"THE FANTASY OF REAL WOMEN": NEW BURLESQUE & THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Emily Layne Fargo, B.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
2008

Master's Examination Committee:
Nena Couch, Advisor
Dr. Linda Mizejewski
Dr. Alan Woods

Approved by
Advisor
Department of Theatre
ABSTRACT

Burlesque performance began as a titillating form of entertainment for male audiences, but the burgeoning neo-burlesque movement has reimagined the old-fashioned striptease as a female-driven, and even feminist, performance medium, now enjoyed by just as many women as men. Utilizing a wide range of texts and archival materials, as well as original interviews conducted with burlesque performers and personal “hands-on” experiences in the world of burlesque and striptease, I consider the past, present, and potential future of burlesque performance, examining the role of the female spectator, the relationship between burlesque performance and contemporary consumer culture (including modern pin-up photography like SuicideGirls), and the possibilities and problems of neo-burlesque as a site of feminist expression.
To Byron – always a helpful research assistant.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my advisor Nena Couch for her support and guidance.

Thanks to Dr. Linda Mizejewski and Dr. Alan Woods for serving on my committee.

Thanks to Mark Shanda and the OSU Department of Theatre for securing funding for my Las Vegas trip so I could observe naked ladies in their natural habitat.

Thanks to burlesque performers Clams Casino, Desiré d’Amour, Duchess DuBois, Miss La Diva, Viva LaFever, Cherry Lix, Dr. Lukki, Rita MenWeep, Dusty Summers, and Heidi Von Haught for participating in my interview project.

Thanks to everyone from Exotic World and the burlesque listserv for their friendliness and willingness to answer silly questions.

Thanks to Anna Watson and David Hunter for their assistance with my photo shoot.

Special thanks to Mom, Nate, and Becky for helping me to get through graduate school with my sanity relatively intact.
VITA

23 May 1984

Born
Grove City, Pennsylvania

May 2006

B.A. English\Theatre
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

2006-2007

Graduate Fellow
The Ohio State University

2007-Present

Graduate Assistant
Jerome Lawrence & Robert E. Lee
Theatre Research Institute

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field:  Theatre
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bump-n-Grind From Blondes to Blaize: A Concise History of Burlesque</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Since commencing my master’s thesis work on burlesque, I have been told many times how “lucky” I am to have discovered a research topic which allows me to spend hours staring at images of beautiful undressed women. While I will admit that this has made for a more scintillating graduate school experience than many students seem to enjoy, burlesque performance is – as I hope to demonstrate – really about much more than just gorgeous naked ladies.

After spending over a year immersed in the stimulating world of burlesque, I am proud to count myself as both a scholar and a fan of this sexy, exciting, and challenging performance medium. My official introduction to the world of burlesque came courtesy of the Charles H. McCaghy Collection of Exotic Dance From Burlesque to Clubs, which is housed in the Ohio State University’s Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute. This collection, donated to the university by Bowling Green State University professor emeritus of sociology, Dr. Charles H. McCaghy, contains a wide range of materials related to burlesque, striptease, and exotic dance, including books, videos, photos, magazines, scrapbooks, posters, trading cards, and other novelty items.

I began working with the McCaghy Collection as part of an independent study in January of 2007; since then I have processed the entire collection and become intimately familiar with its contents. As a theatre enthusiast, I was immediately dazzled by the images of beautiful performers and their glittering, glamorous costumes, but as a scholar of performance and gender theory, I also became equally
interested in the (often problematic) possibilities for sexual expression and empowerment inherent in such a dynamic mode of performance. The McCaghy Collection focuses mostly on historical burlesque, containing relatively little information on the still-growing new burlesque (or “neo-burlesque”) movement that is taking hold in popular culture today. So I set out to perform my own research on contemporary incarnations of burlesque performance, hoping to fill in the gaps in the collection. I became particularly interested in the relationship between women and burlesque – not just the performers themselves, but also the female spectators who attend their acts. To me, this growing female interest in burlesque seemed to be a striking sign that modern burlesque had much more to offer than just the sexual titillation of the exotic dance.

There are two schools of thought currently dominating the discourse surrounding burlesque and striptease performance. The first, more conservative view is that sexual, physical display of this kind is demeaning and antithetical to feminist goals. Critics of burlesque allege that it is exploitative of women, and not so different from other types of sexually-oriented work (stripping, porn, even prostitution) as some in the neo-burlesque community might like to think. The second view, now growing in popularity, is that burlesque performance, because it allows women to publicly express their sexuality, is actually a positive, empowering, and even feminist act.

I myself do not subscribe entirely to either of these views; it strikes me as reductive to categorize burlesque as inherently demeaning or inherently empowering. This seems to be a personal determination, unique to every performer and spectator who encounters burlesque. Thus, while I will take into consideration pertinent criticisms of burlesque performance, I am not interested in spending a great deal of time addressing the question of empowerment versus exploitation.
Instead, I want to explore how the women involved in burlesque have attempted to respond to these and other criticisms in positive, productive ways. Also, as I am principally interested in female spectators of burlesque and their relationship to female performers, I will not be focusing on burlesque’s appeal to contemporary male audiences, nor on the significant number of male burlesque (or “boylesque”) performers working today. This is an important area of inquiry, but simply outside the scope of my current project.

Primarily, I am interested in what the new burlesque movement has to offer contemporary women, not only as participants, but as spectators. What does burlesque teach women about their bodies, about sexual expression, about the performance of gender and the power of eroticism? How is burlesque encountered by female spectators today, and how is it marketed to female consumers? What are the possibilities and problems of this unique performance medium? Burlesque historian Robert C. Allen points out that historical burlesque originally emerged as a forum in which the question “What does it mean to be a woman?” was furiously debated, and neo-burlesque continues to tangle with that issue in both literal and emblematic ways. Burlesque allows women to explore, experiment with, and perform their sexuality, whether from the stage or from the audience. In her book *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, Jacki Willson goes so far as to posit that “the new ‘empowering’ model for female sexual agency now seems to be the burlesque stripper.” If Willson is correct (and I would argue that she is), it is essential that we consider the implications of this model for the average woman today.

