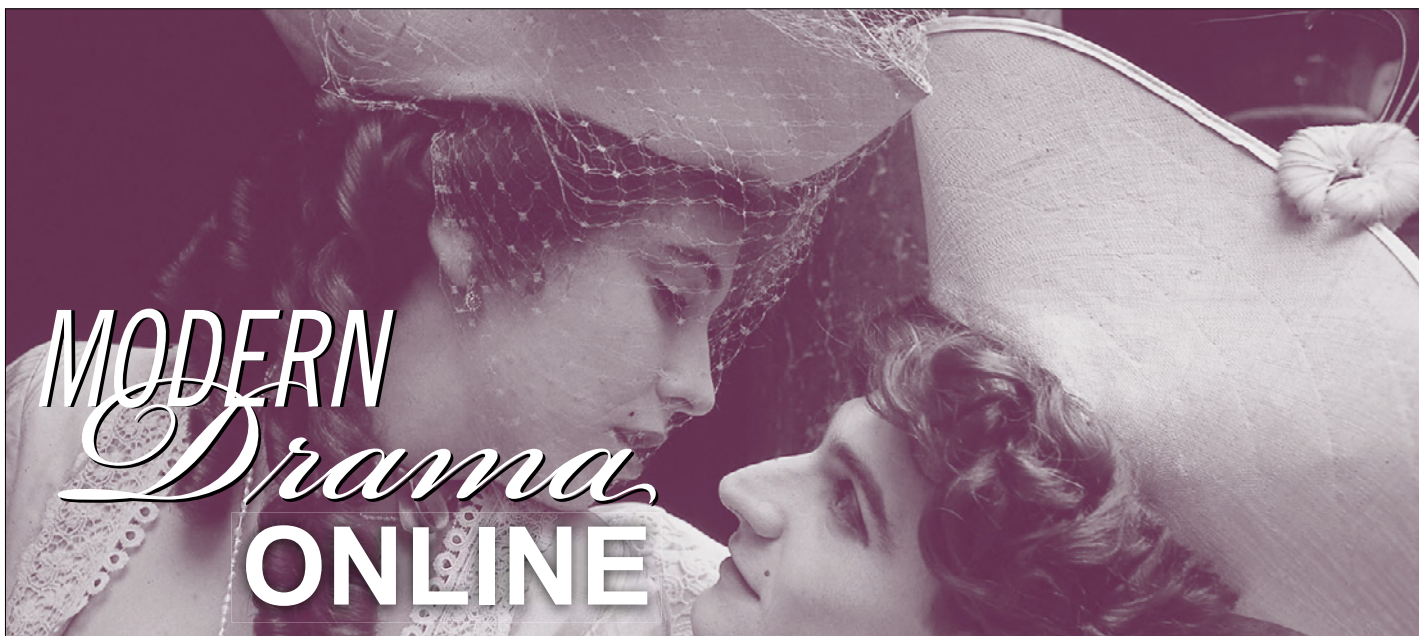
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# The Politics of Burlesque: A Dialogue Among Dancers

by Adriana Disman

Everyone's got something to say about the politics of burlesque. I wanted to hear from the performers themselves. So I invited dancers from across Canada to write a little about what "the politics of burlesque" mean for them. Some describe socially engaged acts, some talk about the reasons behind their decision to perform, and still others express a dedication to carving out specifically politicized space for themselves within the burlesque scene. While this slideshow strives to represent performers from different burlesque communities, it is important to point out that it not comprehensive, and more work needs to be done to represent the multiplicity of bodies and identities that appear in this genre (such as Indigenous, trans, and disabled performers). I hope this slideshow will open space for more burlesque performers to be heard in dialogue about the politics of the art form.







Photo by Olena Sullivan, photolena.ca

I was the first black neo-burlesque performer in the country, and I am still one of very few to this day. I love the glamorous costumes, the unabashed sexuality, and the creative autonomy that such a medium provides. When I perform burlesque I have creative control over every single aspect of my act and a lot of ability to influence audience perception. Many damaging stereotypes exist concerning the sexuality of black women, so having a medium to tell a different story is something I find incredibly empowering.

One of my favourite characters to play is the Church Lady. She is prim and proper yet passionate and playful. She takes the two most common black female sexual tropes—the de-sexualized “good” Mammy and the over-sexualized “bad” Jezebel—and turns them on their head, forcing the audience to confront their pre-conceived notions about what is and is not sexy and appropriate.

—CoCo La Crème



*I'm a sex educator and activist in my work life, a burlesque artist on the side, and a black woman always. I bring all the complex aspects of myself and my politics into my performance because it's important to me to do more than just look pretty on stage. I want to tell a new story, I want to give you something unexpected, and I want us to have a transformative experience together. I perform to create a space for myself to exist in a world that would rather make me invisible. Burlesque for me is therapy, art, activism, and exhibitionism all rolled into one sexy package! I wouldn't give it up for anything!*

—CoCo La Crème

### About the Artist

CoCo La Crème is a dynamic Toronto burlesque artist who has been performing solo and with pioneering burlesque troupe Skin Tight Outta Sight for ... many years. [cocolacreme.com](http://cocolacreme.com)



Photo courtesy of CoCo La Crème, photo by David Hawe







Photo by Karen Chan, ihartvan@gmail.com

The Pickton piece is definitely a sensitive piece and not for every audience. I created the piece as an expression of frustration and anger, not over the Pickton case itself, but at the authorities' and public's easy disregard for these women's lives because they were not standard members of society. Looking at the photos of the women's faces that the police released in connection with the case really got to me. In all of them you saw so much humanity, individuality, and human spirit. I wanted to let these women live again, be respected again, be beautiful again—if only for a moment. The music in the piece is Christina Aguilera's "Beautiful," and at the beginning I layered an audio clip from a news piece about the case. I wanted to give them life and then respectfully set them to rest. But I didn't want to sugarcoat the situation.

—Burgundy Brixx





The element of striptease involved in burlesque is something that I like to utilize to peel away the layers of an issue. I have a degree in theatre and a minor in dance. I come from a very strong modern dance background. This piece is more based in those aspects of performance than in what most people consider burlesque, but it's the peeling—the removal of all the complex layers of a sensitive topic until a raw simple concept remains—that's a theatricality I can only define as part of burlesque. Many people will only consider the art form of burlesque as light entertainment, not as a political statement or introspective education. So I've begun calling that piece "performance art" rather than "burlesque" in order to appeal to people's artistic comfort levels.

—Burgundy Brixx

## About the Artist

Burgundy Brixx is an internationally recognized burlesque performer, educator, and producer of Canada's most popular burlesque show, *Kitty Nights*, in Vancouver, BC. [burgundybrixx.com](http://burgundybrixx.com)



Photo by Karen Chan, [ihartvan@gmail.com](mailto:ihartvan@gmail.com)



The inspiration for the duet was manifested through a series of events with my partner Villainy Loveless. She approached me with the concept after seeing a post on my Facebook with the song “Perfection” by Oh Land; later I tweeted “I love my body” and the two posts stuck with her. We created the number to reflect our own struggles with body image; we wanted to show the inward violence that we as women have perpetuated against ourselves but also show the desire for self-love and acceptance. I feel I grew through creating this number—the feedback from our community has been overwhelming. We knew we had tapped into something honest and real.

—Ruthe Ordare



Photo by Rufio van Hoover, recklessphotography.ca



Broken Doll was born out of my need to heal after a very toxic and emotionally abusive relationship. I had no desire to rekindle the relationship, but I knew I still had some anger that I needed to purge. Inspiration manifested from his pet name for me, "doll." To me, a doll has no internal motivations, desires, or feelings of its own, only the ones projected onto it by a child. This was very much a reflection of our relationship. This partner also discouraged me from losing weight (based on his physical preference), thus denying my body autonomy. In the number I rip off over-stuffed doll arms, pull a stuffing boa out of my belly and tear off a doll dress. To close the number I reveal a large, heart shaped pastie on my left breast, rip half of it off, and drop it. Performing this number was what some of us in Vancouver like to call a "Phoenix Number," where we take all of our emotions, set them on fire, and rise from the ashes. After performing it, I felt relieved. I felt like I had taken a weight off of my shoulders, and I forgave myself for being in that relationship.

—Ruthe Ordare

## About the Artist

Ruthe Ordare is a neo-classical burlesque performer based in Vancouver, BC; she is a member of Pandora & The Locksmiths and teaches at The Vancouver Burlesque Centre.



Photo by Derek Stevens, fubarfoto.com







Photo by Yannick Anton

*For me, burlesque is a feminist act. It is femme worship and defiance. It is about affirming myself, my body, and my sexuality as a black woman moving through the world. As a storyteller, I feel it is important to tell a story with my body—not as a secondary object or as somebody else's object, but purely my own. I perform burlesque as theatre, storytelling, seduction; it is an autonomous act of self-love and ownership.*

—Dainty Smith, performing as Dainty Box



*My sexuality very much informs my work, and it is important to me that the art of burlesque is shown in queer spaces and performed by performers who identify as queer burlesque performers. It's vital to challenge beauty ideas and what is accepted as sexy and desirable. To affirm different body shapes and sizes, skin colours, gender fluidity. Queering burlesque goes a long way in asking those questions and giving new answers.*

—Dainty Smith, performing as Dainty Box

### About the Artist

Dainty Smith is an actor, burlesque performer, and writer who believes in truth and vulnerability. [daintysmith.com](http://daintysmith.com)



Photo by Nabil Shash







Photo courtesy of Sauci Calla Horra, photo by Olena Sullivan, photolena.ca

I'm a social worker by day, so I am very aware of the political context of burlesque. When we see the old tease reels, we tend to forget that those burlesque performers were marginalized in the past much like sex-trade workers are today. We still have to strive for legitimacy amongst other artists and with sponsors, even though our performances are usually more PG-13 than most music videos or even lingerie ads in bus shelters. This is alternately amusing and frustrating. My goal is to challenge stereotypes of beauty and celebrate sexuality. Burlesque dancers have real female bodies and we're often older. We don't need to look like fashion models or porn stars. And we aren't washed up at twenty-six!