---


Though the neo-burlesque movement has been covered extensively in the popular media, relatively minimal academic work has been undertaken thus far on the subject. Several excellent histories of burlesque have been published, but they either do not extend far enough to include the new burlesque or mention it only as a brief contemporary footnote. Of the currently-available books on new burlesque, the most prominent are Katherina Bosse’s *New Burlesque* and Michelle Baldwin’s *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, both published since 2003. Bosse’s book is primarily a collection of photographs of current burlesque performers, with only a few pages at the end of the volume dedicated to a short essay on burlesque by Cécile Camart. Baldwin’s book is more comprehensive, providing an overview of burlesque history as well as a fascinating insider’s look at the vibrant contemporary burlesque community. However, Baldwin is not inclined to spend much time problematizing the discourse surrounding burlesque, instead claiming it as a purely empowering and thoroughly feminist art. Jacki Willson’s *The Happy Stripper*, published in the United States in January of 2008, does provide an insightful academic examination of the new burlesque movement, but Willson focuses almost entirely on the viewpoint of the performer (the “happy stripper” of the title), largely ignoring the position of the burlesque spectator.

My own research on burlesque began with the materials held in the McCaghy Collection, but expanded to include a wide assortment of texts (from books and scholarly articles to media commentary in print and online) focusing on subjects ranging from burlesque history to gender theory, feminism, sex work, and sexuality in popular culture. In addition, I conducted my own interviews via e-mail with several burlesque performers, whose input proved invaluable to my understanding of the neo-burlesque community. I also decided that, given the nature of my subject, I wanted to engage in a bit more “hands-on” research. Over the course of my studies
in this field, I have traveled to Las Vegas for the Miss Exotic World Pageant, stripped down for a pin-up photo shoot, spun around a stripper pole in a cardio pole dancing course, and twirled tassels in a burlesque workshop. Throughout this paper, I will be sharing anecdotal impressions of the world of burlesque based on these varied personal experiences as an observer and participant in that world.

My work is organized into three main chapters, followed by a brief concluding section. The first chapter, “Bump-n-Grind From Blondes to Blaize,” will provide an overview of burlesque history, from burlesque’s American debut in the 1860s to present-day neo-burlesque. The following chapters will constitute a further exploration and critical examination of what burlesque has to say about womanhood, and what it can offer the modern female spectator. The second chapter, “Women Under Construction,” will focus on the new burlesque movement itself, while the third chapter, “The New Girls Next Door,” will analyze some of the more commercialized incarnations of burlesque which have emerged in contemporary consumer culture.
Burlesque has never been an easy art to define. Today, if the term is recognized at all by the general public, it is usually associated with striptease, which was in fact a relatively late addition to the burlesque repertoire. In its initial form, burlesque had more to do with political satire than sexual display; its origins are often traced all the way back to the ancient Greek stage burlesques of Aristophanes and others, which poked fun at the social norms of their day. Throughout its varied history, burlesque has incorporated aspects of many theatrical traditions and dramatic forms, including music, poetry, dance, acrobatics, clowning, parody, and so on. Burlesque is a multi-disciplinary performance art which has survived by evolving with the times, refusing to “hold still long enough to be pinned down,” and this makes it a particularly rich ground for scholarly inquiry.

Americans got their first taste of the controversial art of burlesque through the performances of Lydia Thompson. Thompson and her theatrical troupe, the British Blondes, arrived in New York in 1868 to begin a several-year tour of the States and proved to be an instant phenomenon, as their saucy blend of music, comedy, clever social satire, and bold sexuality piqued the interest of audiences around the country. The Blondes were beautiful, physically imposing women who

---

based their highly successful stage act around the telling of bawdy jokes and the impersonation of male characters. Later incarnations of burlesque performance (especially after the popularization of striptease) may seem to bear little resemblance to the productions put on by the British Blondes, but Lydia Thompson is almost universally regarded to be the progenitress of modern burlesque in America. Thompson and the British Blondes laid the groundwork for what have remained the two chief components of burlesque: 1) comedic social commentary, often deliberately turning social mores on their heads, and 2) sexualized display of the female body.

Though Thompson and her troupemates did not strip, they did reveal their shapely legs through the wearing of tights, which was sufficiently shocking and sexually exciting in their era. The fashions and morals of the time dictated that the lower parts of a woman’s body remain concealed under layers of skirts and petticoats, so to display even the outline of the legs was considered highly immodest, and therefore tantalizing to male audience members. Some early burlesque performers went even further, forgoing corsetry altogether in favor of “fleshings,” or full-body stockings. These knitted garments covered the body from ankles to neck, but still managed to give the appearance of nudity thanks to their skin-tight fit and flesh-toned fabric. Fleshings, Jessica Glasscock explains in her book Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight, were “the nineteenth-century equivalent of gratuitous nudity,” an “illusion” in which “the audience willingly participated.”

Such attire was especially scandalous, Glasscock continues, because it did not include the corset, a garment which was “more than just lingerie, it was the

---


3 Glasscock 17.
foundation of Western womanhood.”⁴ The wearing of a corset “separated decent women from prostitutes”; therefore, “a woman who walked onstage without one was perceived to be giving men an open invitation to her bedroom.”⁵ Corsets were meant to keep women composed and contained, both in body and spirit, and burlesque performers who appeared onstage without them were utterly rejecting this sense of proper feminine restraint.

Any public display of the female body in this era was in direct conflict with the Victorian ideal of “True Womanhood,” which called for women to be delicate, modest, domestically inclined, and ornamentally beautiful. Women who literally made a spectacle of themselves on the stage as Thompson and others like her did were considered immodest and immoral, stepping deliberately outside of the bounds socially prescribed for their sex.

Of course, for many audience members, this combination of the tantalizing and the threatening was part of burlesque’s appeal. The popular image of the burlesque performer was a large, tall woman, so powerfully built that she was practically Amazonian, and publicity for burlesque shows took advantage of this association with posters depicting voluptuous, statuesque performers in the roles of military officers, charioteers, or even literal Amazon warrior women. Male audience members were captivated by this “inverted, reordinated world dominated in every respect by women,”⁶ but it is only because these “fantasy” women were “so distanced from ordinary women and real-life sexual relations” that men were able to “take pleasure” in this “display of charismatic sexuality,” knowing that “sitting in the

⁴ Glasscock 19.
⁵ Glasscock 16.
⁶ Allen 205.
audience” they remained “safely distanced and insulated” from such unbridled feminine power. While men loved to watch dominant female figures onstage, their arousal was always tempered by fear that this variety of sexual power was too dynamic to stay safely confined to the theatre. The sexually intimidating Amazon woman might be alluring on the burlesque stage or in a static poster illustration, but the same figure walking the streets was socially unacceptable and even frightening. In an era when women all over America were actively agitating for increased freedoms and legal rights, these concerns seemed very relevant to the male burlesque patron.

The power dynamic became even more complex when a burlesque performer took on a male role. It was, in fact, fairly common practice at the time for women to play male characters in mainstream plays as well; actresses proved themselves by cutting their teeth on the great Shakespearean roles for which their male counterparts were famous (the title role in Hamlet was a particularly popular feat, tackled by Sarah Siddons in 1775, Charlotte Cushman in the 1860s, and Sarah Bernhardt in 1899). While female burlesque performers might play male roles or dress up in masculine garments, however, they were never trying to present a convincing, realistic portrayal of a man onstage. Instead, they were utilizing their masculine attire as a sort of fetish object, emphasizing their feminine sexuality by contrasting it with markers of masculinity. Typical costumes paired men’s clothing like tuxedo coats, military jackets, riding boots, or top hats with the burlesquer’s uniform of corset and tights. Such garments may have been menswear-inspired, but they made no attempt to conceal the shapely female form underneath. Kirsten Pullen, in her book Actresses and Whores, discusses Lydia Thompson’s practice of cross-dressed performance, saying that “Thompson talked like a man but walked like

---

7 Allen 219.
a woman,” effectively using “male clothing and attitudes not to impersonate men but to underscore her femininity.” These practices, of course, ultimately emphasized the constructed nature of both genders, calling into question accepted gender roles themselves and constituting “a dangerous symbolic usurpation of male power.”

Female burlesque performers may not have been trying to precisely imitate men when they took on male roles, but they were still in some ways co-opting the male voice. “Taking on the markers of masculinity,” Robert C. Allen explains in his seminal work on burlesque history, Horrible Prettiness, “the burlesque performer was licensed to act in a very unladylike fashion.” The effect of such “unladylike” conduct was more than a little disturbing to the men of the time, leading author William Dean Howells to famously deem such performers neither men nor women but “creatures of an alien sex, parodying both.” The female burlesque performer might not successfully become another sex – nor was she attempting to – but she was able to transcend the social boundaries of her own gender, and therefore to say and do things of which so many other women would not dare to conceive. Burlesque, Allen writes, “presented a world without limits, a world turned upside down and inside out in which nothing was above being brought down to earth. In that world, things that should be kept separate were united in grotesque hybrids. Meaning refused to stay put. Anything might happen.” This topsy-turvy stage world was amusing and exciting to burlesque audiences, but it was simultaneously viewed as an unsettling threat to the social order.

---

9 Allen 116.
10 Allen 148.
11 William Dean Howells, qtd. in Allen 25.
12 Allen 29.
The problem with female burlesquers, then, was that they were “outspoken exhibitionists rather than artists”: “[u]nlike the ballet dancer and tableau model who exhibited their bodies mutely, or the conventional actress whose words and actions were restricted by narrative, the burlesque performer looked at and talked back to the audience.”\(^{13}\) A scantily-clad, or even unclad, female was socially acceptable on a public stage so long as she remained still, functioning as a static piece of art to be contemplated. But the moment she began to exercise physical mobility and vocal subjectivity in addition to her physical charms (as burlesque performers did), she became a serious threat that had to be stopped and silenced. The female burlesque performer thus brought together two controversial components – an eroticized body and an outspoken voice – through her onstage presence, and “this combination was far more threatening”\(^{14}\) than anything which theatregoers of the time had previously encountered.

Such clamor over the issue of “loose women in tights”\(^{15}\) may seem ironic or even absurd today, especially given the increasingly revealing fashions of our own era, but in Lydia Thompson’s time, burlesque and the women who dared to perform it were intensely controversial. A woman onstage, displaying her body, speaking freely, and challenging her audience, was an unavoidably strange and shocking sight in the nineteenth century, when female performers of any kind were still conventionally equated with prostitutes, “selling” their bodies to an eager public. Thus, despite their massive popularity, Thompson and her fellow performers always faced a growing “hysterical antiburlesque discourse.”\(^{16}\) They were frequently under

\(^{13}\) Pullen 96.

\(^{14}\) Allen 271.

\(^{15}\) Ann Corio, This Was Burlesque (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968) 14.

\(^{16}\) Allen 16.
attack from public officials, religious leaders, and women’s rights activists (all of whom were, incidentally, fair and frequent game for parody on the burlesque stage) who saw burlesque as a corrupting cultural influence.

Robert Allen points out that burlesque first emerges “at a time when the question ‘What does it mean to be a woman?’ is constantly being asked.”