—Sauci Calla Horra







Photo courtesy of Sauci Calla Horra, photo by Ruth Gillson

I use burlesque as my mode of self-expression. My current inspiration is exploring grief and loss, a strange topic for burlesque. For example, my piece *Ballad of a Soldier's Wife* is a reverse strip where I start off scantily clad and get dressed during the song. The story is that I'm receiving gifts from my husband while he is posted different places during WWII. I put each gift on and end up dressed as a widow at the end as I receive the letter stating that my husband has died in the line of duty. It's an interesting act to perform as there's no happy ending. I find it cathartic. It may sound corny, but I feel more integrated and healthy through doing burlesque.

—Sauci Calla Horra

## About the Artist

Sauci Calla Horra is the producer behind *Skin Tight Outta Sight Rebel Burlesque* and is also the Founder and Executive Producer of *The Toronto Burlesque Festival*. [skintightouttasight.com](http://skintightouttasight.com), [torontoburlesquefestival.com](http://torontoburlesquefestival.com)





I think I'm having a hard time with talking about my politics as a burlesque performer because a lot of the time I feel very much like an outsider in the burlesque community, even though I helped spearhead its revival. I don't feel very political about it in the sense a lot of the performers do. I don't feel "empowered" in the sense a lot of the others do or feel the need to work out some "therapy," and I scoff at the body politic, not wanting to be a part of the so-called fat parade. My performances are closer to ritual, specifically ritual in the witchcraft sense. I believe in seduction over the cerebral. I think people forget this is really about SEX! They get caught up in the tease and coquetry of it all.

—Tanya Cheex

Photo courtesy of Tanya Cheex, photo by David Howe



I'm greatly influenced by the circus sideshow. I have a tribute to Myrtle Corbin, the Four-Legged Lady, where my reveal is a set of miniature legs under my skirt that tap dance to Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer." Sideshow performers were outsiders of society, ridiculed in public, but who developed strong bonds and community in the circus; that's not to say there were not cases of abuse and mistreatment. For a lot of them, this life was preferable to the outside. The well-known photograph of Myrtle Corbin represents a static time. The somber facial expression, the Victorian dress with the boots and stockings, complete with a twin set of tiny legs, indicate a second sexuality fetishized, a further challenge to Victorian sexual mores.

— Tanya Cheex

### About the Artist

Toronto-based Tanya Cheex staged her first "strip show" at the age of eight in her neighbours' backyard and went on to become the Founder and Artistic Director of Skin Tight Outta Sight and the first inductee into the Canadian Burlesque Hall of Fame. [skintightouttasight.com](http://skintightouttasight.com)



Photo courtesy of Tanya Cheex







# Unapologetic Burlesque

## Pride at the Gaystone 2013

Vena Kava (Co-Producer, Performer), Matthew (Outreach/Accessibility Coordinator, Performer), Ebonee Darling (Performer), Chase (Stage Manager, Performer), Scorpio Rising (Co-Producer, Performer)

Photo courtesy of Unapologetic Burlesque, photo by Max + Gna

*As people of colour performers, we had been finding many Toronto burlesque spaces hard to navigate and uneasy spaces to be in, where whiteness, heteronormativity, and cultural appropriation often create similar scripted characters, repeating storylines, racism, and other forms of harm. After having conversations in an arts-based community program about burlesque's radical and often forgotten history of commenting and poking fun at the "status quo," we decided to see what the possibilities were to create a space for alternate, subversive, and radical narratives and representations of burlesque to be celebrated.*

*Thus was born Unapologetic Burlesque: a queer, consensual, anti-racist show where the performers can tell their own stories, not ones that are dictated by what audiences and larger society want to hear.*

—Unapologetic Burlesque







Photo courtesy of Unapologetic Burlesque, photo by Hamidah Hemani

*To us burlesque is consensual: you get to choose who gets to see what, where, and when; who looks where and when; what you wear, choose to take off, what to put on, and what stays on the whole time.*

*This show gives performance space to emerging, first-time, and seasoned performers who are people of colour, Indigenous, queer, genderqueer, trans, people of varying body sizes, people of all abilities, people from varying class backgrounds. We acknowledge that even within queer people of colour performing spaces there are barriers to accessibility, and still certain bodies and genders don't get as much space as others. We hope that the goal of broadening accessibility and representation will be part of an ongoing dialogue.*

—Unapologetic Burlesque

## About the Artist

Toronto burlesque performers Scorpio Rising and Vena Kava came together in 2012 to create Unapologetic Burlesque. [unapologeticburlesque.weebly.com](http://unapologeticburlesque.weebly.com)



# Views and Reviews

## Editorial

by Jenn Stephenson

I am trying to think, to write, and my body keeps getting in my way. It is too cold in here. My shoes are new and they chafe. I have a hangnail. I can't find my glasses. With all due respect to Descartes, my body is more than a neutral container for my mind. In opposition to Cartesian dualism, which proposes a separation between mind and body, contemporary thinking supported by advances in cognitive neuroscience now tells us that consciousness is embodied, that is, the physical characteristics of my biological self as well as my material environmental context have a direct effect on what I think and how I feel. For example, a recent study suggests that intentionally strong action can impel intentionally strong cognitive function, in this case empathy. Participants who grasped a pen firmly in their hands, strongly engaging the muscles, were more generous in writing cheques for charity than those who dangled a pen lightly in their fingers (Hung and Labroo). Similar correlations between body engagement and conscious thought manifest through seeing or hearing others perform related actions even if my own body is passive. Mirror neurons excite corresponding areas of the viewer's brain that match the active brain areas of the actor (Thomas). Linking the action of staged bodies to the understanding of audience bodies in these ways, theatre presents a profound opportunity to explore the interrelated experiences of bodies in the world.

As Susan Bordo writes, "The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture" (165). The body is a surface "on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (Bordo 165). It is through the body, through its appearance, habits, gestures, posture, movement, and adornment, that we enact sociopolitical self-projections. For each of the performers and performances reviewed here, the staged body as a locus of social power and control is the object of consideration of the work. Rather than establishing an indirect representational relationship between the performer's body and some other fictional body elsewhere as the vehicle of artistic communication, the actual bodies appearing (or in one case significantly not appearing) are themselves in a direct way what the performance is about.

In our first piece, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey mimics the episodic faux documentary style of the cabaret performance *Miss Toronto Acts Back* created by the DitchWitch Brigade, directed by Antje Budde. Spanning more than six decades, the history of the Miss Toronto beauty pageant provides the material used by

the group to humorously and subversively skewer socially imposed roles for women over this period. In her review, Fitzsimmons Frey reflects self-consciously on her discomfort and her laughter dually positioned both as culpable audience voyeur and invaded subject of the reversed gaze.

Conventional ideals of beauty, specifically the otherworldly golden hair of fairytale princess Rapunzel, also attract the attention of visual artist and performer Chika Modum. In her performance *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified* at the University of Calgary, Modum literally rewrites the story of Rapunzel/Chika, tracing and mischievously changing the words, first on a white wall and then on her own white dress, both of which she ultimately abandons. Reviewer RICHARD SMOLINSKI considers the physical struggle of the performer to complete these tasks and, by extension, the challenge of effecting an escape from the invasive and restricting identity values superscribed on bodies by language.

*White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* by Nassim Soleimanpour is premised on the fact that at the moment of performance the playwright, unable to travel having been denied a passport by the Iranian government, uses the play to travel virtually. Casting the solo actor as "Nassim," the essentially absent playwright-body becomes present each night through a trick of theatrical possession. A popular global phenomenon, *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* saw many productions from its premiere in the summer of 2011 to the present; however, when Soleimanpour was granted a passport and attended his own production in February 2013, the play experienced a radical sea change that shakes the performance to its foundations. Kelsey Jacobson, a devoted scholar of this play over its short life, considers the implications of this new situation in negotiating the interplay of the absent body, its ventriloquized stand-in, and the potential appearance of the actual body of the playwright in the audience.

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# Miss Toronto Acts Back: Observing and Thinking in Montage

by Heather Fitzsimmons Frey

*I'm not a fan of arcs, in terms of dramaturgy. At all. As an audience member it's so predictable. It does not respect intelligence. I can see the strategy of indoctrination. And it happens over and over and over. Why should I watch that? It's a waste of time and playful intelligence.*

—Antje Budde, director

## Miss Toronto Acts Back

From 1926 until 1991, women lined up to compete in the Miss Toronto beauty pageant. Run by the City of Toronto Police Department from the mid 1930s onwards, the gendered annual spectacle also featured male-only, athletic police games. The 1937 events included track and field, tug of war, and even pillow fights. Today the games include numerous sports and games for male and female competitors from the police force (Plummer; TPAAA). Even though the police abandoned the pageant in 1991, Torontonians still parade across stages across the city to compete for crowns in contests like Miss Teen Toronto, Miss Chinese Toronto, and Miss World. These performances of conventional beauty constructs surprise me, because I wonder both why someone would want to compete, and why others would want to watch. But people *do* want to exhibit themselves, and people *do* want to watch, and therein lies the provocation that spurred the DitchWitch Brigade into action.

Beginning in the summer of 2008, director Antje Budde led the DitchWitch artists through four years of development and exploration to create three performances in the Miss Toronto series: *Miss Toronto Gets a Life in Parkdale* (2009, 2010) and *Miss Toronto Acts Back* (2011). Rather than adopting a narrative arc that might impose a feeling of logical sense to the moments they chose to present, they opted for an episodic format, presenting a montage of different styles. Budde remarked that she used a montage strategy because “you can edit, you can jump,” and because the strategy does not suggest closure. Budde’s comments about arcs led me to structure this piece into something like a montage of fragments. Inspired by creative structures in film, video, burlesque, vaudeville, and some avant-garde performances in Europe and in China, Budde says of her work, “I feel I am not relating just to one particular culture, but to everything I know. And also everything I don’t know. I wonder about a lot of things, and I just



Spied upon in the dressing room.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde

don’t know how to put that into an arc. I am wondering and I am wandering.”

## Voyeurism and Spectacle

Although the DitchWitch Brigade initially performed *Miss Toronto Gets a Life in Parkdale* at the Rhino Pub in Parkdale, Toronto, by 2011 the show had moved to Unit 102, also in Parkdale—a performance-but-not-theatre space. When I entered this “found” space to watch *Miss Toronto Acts Back*, performer Eve Wylden’s “private” dressing room was on stage, positioned so that I had to step through it as I left the entrance hallway and made my way to the temporary riser seating. Wylden sat perpendicular the audience entrance, in front of her mirror, applying whiteface makeup, while accompanist and supporting performer Art Babayants took a handheld video camera and, paparazzi-style, began filming. Live video was projected onto a large screen that provided the centre stage backdrop.

Usually audiences remain in a privileged position, hidden in the dark, watching without consequence. However, Babayants filmed *us*, the audience, projecting intimate details of selected faces for everyone in the theatre to see. The camera’s gaze lingered longer than a “kiss cam” at a hockey game, and almost as long as a baby’s stare on the bus. Next Babayants turned toward Wylden’s dressing room and, like a voyeur, zoomed in on parts of her body, such as her boot or her nose. As we did previously with fellow



Making a deadly surprise sandwich for her husband while entertaining the baby with a vegetable show.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde



Radio host in conversation with doll Miss Toronto about lifestyle during economic depression.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde

spectators, we could now simultaneously watch the “reality” of Wylden in her dressing room alongside the male camera operator’s viewpoint and choices. “The open, undisguised dynamic between the ‘real’ and the ‘constructed’ is crucial here,” says Budde.

While Wylden did a fabulously kitschy lip sync of Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” hairbrush mic in hand, Babayants’s camera interrupted and disrupted the audience’s gaze, alternating between projecting and framing details of Wylden’s performance on the big screen or a spectator’s own watching face. As the song reached its end, Wylden was ready to leave her “private” dressing room and perform *Miss Toronto*. Winking mischievously at the audience, she zipped up her beige worker’s coveralls. In this momentary reverse striptease, Wylden reminded me that any burlesque performer plays with power and gaze, constructing femininity even as she reveals and conceals her body. What we are invited to see and where we choose to look is inevitably political.

Exhibitionism is a vital part of what actors do. “Not the only part obviously, but it is a driving force for them to go on stage, to be seen [...] The [*Miss Toronto*] actors take responsibility for being exhibitionists, and they play with it during the course of the show, making that aspect of their work visible” (Budde). But the DitchWitch performers also refuse to “let the audience off the hook—like you sit there in the dark and you do whatever you want. No. We undermined that quite often” (Budde). After Wylden left her dressing room for the “actual” performance space, Babayants’s camera turned away from the spectators, and we were treated to a feast of other media and live performance treats, but later the house lights again turned on us as the performers re-visited the theatre space as a 1980s sex-education class, asking spectators personal questions or requesting we read sexually charged material out loud. Throughout *Miss Toronto*, we were rarely permitted to let others be the exhibitionists while the audience hid safely in the dark, and our privacy was never sacrosanct.

## Refocus the Gaze: Vaudeville, Burlesque, and Media History

Babayants grinned at me over a cup of coffee, saying, “You know the famous song, ‘You Gotta Have a Gimmick’ from *Gypsy*? We were not a vaudeville, but we technically had a whole bunch of vaudeville acts. Burlesque also has to have a gimmick for each number—you can’t go on stage without something specific. We had the

male gaze, a puppet, there were songs, there was dancing, there was interaction with the audience—except that we were not trying to be commercial and that’s a significant difference with our show.”

Budde explains that the episodic structure borrows from cabaret and from venues like bars and nightclubs where people go “to socialize, to not be alone. And maybe see something together.” Intentionally located away from conventional theatre venues, the original production of *Miss Toronto* was presented at the Rhino Pub in Parkdale, Toronto, where an exterior wall boasts a mural painting of the photograph of the 1926 Miss Toronto winners. But Budde says that *Miss Toronto*’s dramaturgical frame is linked to a retrospective of mass-media forms and styles rather than to vaudeville or burlesque. Since media of all kinds are involved in gender politics and the politics of representation, and since they can enable a kind of voyeurism, DitchWitch’s hijacked history (blurring fact with fiction) of the Miss Toronto beauty pageant travels along the historical trajectory of the popularization of various forms of media: theatre puppetry, silent film, radio, live and pre-produced television, digital media, and amateur self-made video.

Budde explains further, “The traditions and practices of burlesque were interesting for us in an historical and also a philosophical way. We were also very interested in the actual practices. [...] We would not have had enough skill and time to exercise a strip tease the way highly skilled burlesque dancers can—I mean they are really very specialized in that art form. But we were interested in questioning, challenging, undermining certain perspectives.”

When *Miss Toronto* explored 1960s television formats of beauty competitions, Wylden (playing a fictional rendition of the real beauty pageant contender Carol Goss, known now as former MLA Carol Taylor and current chancellor of Simon Fraser University) stood on a small rotating platform like a mannequin or doll, as Babayants, playing a TV host, constructed her performance of femininity by dressing her in such things as a blonde wig and a stuffed bra. The hilarious but obvious construction of beauty by a male outsider commented on ways that many women allow men, the media, and popular culture to influence their performance of gender. But the moment in the dressing room when Wylden playfully zipped up her coveralls points out that women can control their own performance just as they can direct and refocus the gaze.

After the dressing room/lip sync introduction, the audience is treated to a mockumentary about Eve, a species of person known



A beauty in the making, and the TV host lends a hand.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde



TV host Art quizzes Miss Toronto / Carol Goss.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde

as an “actor.” As we watch the video narrated by an appropriately authoritative, scholarly, and British-sounding male voice, Eve is distracted by a good-looking man, trips, and falls down a sewer. There she stumbles on the history of Miss Toronto in the form of silent movie footage unearthed for the first time. That faux historical document takes us back to the 1920s.

The first scene includes a 1920s-style, black-and-white silent film. As the flapper (performed by Wylden) rehearses her interpretative dance talent-show number for the first Miss Toronto pageant, the on-stage Wylden sings about the silent film flapper proto-feminist who is shocked to discover that the early version of the beauty pageant did not include a talent show, all to the tune of “Puttin’ on the Ritz” and accompanied, silent film-style, by Babayants on piano. Among the things we learn about the beauty pageant rules, we’re told newspapers helpfully printed the names and addresses of the girls, enabling interested “suitors” to find the contestants.

The 1930s are discussed through a radio talk-show interview (with a Charlie McCarthy ventriloquist Miss Toronto puppet), the 1940s through wartime news reporting (highlighted by a disturbing tap-dancing number performed by Babayants partly between Wylden’s legs, reminiscent of the sound of gunfire), and the 1950s through a television cooking show and a filmed radio broadcast focused on the psychology of the “Career Girl.” Babayants played live music to comment on and undercut each scene, manipulating audience laughter and exposing that manipulation. As the Ditch Witch Brigade played expertly with each media style, they pointed out ways that gender constructions and images of beauty have changed—which is to say, despite stylistic variation, surprisingly little.

## Dangerous Laughter

I didn’t laugh constantly during *Miss Toronto*, but I laughed out loud at least once during nearly every scene. Sometimes, like in the 1980s scene when both Babayants and Wylden broke into a voguing sequence as part of their commentary on gay liberation, I laughed in delighted recognition, but other times it was the kind of awkward, uncomfortable laughter that made me cringe. Budde explains that, like burlesque, political comedy that engages with real life, “we created types of laughter that were very complicated. You could laugh throughout the show. It was very funny. But at

the same time it was also cruel. This is where the uneasiness comes from.” Wylden told me she’d hoped people would ask themselves why they felt uncomfortable.