Emerging from the needs of this unstable cultural milieu, burlesque performance became a unique public forum for testing and contesting the meaning of womanhood and a woman’s proper place in society—a function burlesque still fulfills to this day. As Kirsten Pullen puts it, burlesque performances were “a ‘rehearsal’ of anxieties over shifting ideologies of gender.” People were not so much afraid of Lydia Thompson herself as they were of what she represented about women’s social roles, which were shifting rapidly during this period in history. Burlesque essentially became a scapegoat for many larger issues pervading the culture, “emblematic of the way that popular entertainment becomes an arena for ‘acting out’ cultural contradictions.”

In truth, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, burlesque was not so different from another popular theatrical form that attracted far less of a fuss: vaudeville. Burlesque was perceived as a slightly salacious, lower-culture version of vaudeville variety entertainment; it was, as legendary singer and comedienne Sophie Tucker described it, “vaudeville with tits.” Besides the pretty dancing girls which were its main draw, burlesque shows also often featured musicians, comedians, and

---

17 Allen 27.
18 Pullen 7.
19 Allen 27.
other entertainers; so, “just as men today might claim to read *Playboy* for the articles, men of that era would ostensibly go to burlesque shows to see the great comics.”

Burlesque could never quite compete with vaudeville shows, though, which had a higher profile and better reputation, and therefore attracted more well-known and profitable talent. In an effort to compete, burlesque shows began to feature the one thing it had that the more family-friendly vaudeville did not: sex, specifically in the comely form of the stripper.

No one is quite sure when the first striptease act was performed; there have been many origin stories, and just as many different performers attempting to take credit for this landmark event. But whether it began intentionally or accidentally (the tale of the “broken strap” is a prominent feature of burlesque lore), striptease had been popularized on burlesque stages by the 1920s.

The classic burlesque striptease tends to adhere to a very specific formula, though obviously there have been innovations and embellishments throughout the years: a beautiful woman comes onto the stage wearing an elaborate costume (a glamorous gown, high heels, often long gloves or a feather boa), then proceeds to strip off her garments, teasing the audience as she does so. The act typically ends with the reveal of the performer’s body, naked except for G-string underwear and pasties covering her nipples (though some performers were inclined to go further, especially as competition between strippers increased). The act may also involve storylines, characters, or gimmicks to add interest and give the performer an “excuse” to strip off her clothes, but the overall format remains the same.

---

Jessica Glasscock, in her book *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight*, identifies “four essential actions” of striptease: “revealing, arousing, amusing, and doing all of these on a stage.”  Though the response to a “properly executed” striptease ought to be “physical,” it is this element of amusement and entertainment “that differentiates the striptease from the mere stripping off of clothes.”  “A real striptease,” Glasscock writes, “is a stage act. It requires a certain amount of distance between the teaser and the teasee.”  Famous performer Ann Corio corroborates the paramount importance of the tease in her book *This Was Burlesque*: “Anyone can strip but few can tease. And the tease is the most important part.”  According to Corio, a stripteaser’s “greatest asset” is not fancy costumes or sultry dance moves, but “a man’s imagination.”

As burlesque shows began to lose audiences to more popular vaudeville entertainments and lavish Broadway revues, the female stripper became burlesque’s main attraction, soon entirely supplanting the comics and other variety performers that had once been integral parts of the genre. Acts became progressively more risqué (more strip, less tease) as public interest in burlesque waned further, pushed aside first by vaudeville and the revues, and later by the motion picture industry. Burlesque tapered off in the 1920s, only to have a resurgence during the Great Depression, even moving to Broadway playhouses under the purview of famous burlesque entrepreneurs the Minsky brothers. As Irving Zeidman observed in his

---

22 Glasscock 8.
23 Glasscock 8.
24 Glasscock 8.
25 Corio 73.
26 Corio 107.
1967 book *The American Burlesque Show*, "burlesque thrives on depression," offering inexpensive escapist entertainment to the masses. The dire financial straits that plagued this era also drove more young women into the striptease lifestyle, not due to a love of performing, but as a means to make ends meet. "As the depression deepened," Zeidman writes, "more and more girls turned to burlesque for a living, and the more competitive it got, the more they stripped."  

Burlesque’s escalating focus on titillation rather than performance attracted an even stronger antiburlesque discourse, as well as legal measures. Police raids on burlesque theatres suspected of showing too much flesh became commonplace during the 1930s. Additionally, as the sexualized display of the female body increased, the performer herself lost her voice. When she was permitted to appear in comedy sketches at all, she was relegated to the role of “talking woman,” reacting to the male comic rather than speaking for herself. Even youngest Minsky brother Morton admitted that “burlesque was becoming nothing more than a legal way of selling the illusion of sex to the public.” In 1937, antiburlesque legislators finally succeeded in outlawing burlesque in New York City. It continued to thrive in other major U.S. cities and through touring shows which traveled across the nation, but as H.M. Alexander observed in his book *Strip Tease: The Vanished Art of Burlesque*, “the heart [was] out of burlesque.”

Though burlesque itself was flagging in popularity in subsequent years, the 1940s ushered in an era of burlesque stars or “queens” as featured performers. These women made their names through their spectacular performances and wild

---


28 Zeidman 142.

29 Morton Minsky, qtd. in Allen 232.

publicity stunts, rendering them “larger than life” both onstage and off. Discussing the post-World War II burlesque boom in her book *Stripping in Time: A History of Exotic Dancing*, Judith Lynn Jarrett echoes the famous lyrics of Stephen Sondheim’s *Gypsy*, saying that in order to be successful, every stripper needs to “get a gimmick.” Beyond elaborate costumes and props, the very best gimmick was “an outsized personality,” which could guarantee gossip and publicity. Physical attractiveness was always advantageous to a striptease performer, but mere beauty was no longer necessarily enough to build a career. Burlesque queen Gypsy Rose Lee, who gained notoriety by marketing herself as the “literary stripper” or “striptease intellectual,” provides one of burlesque history’s most famous examples: throughout her long and successful career, the focus was never on her looks (which were average at best), but on her compelling personality and the witty repartee she incorporated into her strips.

Gypsy’s cerebral approach was the exception, not the rule; other famous burlesque queens had their own gimmicks, based on the exploitation of other, less academic assets. Ann Corio played the innocent ingénue in her popular act, Sally Rand pioneered the art of fan dancing, and Lili St. Cyr made a name for herself with her onstage bubble baths and elegant reverse stripteases. As burlesque acts proliferated, though, stripteasers had to go further in search of unique ways to “hook” an audience. Some, like Georgia Sothern, cultivated unusual dance styles. Others incorporated exotic animals into their acts: Zorita danced with a live python, while Rosita Royce trained doves to perch upon her body and fly off one by one. A few performers became glorified celebrity impersonators, such as Dixie Evans, “the Marilyn Monroe of burlesque,” whose act was simply a naughtier, nuder version of the Hollywood starlet’s persona. Eventually, though, “the only parody left for

---

strippers was the parody of the body itself,“ leading strippers to become “living embodiments of a parody of vital statistics, a display of the ordinary and outsized.”³² By the 1950s, strippers could gain fame simply by virtue of having an unusual height or bust size. Tempest Storm, for example, gained notoriety for her impressive 44DD breasts (which she reportedly had insured for 1 million dollars) and her flowing mane of bright red hair. Stripteasers’ measurements and vital statistics were commonly listed in publicity materials as though they were “a prize horse or a new model of car,”³³ or even attractions in a freak show. Burlesque stars still boasted a brash and formidable sexuality, but in many ways they had been reduced to the status of popular commodity.

Burlesque queens were often groomed, promoted, and ultimately controlled by male managers, which diffused their power still further. Some performers took charge of creating and marketing their own personas, but it was just as often “burlesque theater owners and producers who named queens and gave them a gimmick.”³⁴ Performers were sometimes able to involve themselves in the business side of things, though, gaining considerable control over their own affairs; Gypsy Rose Lee is an obvious example, as is performer Rose La Rose, who owned and operated several theatres in the Toledo, Ohio, area. Two former burlesque queens I interviewed, Viva LaFever and Dusty Summers, were both heavily involved in the management of the theatres where they performed. As Summers puts it, whether or not burlesque empowers women, “you have to be a powerful woman to be in burlesque.”³⁵

³² Jarrett 173.
³³ Jarrett 173.
³⁴ Goldwyn 142.
No matter how much power the women in burlesque wielded, though, they were unable to halt burlesque’s not-so-slow descent from tease to raunch. Desperate to keep their audiences, club managers pushed the boundaries as far as they would go; recounting her experiences working in burlesque during the 1970s, Viva LaFever remembered bosses who would “ask for volunteers to take it all off.” Those who agreed “would be paid extra and would go to jail”; LaFever remembers being “politely” escorted and booked by police officers who all the performers knew “by name,” then held in a cell until the manager could come to bail them out.

Ultimately, though, burlesque’s relatively tame entertainments were unable to compete with a growing sex industry that offered full nudity, live sex acts, and hardcore pornographic films. Just a few decades later, “by the early 1980s, the art of revealing a woman’s body had become more like a gynecological examination” than a sultry, suggestive entertainment; stripping was becoming “big business, not show business.” Burlesque striptease, Jessica Glasscock writes, ultimately “became only an adjunct to a massive sex industry,” causing “the lines between stripping, prostitution, and other kinds of sex work” to become “briefly blurred.” In truth, these boundaries still remain confused today; upon revealing my master’s thesis topic to friends and relatives, I have on numerous occasions found myself fielding a barrage of comments and questions about burlesque’s relationship to stripping, prostitution, and pornography, including a suggestion that I take the stage at a local strip club’s amateur night as “field research.”

36 Viva LaFever, Personal Interview, 7 December 2007.
37 LaFever Interview.
38 Jarrett 192.
40 Glasscock 161.
The most significant confusion does seem to exist between burlesque striptease and the stigmatized occupation of modern commercial stripping. Some burlesque performers will deny any relationship between the two mediums, while others admit that peeling and pole dancing are “more similar than many want to recognize.” The main substantive difference seems to be that “burlesque is entertainment, it’s a show,” whereas “stripping seems to be more providing a service.” Jo “Boobs” Weldon, a performer who has worked both as a burlesque stripteaser and a commercial stripper, lays out a few more important differences in an article in Shimmy magazine: “[s]tripping is mostly about the nudity; burlesque is mostly about the costume,” and “[p]eople who come into a strip joint are usually called customers; people who go to a burlesque show are usually called an audience.” Also, burlesque performers rarely have direct physical contact with the members of their audience, while strippers may perform up-close-and-personal lap dances or table dances to earn extra tips. Weldon says that she “often resent[s] it when people talk disparagingly about strippers as opposed to burlesque dancers,” but she also “recognize[s] the need to make the distinction, certainly not least for professional booking purposes.”

As commercial exotic dancing and pornography grew in popularity and availability throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, it seemed for a while that burlesque was dead for good. In the mid-1990s, however, burlesque experienced a dramatic rebirth which is still developing and expanding today. The “new burlesque” or “neo-burlesque” revival sprung initially out of the performance art community in

---

41 Dr. Lukki, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.
42 Duchess DuBois, Personal Interview, 6 August 2007.
43 Jo Weldon, “From Tassels to Taxes: Burlesque Advice From Those in the Know,” Shimmy Magazine 1.2 (Spring/Summer 2006) 55.
44 Weldon 53.
New York City, with underground theatrical performances that referenced various aspects of historical burlesque and striptease (though many performers did not yet consider what they were doing to be “burlesque,” instead using terms like “performance art, or female-to-female drag, or just creative stripping”\(^45\)).