One of the funniest, most grotesque scenes was the 1950s cooking show, where spectators were recast as the TV studio audience. Wylden demonstrated how to prepare a sandwich for her husband (spiced with arsenic), while her plastic-doll baby watched and cried. The vegetables she used became props for what Wylden called, in our interview, “veggie porn.” Mr. Carrot and Mrs. Lettuce were cleaned (Wylden used her teeth on Mr. Carrot in a pseudo-erotic way) and “tossed together” in ways that will forever change the way I see a green salad.

Wylden described some Toronto burlesque, saying, “To be honest, I’m not a huge fan of the shows I’ve seen because a lot of the material doesn’t push the boundaries on gender roles, sexuality, and what is considered beautiful. Most conform to and reinforce beauty stereotypes. The perverseness of this 1950s housewife performing veggie porn to soothe her crying baby and release her repressed sexual desires pushes the envelope in ways that I find much more interesting.” But she admitted that some audience members did not like the “baby” to watch—“maybe it’s a little too much, now that there is a baby involved,” she sighs, and Babayants concurred that some audience members told him the piece was shocking, inappropriate, and vulgar.

But humour scratches people’s edges differently. My cheeks hurt from laughing so hard as the sandwich was assembled, but then the 1950s housewife silenced her “baby” by wrapping it in tinfoil. Suddenly, I was confronted with an “inappropriate” performance of motherhood. Wylden reflected, “I’m sure many mothers have had that gut feeling of just wanting to get their baby to *shut up* but we’re taught that it’s not an acceptable feeling to have. [...] I’m not condoning wrapping babies in tinfoil [...] but I thought the very reason it was funny was because sometimes, deep down, we wish we *could*.” While I would not say I was offended, my anxiety grew even though I *knew* that the scene critiqued assumptions about gender roles and the performance of motherhood and I knew the plastic doll was just a toy. My own real baby was at home with the babysitter, and I did not want to “play” along. Later, during the 1970s segment, Wylden suggested participating in a fictitious “popular” and “televised” party game with the “baby” and invited everyone in the so-called studio audience to liberate





Miss Toronto 1960s revolt inspired by the hippie fun.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde



Poster for *Miss Toronto Acts Back*.  
Photo courtesy of Antje Budde

the “baby” from the tinfoil. Babayants explains, “That feeling of being uncomfortable during every scene of the show is very, very important. Funny uncomfortable or sad uncomfortable—I think it’s important.”

## Gender Construction

When I asked Wylden what she hoped the audience would leave the theatre thinking about, she laughed, saying, “I don’t have any great expectations about someone watching *Miss Toronto* and having a major feminist epiphany.” But she did go on to say that “a project like this provides a kind of counterculture alternative to the popular media, giving people a chance to think about constructions of beauty, gender inequality, and the objectification of women in our society. [...] It allows people to think about how

far we have come in the twentieth century, but also, how far we still need to go.”

The connections made by *Miss Toronto* among beauty pageants, burlesque, and the audience constantly confront the way women can construct themselves (with make-up, hair dye, and even plastic surgery) to conform to contemporary beauty ideals. In her book *Undressed for Success* (2005), Brenda Foley argues that beauty contestants masquerade as “morally upright,” while burlesque dancers represent “naughtiness,” but in both cases women perform ideals pandering to male sexual desire. The crossover is obvious in the conclusion to a June 2009 article about the history of local beauty pageants in Toronto’s *Post City Magazine*: “Perhaps with the economy in the tank, they could add a new contest: Miss TSX 2009. That’s sure to give the index a rise. Ahem” (“Toronto’s Timeless Beauties”).

For me, the scene that epitomizes that uncomfortable position at the threshold of feminism and changing gender performance was the 1950s “career girl.” Budde pulled actual footage from a televised radio broadcast of a show in which male psychologists assessed young women’s suitability to be career girls and rated their likelihood to achieve success with a percentage, not unlike a score in a beauty pageant. The psychologists asked inappropriate and unhelpful questions, like “Do you read romance novels?” and deliberately misinterpreted the young woman’s responses. In *Miss Toronto*, Budde blanked out the female contestant in the footage she projected on the centre stage screen, and Wylden took her place, lip syncing the responses to the psychologists. Wylden saw the original footage and said, “The look on that woman’s face—it’s an intense experience for a modern woman to view. She smiles through the whole thing but you can see the disappointment in her eyes at the end.” Babayants admitted that, no matter how many times he saw Wylden perform that scene, “it always made me feel very uncomfortable as a man. All those people there, the psychologists, they are men.”

## Ghost of Miss Toronto

At the end of the first two *Miss Toronto* productions, Budde offered audience members a chance to engage in political action, suggesting people sign a petition requesting that the unnamed alley close to where you can find the 1926 *Miss Toronto* mural be renamed “Miss Toronto Promenade.” At first, the city said “promenade” was not an official street name, so the Brigade offered “Miss Toronto Way.” Then the City said there were too many street names with “Toronto” in them already, and it would be confusing to police and fire departments. The suggestion died, and in the third rendition of the show, Wylden simply appeared on stage as the Ghost of Miss Toronto, honoured by a eulogy pronounced in English and ragged French.

In our interview, I told Budde that I was never sure whether the DitchWitch Brigade sympathized with and admired the *Miss Toronto* beauty pageant contestants or not. The ridiculous event could merely encourage laughter, but it seemed more complicated than that. She laughed. “Right. Exactly,” she said, smiling, but she did not elaborate. The unanswered questions the show raised floated between us like the Ghost of Miss Toronto.

When I asked Wylden about renaming the back alley, she told me, “I don’t know if it was a joke. It was certainly satirical. It was

both really inappropriate and also completely appropriate. [...] We *could* have a street dedicated to all the Miss Toronto contestants, that makes sense. But then to say we are going to honour them with a back alleyway where hookers hang out—that’s kind of the point, like, how far have we come? Not very far at all. And that would have been a nice reminder. We name streets after men, specific men with names, all the time.”

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## About the Author

Heather Fitzsimmons Frey is a theatre artist writing her PhD dissertation at the University of Toronto Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies. Her academic interests related to Miss Toronto include performances of gender, girlhood, and identity, and using theatre to explore possibilities of agency. She has never been in a beauty pageant.

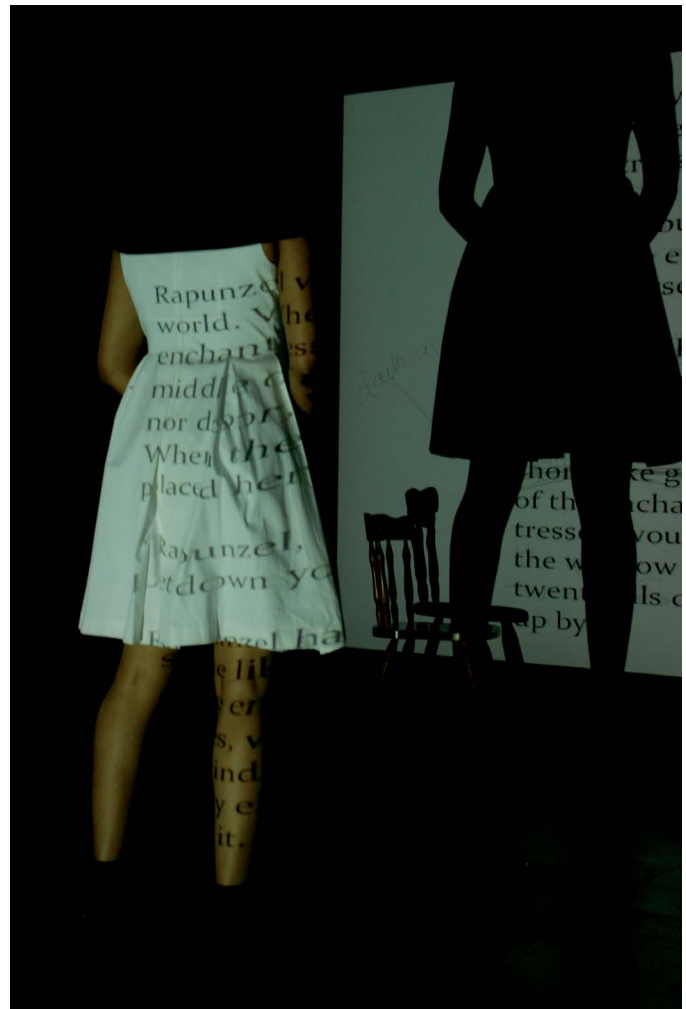
# Chika Modum. *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified*

by RICHARD SMOLINSKI

Little Gallery, Calgary, Alberta. 11 and 13 February 2013

Before leaving Calgary for opportunities overseas, Nigerian-Canadian artist Chika Modum was one of the city's most intriguing emerging creative practitioners. Despite completing her master's degree only a year ago, Modum had already been a participant in Dak'art 2012 Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain and was one of 100 artists short-listed for the UK's inaugural Aesthetica Art Prize. Modum's energy, engagement, and perspective were already having a significant impact on a local art scene in need of greater cultural diversity. Many young Canadian artists, influenced by her creative efforts, will miss the example of her work. Part of this influence stemmed from her time as artist-in-residence at the University of Calgary's Department of Art, where Modum developed a new performance: *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified*, a work whose complexity far surpassed the inventory-like factuality of its title. Revisiting the folktale of Rapunzel, the performance re-situated the story of the cloistered girl with the plentiful head of hair within the context of contemporary, culturally hyphenated feminine identity. Presented at the university's Little Gallery, like many past notable performance works, *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified* took place within a modest venue and was witnessed by an intimate crowd. Despite the limited reach of this initial gesture, the work's intriguing invocation of race and identity issues merits critical reflection and discussion.

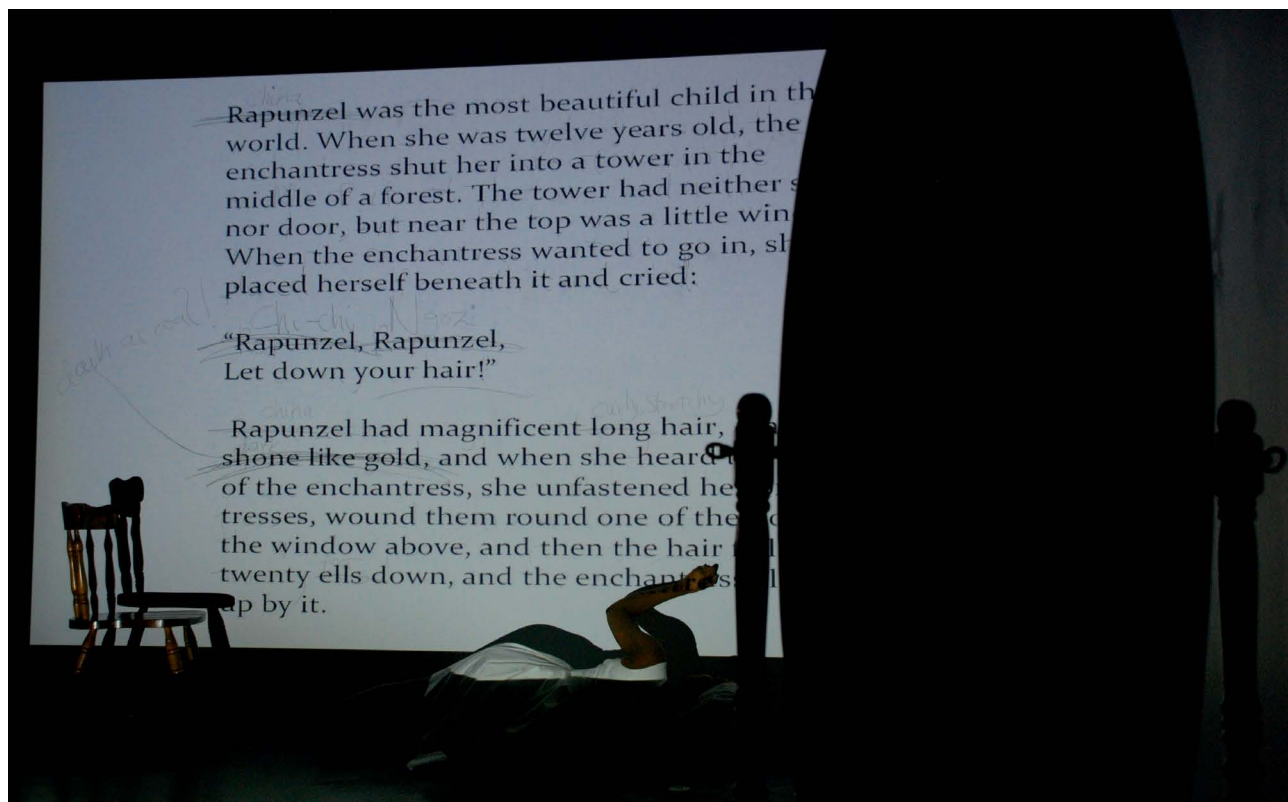
Performance is an interesting choice of medium for Modum as it differs greatly from the static sculptural and installation work that she had previously explored. Drawing attention to the live and moving body of the performer and to issues of how bodily appearances signify cultural and gender identities, performance also provides a means of empathy and identification where the stresses and strains of the performer's body may palpably affect the bodies of audience members, yielding insights and perceptions



From the performance *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified* by Chika Modum, staged at the University of Calgary 2013.

Photo by Setareh Minoofar





From the performance *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified* by Chika Modum.  
Photo by Setareh Minoofar

analogous to the performer's in-the-moment experience. Likewise, the change in practice emphasizes the corporeal form absent from Modum's impressive past creative research into African hair and its socially inscribed implications. Her past sculptural installations featured enormous masses of "hair" braided from black plastic garbage bags. *Isi-Aka* featured over two dozen braided strands that draped from the ceiling to the floor where the separate tendrils were tangled into an intestinal mass. Forming an imperfect curtain the strands of the work drew attention both to themselves as separate and distinct pieces and to their mutual difficulty integrating into a unified whole. In the subsequent project, *Presence*, the braided strands were further formed into coils that emulated a concentric hairstyle that elegantly emphasizes the shape of the skull. These separate coils were then joined to roughly form an elaborate tree trunk-shaped object that seemed to grow from the gallery floor to the ceiling. Despite the implication of growth and power implied by *Presence's* amassed material, the work projected a great deal of stillness and inertia, as if it were the remnant of some Samsonesque shearing of vitality. Physically imposing and coolly abject, *Isi-Aka* and *Presence* mined the strong connection between hair and female performative identity in contemporary Nigerian culture. According to Modum, when a Nigerian woman has her hair styled, it is described as having it "made," a term that insinuates fabrication and creative elaboration, while intimating the construction and fashioning of identity by individuals. The elaborate gravity-defying armatures of hair and the provocatively twisting spires of braids may by turn assert a woman's sense of individual power, social status, and self-determined standards of beauty; however, such "made" hair also signifies that woman's cul-

tural identity and her place within a traditional male-dominated society. While the hairstyles of Nigerian women push the boundaries of style and assert female self-determination within a patriarchal culture, by separating hair from the female body, Modum's work ironically neuters such claims to self-identification by effacing the very individuality that it attempts to claim.

The second of the pair of performances of *identity* attracted an audience of some twenty witnesses. Upon arrival, we found the artist modestly attired in matching white headscarf and tunic-length dress. While a large wall-size projection of the text of the Rapunzel myth loomed behind her, Modum sat quietly inspecting her reflected appearance in a full-length, oval mirror. Near the mirror, there was a small basket containing a few felt-tipped markers and thick graphite sticks. After this initial reflective moment, Modum arose and turned to confront the projection. Choosing one of the graphite sticks and following the early school practice of faithfully copying a set text, Modum began to transcribe the myth onto the wall. At first, the transcription precisely traced the projected words' every letter but the task was quickly subverted as the artist seemed to grow impatient with the methodical process and began to add emphatic flourishes that challenged the boundaries of the text. Furthermore, she proceeded to make several revisions to the familiar narrative. After copying a sentence that declared Rapunzel to be the most beautiful girl in the world, Modum emphatically scribbled out that name and with a cheeky sense of glee substituted "Chika." While in that very instance the subversion of the original text seemed an act of identity obliteration and usurpation, the cumulative effect of Modum's revisions seemed designed to challenge ubiquitous (and Caucasian-privileging) ide-

als of beauty. In place of the conventional assumption of beautiful hair as “long” and consisting of locks that “shone like gold,” Modum revised these aesthetic ideals to assert the beauty of “curly, stretchy” hair that was “dark” (or, as Modum emphasized in a marginal addition, “dark as coal!”).

The scale of the textual projection made Modum seem diminutive and further emphasized the sense of a memory extracted from childhood. Writ large, her weakly scrawled inscriptions seemed to echo a child’s halting attempts to master language, and while initially standing on her tiptoes to reach the top of the projection, there was a palpable sense of Modum not measuring up to the standards set by the grown-up world. Likewise, the scale of the projection made the textual inscription and revision an arduous and physically taxing process, forcing Modum to alternate between writing and recuperative assessment. At these resting points, as she flexed her wrists and rolled her shoulders, the audience began to feel empathetic aches and strains, as if we too had overextended our bodies, attempting to fulfill some difficult challenge. Perhaps it was the proximity between the viewer and the performer, and the lack of a clear distinction between performing and viewing areas within the gallery, but her nervous and tentative bodily movements were infectious and there was a palpable sense that the audience felt the effects of Modum’s exertions and her frustrations with the imposing text. Indeed, despite the initial subversive engagement, a sense of futility overshadowed Modum’s efforts to rewrite the Rapunzel tale as her own. During these uncomfortable breaks in the progress of the transcription, Modum also took time to inspect her appearance. In her quiet self-scrutiny, we could not be sure if she pondered the extent to which she measured up to the claims emblazoned upon the wall or whether she was mustering her strength for further textual confrontation. As the pace slowed, the work became increasingly sombre, and when Modum finally completed her resistive transcription of the myth, she seemed both physically spent and at the precipice of some significant change.