This modern brand of burlesque performance immediately exhibited several important differences from its popular culture predecessors. First of all, unlike the burlesque of the past, neo-burlesque is not only made by women, but for women. Throughout its long and varied history, burlesque has typically appealed most to a male, working-class audience, which tended to feel overlooked by the offerings of the “legitimate” stage. As performer Ann Corio puts it, burlesque may have been the “lowest branch” of the theatre, but that made it “the limb nearest the people.”\(^46\)

Specifically, though, burlesque was meant to appeal to men, to act as a sexual outlet and escape for the put-upon working man with a family. Burlesque performers, particularly in the era of the “queens,” catered explicitly to male fantasy. “If early twentieth-century burlesque was ‘everyman’s’ entertainment,” Michelle Baldwin reasons, “then new burlesque is ‘everywoman’s’ entertainment.”\(^47\)

There is some ongoing argument about burlesque’s female audience, or lack thereof, in the past; women certainly attended burlesque shows, but they were in the minority, and did not constitute the target demographic. Lydia Thompson actually claimed that, when she first came to America, “ladies and children were my greatest patrons,”\(^48\) and expressed dissatisfaction with the shift to mostly male audiences, but by the time author Bernard Sobel began chronicling burlesque in the

\(^{45}\) Baldwin 27.  
\(^{46}\) Corio 9.  
\(^{47}\) Baldwin 129.  
\(^{48}\) Lydia Thompson, qtd. in Jarrett 10.
1930s, its reputation had become so tarnished that “no decent woman would voluntarily pass by a burlesque house.”

Ann Corio concurs with this assessment, writing in *This Was Burlesque* that during the peak of her career as a striptease performer, “a girl in a burlesque audience was a rarity indeed, one who was stared at and who others considered to be a fallen woman – or, at least, one about to fall.”

Liz Goldwyn’s burlesque costume retrospective *Pretty Things* provides a wholly different account, claiming that “burlesque did have a female audience as well”: “[w]omen would go with their dates or even families to see a good show, and to inspect the wardrobe of the queens.”

Goldwyn also writes that top burlesque stars “received countless fan letters from women asking them about their wardrobe, where they had costumes made, and tips for a good sex life with their husbands. The average housewife seemed curious about how she could attain a bit of the burlesque queen’s sexual allure without the taint of her profession.” This observation is born out by countless articles in men’s magazines, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, which comment on women’s fascination with burlesque. A 1956 article in *Cabaret* by Arch Ayres attempts to answer the question of “Why Women Like to Watch Strippers”; an article in *Modern Man* by striptease star Texas Sheridan purports to explain “Why Every Girl’s a Stripper at Heart.” Even a *Life* magazine article, covering Ann Corio’s burlesque revival show in 1966, discusses “burlesque’s current vogue as a spectator sport for women.”

The Charles H. McCaghy collection also contains a large assortment of materials, including a detailed

---


50 Corio 158.

51 Goldwyn 12.

52 Goldwyn 26.

scrapbook, donated by Vanessa and Bob Cartwright, an Ohio couple who shared a mutual enthusiasm for burlesque. They attended numerous shows together throughout the 1950s and 1960s, even forging personal friendships with many performers and their families.

Though it seems that some women, like Mrs. Cartwright, did express genuine interest in burlesque, in general female interest in the burlesque of the past has been attributed to simple curiosity, jealousy, or the desire to learn new ways to get or keep a man’s attention. Women who attend neo-burlesque performances today, however, seem to enjoy it purely on its own merits, and for their own pleasure. There are still men in burlesque audiences to be sure, but it is often the women who are “the loudest and most pleased, and also closest to the stage.”

As asked about the typical composition of their audiences, neo-burlesque performers tend to estimate an even male\female split, if not a female majority; many also note an expanding audience among the queer community, both male and female. Performer Olive Talique of Cherry Pop Burlesque goes so far as to describe neo-burlesque as “striptease without the baggage of the male gaze,” implying that even if there are lustful heterosexual men to be found watching these performances, their gaze has been somehow nullified. Other modern performers seem to give little thought to the gender breakdown of their patrons; New York-based performer Dr. Lukki says her “audience” is quite simply “anyone who wants to see some fucked up weird shit. If they want a picture perfect body and flawless 50s style pin up, then they may not know what to ‘do’ with me.”

In any case, the new style of burlesque most

---

54 DuBois Interview.


56 Lukki Interview.
definitely does not revolve around titillating or pleasing a male viewer; and a modern housewife might want to think twice before soliciting advice from a burlesque performer about how to satisfy her husband in bed. Asked by *Times* reporter Shaila K. Dewan if being in burlesque is a good way to attract men, performer Dirty Martini responded, “Are you kidding? I’m the most intimidating thing they’ve ever seen.”

The audience for burlesque has certainly changed, and so, equally, has the performer. In the past, burlesque was a career option, often for women who had failed to achieve a professional dancing or acting career. Burlesque could be a relatively easy way for a beautiful girl to make money, and for many performers, the possibility of financial gain was a primary motivation. Now, burlesque is largely taken up as a hobby rather than a vocation, which greatly affects the stakes and limits of the art form. Well-paid international stars like modern burlesque poster girl Dita Von Teese are most definitely the exception rather than the rule. The typical burlesque performer of today (if such a formula can be identified) is more likely to be a young, educated, liberal woman, often living in an urban setting and holding down a full-time, professional career in addition to her performing interests. Burlesque performers may be doctors, college professors, librarians, journalists, secretaries, or belong to any other profession imaginable, and their performing careers may exist as secret “second lives,” or fun evening-and-weekend sidelines. As performer Desiré d’Amour puts it, “burlesque is a passionate hobby, but not the goal of our life.”