Once again Modum stood and faced the glaring light of the data projector, and she once more looked into the mirror. Instead of seeming to observe her appearance, her gaze focused upon how the various words of the projected myth fell upon her body and literally covered her with layers of abstract ideals and expectations. After scrutinizing the ways that these terms invasively defined and colonized her corporeal form, Modum retrieved a felt marker from the basket and began to trace the words onto her white tunic, reiterating their connotations and implications. Unlike the earlier transcriptions on the wall, the physical movement of her body and the changing undulations of the tunic’s surface obscured this process and it was not immediately apparent which words were being inscribed. After recording and concretizing these once fugitive and insinuating terms upon her garment, Modum turned away from the audience and disrobed. Instead of ending the performance naked and projecting either a sense of liberation or vulnerability, Modum wore jet-black undergarments beneath her white dress. In the absence of the contrasting material of the tunic, Modum’s body was transformed into an indefinite silhouette against the jarring white light of the projector. As they fell upon her darkened form, the black text of the projected words disappeared and momentarily lost their power to distinctly define



Modum inscribing the words of the fairytale text on her white dress.  
Photo by Setareh Minoofar

Modum in terms of societal conventions and expectations; however, escaping these strictures also compromised the visibility that the artist attempted to establish through her intervention into the Rapunzel myth. This final captivating visual gesture, contrasting the body to the text and her racial identity to the conventions enshrined in the myth, aptly summed up what is at stake in Modum’s *identity* performance—throwing over societal expectations can lead to the erasure of the very identity that it was intended to secure. After this climatic moment, the artist hung her rejected garments on the wall next to the projection and exited the space.

A performance that had started with a subversive energy ended equivocally when Modum left behind the inscribed white dress as a mute final offering. At the work’s conclusion, the audience might have reflected upon what we witnessed and may have recalled the efforts of the performer as she struggled against the invasive and seemingly unassailable edifice of language. Some might have wondered, however, to what extent those struggles signalled a substantial change in the matter at hand and actually affected the reality that had inspired the artist’s creative response. At such a point of speculation and inquiry, it is worthwhile to remember how art often enables us to imagine alternate realities and test drive different identities, even though the identities that conventional society projects upon us are difficult to escape, efface, or erase. Although we may hope that asserting the self against the exasperating assumptions that the world may make about identities would yield some triumphal resolution (or at least some détente between individuals and societal expectation), contemporary endings are seldom so tidy or so satisfying. Modum’s performance exemplifies the often frustrating yet intriguingly productive limits of performance—the performance itself cannot change the world





Sculpture by Chika Modum titled *Isi-Aka*.  
Photo by Chika Modum

but it can make clear the gap between our hoped-for, imagined world and present circumstances, a situation that reconnects our desires to our individual responsibilities. Post-performance, the white dress with its traced words hung in the space accompanied by the mirror, the chair, and the basket of graphite sticks and markers. With the projector turned off the viewer could inspect the wall where Modum haltingly transcribed and revised the Rapunzel myth and finally read what Modum had recorded at the performance's culminating moment. The laboriously formed letters that stained the fabric were just legible, and the inscription of "voices," "braided," and perhaps "looks" or "locks" suggest that the imposition of identity and the traces it leaves behind are fraught with contingency and ambivalence.

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## Note

For a clip from *identity: borrowed, enlarged, projected, traced and modified*, see [http://youtu.be/lf\\_Kz5h7nMQ](http://youtu.be/lf_Kz5h7nMQ).

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## About the Author

RICHARD SMOLINSKI is a visual and performance artist working in Calgary. He is a sessional instructor at the University of Calgary and the Alberta College of Art and Design.

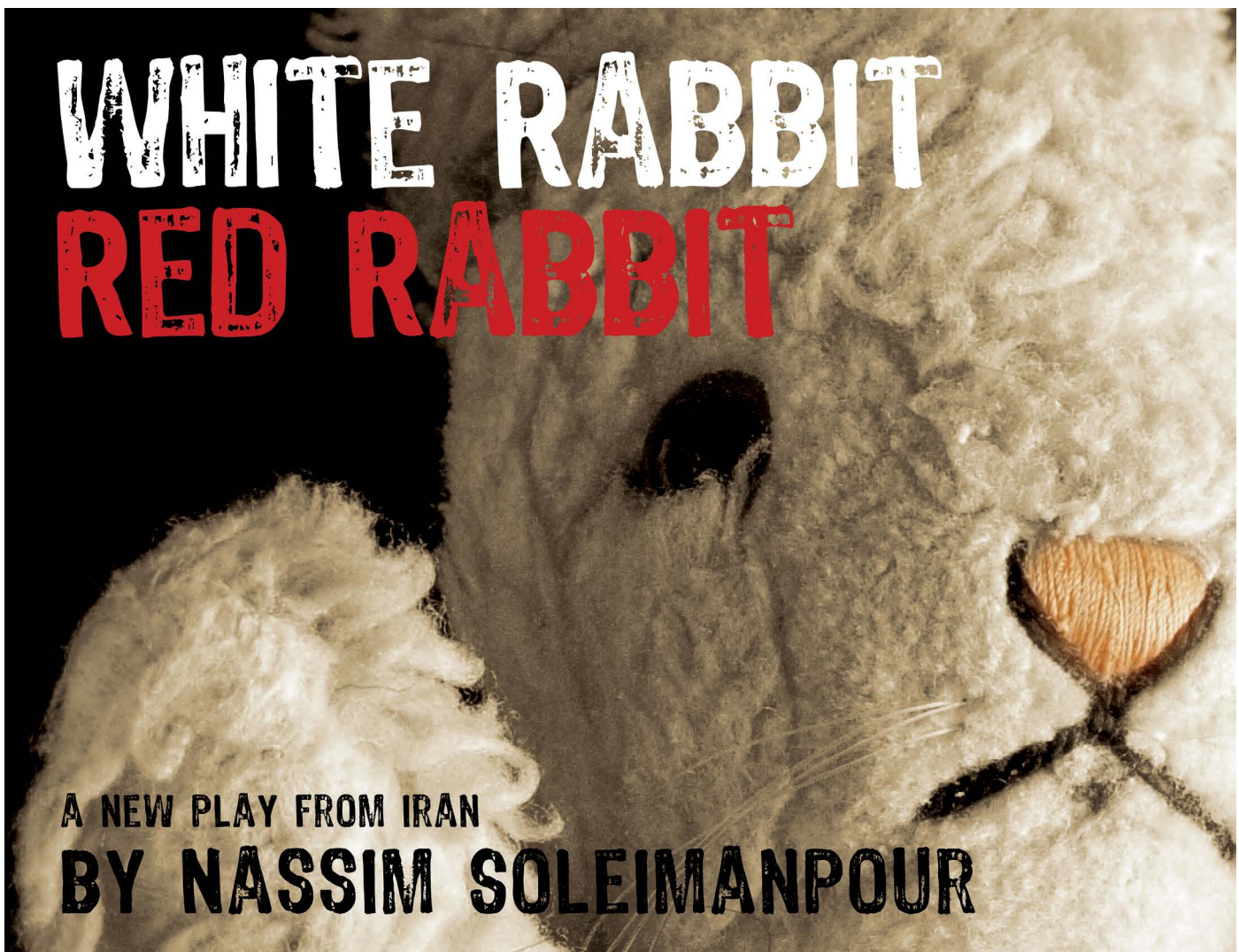


# (Dis)Embodied Authority in *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit*

by Kelsey Jacobson

Written by twenty-nine-year-old Iranian playwright Nassim Soleimanpour, *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* is a unique theatrical experiment. To begin with, it calls for an empty seat in the front row of every performance to be saved for the playwright: “Would you save a seat for me? An empty seat for me in the front row?!” (20). Unable to leave his country because of Iran’s forced military service requirement, Soleimanpour draws our attention to the conspicuously vacant seat, to his forced absence, and, by extension,

to the show’s themes of compliance to authority. Further, the play requires that a different actor perform it each night: the performer is handed a sealed envelope containing the script the moment he or she walks onstage, opens it and begins, with no director, very little set, and minimal guidance, in what is essentially a cold read. Actor and audience members alike are engaged as “obligatory” volunteers who obey the wishes of an absent dictatorial playwright, often without a second thought. Despite the relative powerlessness



*White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* poster.  
Image courtesy of Aurora Nova Productions



The playwright Nassim Soleimanpour.  
Photo courtesy of Aurora Nova Productions

of words and the complete absence of a physical presence forcing them to do as instructed, as accentuated by the empty seat, they do as they are asked.

With such a unique method of storytelling, it is easy to see why the show has enjoyed great popularity in Canada, with performances at prominent events and venues like Summerworks in Toronto (2011),<sup>1</sup> Magnetic North Theatre Festival in Calgary (2012), the Vancouver East Cultural Centre (2012), and Espace Libre in Montreal (2012). Some suggest, however, that the popularity of the show seems to be waning. After a very busy year in 2012, *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* headed to Australia, New Zealand, and Brazil, with comparably fewer productions and in arguably less-prominent venues in Canada in 2013.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the show's longstanding official archival blog of pictures, comments, and reviews has also been recently closed, ceasing all updates as of 7 June 2013 (*Blogspot*). Some call the show a "one trick pony" that, as a result, has a limited spectatorship: "Unfortunately, it's also the kind of play that works best if everyone involved is looking at it for the first time, making it a work with an expiry date [...] How long will people be able to stay in the dark?" (Thorkelson). Certainly the novelty factor is important, but perhaps there is something more at work.