Miss d’Amour, along with several other performers I spoke to, did express a desire to someday pursue burlesque full-time, suggesting that the establishment of more permanent burlesque clubs or even a revival of the touring system might eventually

---


aid in this objective. Other performers see the recreational status of burlesque as a positive thing; performer Cherry Lix of the Twilight Vixen Revue remarks that, “Today, I don’t know a single performer who shows because she needs the money or because someone is pimping her out to get on stage.”

For now, though, whether for good or ill, burlesque remains separate from the “real lives” of most of its performers.

For many of today’s burlesque performers, though, burlesque is not necessarily something they do “just for fun.” As previously noted, many members of the neo-burlesque scene are well-educated professionals; consequently, quite a few of them seem to possess a highly intellectual understanding of the implications of their performances and the discourses they are able to generate. For them, burlesque is not only an enjoyable outlet, but an academic, theoretical endeavor. An Australian performer known as Lola the Vamp is even using her experiences with burlesque as the basis of a doctoral degree.

Performer Dr. Lukki is employed in her “real life” as a university professor, and says regarding her acts, “I am interested in layers of meaning; the ‘reveal’ to me is more about ‘putting on’ those layers of meaning than it is about ‘taking off’ clothing.”

Investigating the significance of the burlesque revival in a recent article, Helen Chernikoff similarly postulated that neo-burlesque might be, in fact, “more nerdy than sexy,” declaring that “[b]urlesque has become intellectual.” “If you think of us as burlesque nerds, it makes sense,” Jo “Boobs” Weldon, Headmistress and Professor at the New York School of Burlesque, offers in the same article. Neo-

---

59 Cherry Lix, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.

60 Lukki Interview.


62 Jo Weldon, qtd. in Chernikoff.
burlesque performers pride themselves on the extensive research they put into creating their personas and acts. Many are also concerned with current events and gender politics, and often use their performances as a venue for incisive political commentary on issues that stir them. One could argue that burlesque truly has become "the thinking man’s stripping."  

It should also be noted that neo-burlesque, though it features women taking off their clothes, really puts very little emphasis on the display of nudity. Instead, the focus is on the entire act, the drawn-out process of the "tease"; and, as with the burlesque queens from whom current performers like to draw inspiration, charisma and personality are more important than beauty or formal performance training. Sara Faith Alterman, writing for online publication The Phoenix, notes that “genuine burlesque is a balance of sexuality and comedy, of the softness of the body and the sharpness of the tongue.”  

“Yes, you’re going to see boobs,” she concedes, “But when? Skin takes a backseat to anticipation and theatricality; the promise of a bare arm becomes surprisingly titillating when a woman takes nearly a minute to remove a single glove.”  

Tina Warren, co-founder of Glasgow burlesque venue Club Noir, says that the new burlesque is “about tease and glamour and making women goddesses rather than objectifying them. If any man comes hoping to find a strip club he will be very disappointed and bored.”


65 Alterman.

If one thing is clear regarding the revival of burlesque, it is that, in order for burlesque to launch any kind of successful comeback, it had to offer more than mere sexual titillation to its audiences. The general public can now view more uncovered female flesh in a prime-time beer commercial or on a public beach than is displayed on the typical burlesque stage, and all manner of fantasy fodder can be downloaded for free from the endless selection of pornography available on the internet. Burlesque’s growing popularity demonstrates that it has something new and unique to offer. Just what that is, though, remains a contested issue as burlesque works to find its identity as an emerging “American folk art.”

There seem to be two main schools of thought operating within the neo-burlesque scene, both of which reference very different traditions within the vast history of burlesque performance. The first consists of those who want to preserve the form of burlesque performance, and the other is made up of those who are more interested in keeping the spirit of burlesque alive. The accepted burlesque “form” is, quite simply, the glamorous retro striptease, drawing inspiration from and paying tribute to the burlesque queens of the past. Performers of this school, who include the aforementioned Dita Von Teese and Britain’s Immodesty Blaize, explain the revival of burlesque as an effort to offer “a little escapism amid increasingly dire straits” in today’s stressful world. Blaize has argued that the growing popularity of burlesque is symptomatic of a public need “to escape into beautiful fantasy to forget the fact that the world [is] a depressing place.” So this variety of burlesque is

---


26
intended to please and to entertain, not just with an aim of sexual titillation, but to offer solace for jaded modern audiences (female and male alike) who nostalgically long for simpler times.

Those who seek to preserve the “spirit” of burlesque go back even further in history to find their traditional inspiration. Instead of identifying stripteasers as the aesthetic grandmothers of burlesque, they locate the beginning of the burlesque tradition in the subversive satire and sexual transgression of Lydia Thompson and her ilk. Michelle Baldwin, author of Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind, explains that acts of these original performers were “a commentary on their time,” and so the new burlesque should be also “influenced by and a reflection of our time.”

Baldwin argues that burlesque is defined by “the divine mixture of the sexy and the satirical.” For her, and the many others in the community who share her perspective, it is imperative that burlesque performance make a statement of some kind; whether or not it looks like the burlesque of the past, they believe it ought to perform the same social function. In our sex-saturated modern society, public display of the body can no longer be counted as inherently transgressive, so performers have to seek more extreme means in their quest to question mainstream social norms and gender roles.

Again, the goal is not sexual titillation, but, in this case, intellectual and ideological stimulation. The spirit of burlesque may be considered akin to the carnivalesque, as discussed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. Burlesque has always existed as a “socially peripheral” art

---


71 Baldwin 38.
form, but it may still strive to be "symbolically central."\(^\text{72}\) This school of burlesque attempts to revive the "punning relationship with official culture"\(^\text{73}\) the late nineteenth-century burlesque of Lydia Thompson had. The burlesque performer can be thought of as a "low other" (an idea of Stallybrass and White's utilized extensively by Allen in *Horrible Prettiness*), enacting inversions and transgressions, crossing social boundaries, and establishing a version of the "world upside down," where that which cannot be shown (most often, overt female sexuality) is made visible.