Kim Renders as Nassim Soleimanpour at Queen's University in September 2012. Soleimanpour obtained a passport and saw his own play for the first time in Brisbane in February 2013.  
Photo courtesy of The Journal

In February 2013, the BBC published an article announcing that Soleimanpour attended *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* for the first time in Brisbane (Youngs), which is significant in terms of the show's central conceit. It turns out that sometime after the show's premiere, Soleimanpour was diagnosed with an eye disorder and granted an exemption from Iran's mandatory military service, finally receiving the coveted passport that affords him the freedom to travel: a freedom his play bemoaned he might never have. With a show predicated on the playwright character's inability to leave his country, contrasted with his profound ability to conduct an audience and actor from afar, Soleimanpour's sudden motility and subsequent attendance at performances of his own play constitutes an interesting theatrical challenge considering the relative power of words and physical bodies.

To consider how Soleimanpour's newfound ability to travel may affect *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit*, we can return to the premise of the show, which cleverly toys with our usual delineations between the fictive and the real, blurring the line that marks theatre's usually "safe" frame. Generally, the theatre acts as a privative frame, assuring viewers that everything framed by the proscenium arch (literally) or by the declamation of the event as a work of theatre (figuratively) is not real. In other words, we are aware that the performance onstage is a fiction in which a character's death, injury, or emotional upset entirely precludes the real person acting it. Thus, though Hamlet dies, we know Kenneth Branagh is wholly safe and very much alive. In a kind of paradoxical set-up, by suspending our disbelief, we allow stage swords to exist as real dangers in the fictive world, but as harmless fakes in the real world. *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* makes use of a vial of poison rather than a sword, but, unlike other shows, it self-referentially draws attention to the fact that audiences assume it is fake simply because it sits on stage. "Was that powder salt or sugar, or was it RAT POISON? This is a theatre, so it's VERY probably FAKE ...



right? ... But what really matters is POSSIBILITY. What MATTERS is NOT KNOWING” (25). This vial of poison, which the actor will later drink, incites real worry in audience members about the safety of the performer. *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* thus suggests that elements of the fictional world (viz., the presence of poison) may have bled into the real world.

The show also manages to confuse our conception of theatrical roles, some of which exist usually only in the fictive world, such as character, and others only in the real world, such as actor, audience, and playwright. However, with an actor who has never seen the script until the night she stands onstage to perform, the actor herself becomes a kind of audience member, balancing commitment to a fictional character with her own, real, personal reactions to the text. This tenuous shifting back and forth between actor-as-character and actor-as-audience member is notable at several points in the production, especially those times that call for aggression, controversy, or inflammatory dialogue as the actor reacts personally to the words she says. For example, the actor is directed to say the following to an audience volunteer onstage: “YOU PRICK. YOU PIECE OF SHIT. You think you’re so fucking smart? Should I get them to beat you? Do you want this one to rip your FUCKING GUTS OUT?! FUCK YOU!!” (30) Watching as actors simultaneously try to perform while reacting to the text is part of the intrigue of the show, with different actors experiencing a spectrum of success at repressing their own personal reactions to the script while they perform it. This is at odds with our usual suspension of disbelief, which allows us to pretend the real person onstage is someone she is not. In other words, whereas in *Hamlet* the audience is encouraged to unequivocally watch Hamlet the character rather than Kenneth Branagh, in *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* spectators watch both a real actor and a fictional character simultaneously. In Denise Clarke’s performance at Magnetic North Theatre Festival in Calgary, the audience watched not only Nassim the character, but also Denise, the person, as she reacted to the text she was delivering that at times seemed to surprise her, confuse her, or touch her (Clarke). The script itself helps to disrupt our usually automatic suspension of disbelief by drawing attention to its lack of success, echoing the questions we are juggling in our heads: “Who IS this actor? Is this actor herself? Is she someone else? Is she acting a role? Is she now a young writer from Iran?” (42).

Audience members in turn become more than simply viewers, being asked to get up on stage, act out small allegorical tales, supply props and costumes, and engage with Nassim throughout the show via e-mail, Facebook, and photos. They are not permitted to simply sit in the dark and remain anonymous, real viewers, but become fictionalized as they are actually assigned tasks within the show, such as taking notes (Soleimanpour 16). Some reviewers claim the strength of the show lies in this unique process whereby actor and audience are simultaneous participants in both the real and fictive worlds, discovering the script together: “By stripping the play of rehearsals, the audience gets to share the process of discovery with the one person they’re never allowed to share it with: the actor [...] You’re never privy to the moments they find personally funny, powerful or outrageous” (Tan). This blurring of the theatrical roles creates a sense of common experience in which the actor and audience roles are conflated and the entire



The rabbit.  
Image courtesy of Aurora Nova Productions

assemblage of people present in the space are “in it together” as witnesses. By disrupting our routine suspension of disbelief that usually separates real life from happenings onstage, Soleimanpour cleverly reflects the play’s content, which rails against compliance and automatic subjugation, through its form as well. Most notable, however, is the fact that ventriloquized words orchestrate it all, as actor and audience follow the directions of an absent authority. This distance is something Soleimanpour himself recognizes as important: “When I wrote *Rabbit* I had this dream for the play. And I thought *Rabbit* will have a journey in space. It works because you are so far from me, right now, because you went and saw the show in Auckland, and then there was this guy from Iran who was manipulating you, and you feel like, ‘Oh my god. Look at this distance. It’s working.’” (qtd. in Tan)

This brings us back to the question of what happens when Soleimanpour then suddenly appears onstage, embodying the absent authority? Though perhaps we are usually able to clearly differentiate playwright and playtext, evidenced by the regularity with which we are aware playwrights watch their own plays, the unique structure of the script and very personal details Soleimanpour provides make the usual distinction between different theatre roles less stable. Soleimanpour’s physical presence onstage during a show therefore interrupts the common experience of discovery; it is no longer a shared experience between audience and actor. There is now someone present who has read the script before and is, in fact, intimately familiar with it: someone who knows what is real, what is fake, what is dangerous, what is safe, what is true,





*White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* by Nassim Soleimanpour. Dramaturgy by Daniel Brooks and Ross Manson. Pictured: Tara Grammy and audience members at SummerWorks (Toronto), August 2011.  
Photo by Ross Manson

and what is not. In fact, his very presence unsettles the ostensible truthfulness of the words of the script, as his being present in the room immediately falsifies the character's claim that he is unable to leave Iran (Soleimanpour 19). This act clearly separates the playwright from the character, and, by extension, the real world from the fiction, re-establishing the boundaries between roles of actor, audience, and playwright. By providing this physical negation that at once shows the falsity of the script's words, the effect is easily transposed onto the entire script, subjugating all the material to fiction. In other words, if the claim of being unable to leave Iran is false, then who is to say the warnings about poison and the implied danger to the actor are not also false? The stakes of the show are thus lowered and the careful disruption of the audience's suspension of disbelief such that they confuse the fictive and the real ceases. The presence of Soleimanpour's body clearly establishes a fictional frame that the character Nassim, the vial of poison, and any danger to the actor are within, but Soleimanpour is outside of, in the real world.

Though I suggest that Soleimanpour's presence seems to undermine the ploy of the piece, some reviewers have found Soleimanpour's presence a welcome addition: "[Part of the show's]

particular conceit was broken on this occasion by the physical presence of the writer. He leapt onto the stage to emotional applause at one point to acknowledge the fact. It is an extraordinary theatrical experiment, made all the more memorable on this occasion by the author's physical presence rather than his haunting of a script he has never heard read aloud" (Carleton). The reviewer admits the "conceit is broken" but values the opportunity for the audience to applaud Soleimanpour. Though clearly here the preference is for the real person, the not-real presence the reviewer evokes by using the ephemeral word "haunting" seems to more aptly reflect the tenuous blend between real and fictive that Soleimanpour toys with so carefully in the script itself. Perhaps in this case, with this show, a haunting, half-real presence is exactly what's needed to draw attention to complicity and obedience even in the absence of a physical authority.

Regardless, a posting on the blog entitled "Signing Off" reassures us that Soleimanpour still wants a connection with participants, even though he is able to act as witness to the show himself: "It has been incredible sharing these notes and pictures with the *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* community. We're retiring the blog, but Nassim is still checking his inbox for messages from audience

members around the world, so please get in touch!” (*Blogspot*). Funnily enough, Soleimanpour suggests the initial concept of the play was one in which he would travel with it as performer, garnering him the opportunity to see the world (Tan). His final edition clearly veers away from the necessity of his physical body accompanying it, but with his newfound freedom perhaps the show is still a viable means of travel for him. The script has indeed moved on to new countries and productions, so perhaps there is no wane in popularity at all. Perhaps Soleimanpour’s presence provides instead a new reading into the work, drawing even more attention to the complicit power invoked by the play text: his physical presence now underlines the absence of any physical presence before or without his being there. Thus, it is a shift in perspective, but not a less viable one, for those who are used to the power of suggestion of an empty seat in the front row.

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## Notes

- 1 Summerworks 2011 was, incidentally, the show’s world premiere, produced by Canadian company Volcano Theatre and Germany’s Aurora Nova Productions.
- 2 Canadian performances of *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* in 2013 include productions at Kamikaze Archive Theatre in Saskatoon, Company of Fools Theatre in Ottawa, DMV Theatre in Nova Scotia, and the Yukon Arts Centre.

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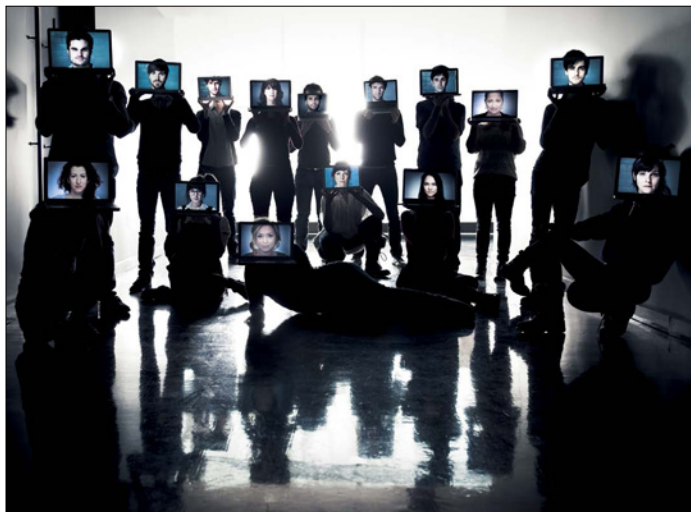
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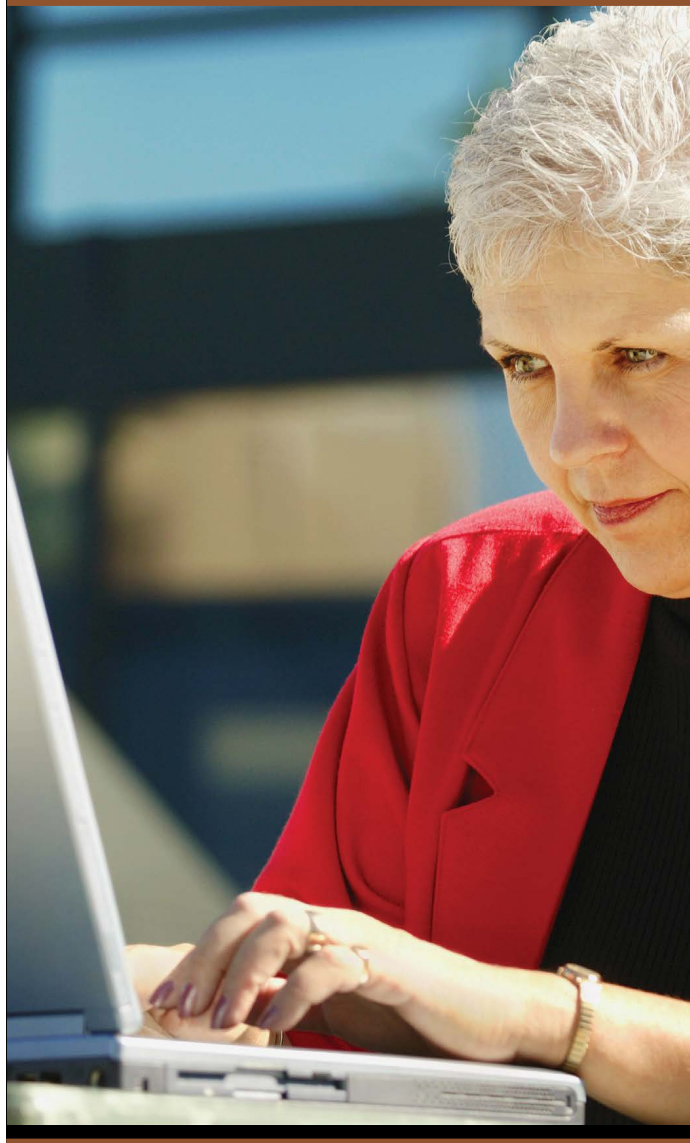
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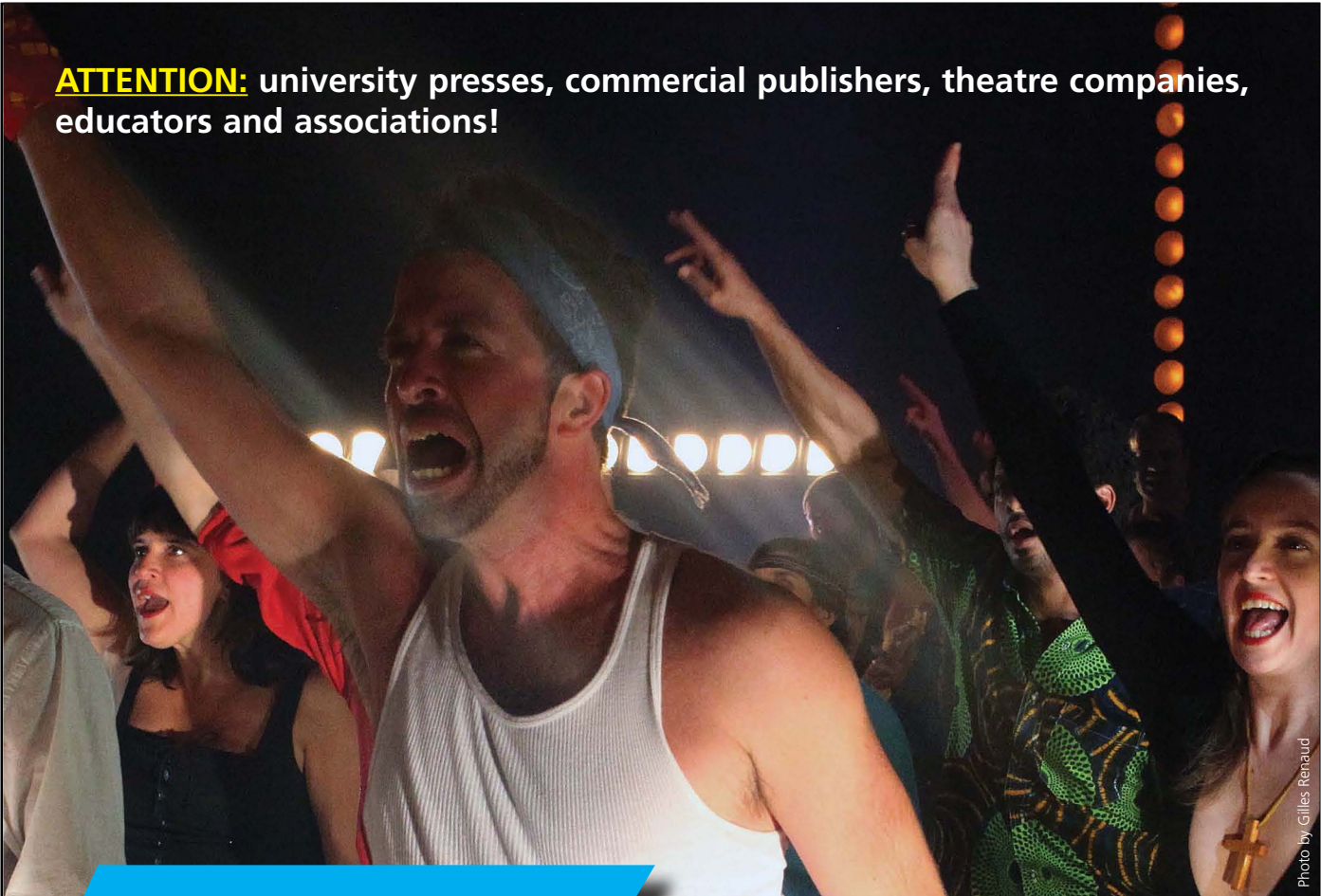


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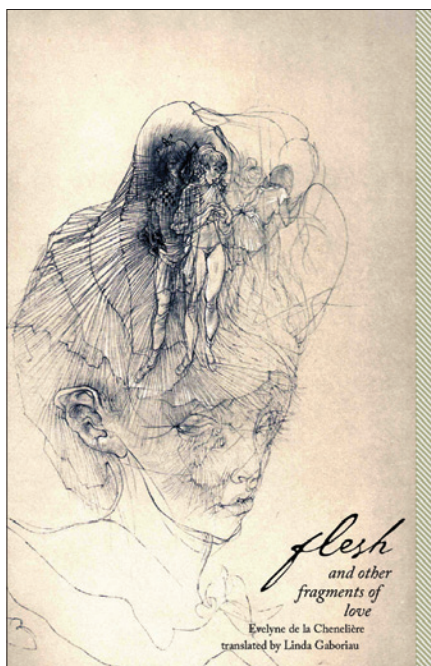
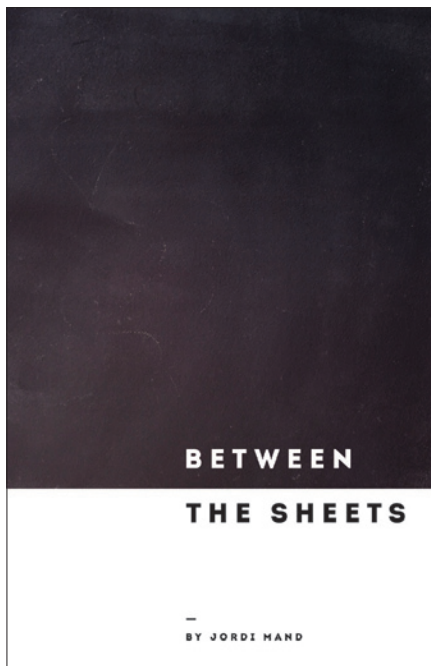
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