Performers of this persuasion often perform stripteases, but with a twist. Julie Atlas Muz, a performer who also has a background in the New York performance art scene, has an act in which she comes out onstage trussed and blindfolded, then proceeds to forcefully peel her way out of the ropes to the Lesley Gore song "You Don’t Own Me.” Her physicality is shockingly violent, and the performance seems to allude to issues of domestic abuse while simultaneously challenging viewers’ perceptions of what is “sexy.” This provocative act is indeed a strip of sorts, but it is a strip with no tease – at least not a tease of a sexual nature. Muz, if anything, teases her audience’s expectations about burlesque, stripping, and the display of the female body in general.

The discourse surrounding these divergent philosophies of burlesque may make the neo-burlesque community sound fractured and divisive, but in my experience, just the opposite is true: the community is actually very supportive, tightknit, and respectful of all contemporaries and predecessors. This is especially evident at the Miss Exotic World Pageant, where the past, present, and future of burlesque come together each year. This event was originally held at a ranch owned by performer Dixie Evans in Helendale, California, which also housed the Exotic

---


\(^\text{73}\) Kateryna Arthur, qtd. in Stallybrass and White 11.
World Museum, an impressive and unique assortment of burlesque memorabilia maintained by Ms. Evans. Now both the pageant and the museum have relocated to Las Vegas, attracting a multigenerational assortment of burlesque performers and enthusiasts each year. I had the pleasure of attending the Miss Exotic World pageant in June 2007 as a part of my research, which afforded me the opportunity to see over 75 different burlesque acts in a single weekend. The current burlesque community is unmistakably diverse, thriving on the respect, admiration, and artistic commerce which have been established between the older and newer performers. The Exotic World weekend accordingly includes a Striptease Reunion showcase with performances by veteran burlesquers (as well as tributes to classic stars of burlesque presented by some of the younger performers), followed the next night by the Miss Exotic World Pageant, which recognizes the best of contemporary burlesque talents. The pageant features competitions for best debut performer, best duo, best troupe, best “boylesque” (for male burlesque performers), awards for the “most classic” and “most innovative” performers, and the ultimate prize, the crown of Miss Exotic World.

Despite growing mainstream awareness and international events like Miss Exotic World, new burlesque still remains largely a subcultural phenomenon in our society today. Neo-burlesque can nonetheless be regarded as a powerful tool for subversion, transgression, and feminist expression within popular culture. In the following chapter, I will take a closer look at the new burlesque movement, considering the complexities, possibilities, and implications of the unique brand of gender performance practiced by neo-burlesque artists.
In neo-burlesque performance, the show is “all about a woman’s fantasy.”\textsuperscript{1} Specifically, it is about the fantasy of the performer, who exercises complete aesthetic control over the act she presents. Performers today are not marketing their bodies per se, but are rather “selling a show,” and each performer has the power to “decide what that show is going to look like, sound like, etc.”\textsuperscript{2} Author and performer Michelle Baldwin explains that one of the crucial differences between the burlesque of today and the burlesque of the past is that, in neo-burlesque, “[o]ur performances, persona, costumes, all of it comes from us. Before, women were given their persona and even their stage names by men. This time women are in control of their own image, and that’s empowering. It gives us a voice women didn’t have before.”\textsuperscript{3} Since burlesque is no longer a viable means to make a living, it has


\textsuperscript{2} Duchess DuBois, Personal Interview, 6 August 2007.

become more about the creative, do-it-yourself spirit and the individual “artistic self-expression of the performer,” rather than a commercial concern for catering to or pleasing an audience. Performer Clams Casino explains that her acts are “not about what you want to see as an audience; I determine what is sexy as the dancer.”

Not that the new breed of burlesque performers has no interest in pleasing their audience – for them, such sexual display is transformed from something “passive,” where they offer their bodies up for visual consumption, into “a complicitous and reciprocal pleasure.” The audience at a neo-burlesque show may enjoy looking at the performers; it may even turn them on. But the performers are looking right back, and deriving just as much pleasure from the experience. Neo-burlesque performers delight in “explor[ing] their very objectness,” putting into vital practice a statement made by Joanna Frueh in her book Erotic Faculties: “[a]s long as I am an erotic subject, I am not averse to being an erotic object.”

Burlesque gives performers an opportunity to indulge their own erotic subjectivity through the creation of a fantasy identity as their onstage persona, utilizing elements such as costuming, props, physicality, and often a suggestive stage name. Many performers construct a character that represents an “overinflated, larger-than-life” version of their personality, allowing them to express

---

7 Willson 145  
traits that they tend to "keep repressed in their day-to-day lives." Heidi Von Haught of the Seattle troupe the Von Foxies says that “[f]or the most part, Heidi is an extension of me – parts of me I wish were bigger, parts of me that need a safe space to come out in.” Clams Casino similarly acknowledged in my interview with her that her bold burlesque character “is often just a super magnified version of myself,” admitting that she is actually "shy in real life." British burlesque queen Immodesty Blaize also considers her stage persona to be “just a more extreme version of who I’ve always been.” Blaize advises any aspiring burlesque performers to begin by finding “the perfect alter ego to suit their personality,” which will then allow them to act out their fantasies in a satisfying way on the stage.

Burlesque queen Ann Corio once offered her own words of wisdom to performers: "Make yourself as feminine-looking as possible." Performers today are still heeding this advice, but with a very different attitude. Alongside the mainstream feminine ideal, burlesque has emerged as a subculture “that also promotes the production of an elaborate feminine identity, but in very different ways.” Specifically, burlesque acknowledges and embraces the ideal of elaborate feminine identity as a production: something that is produced, not natural, and also takes on the heightened nature of a theatrical show. This outlook towards gender

---


10 Heidi Von Haught, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.

11 Clams Casino, Personal Interview, 29 August 2007.


falls in line with Judith Butler’s idea that “gender is always a doing.”\(^\text{16}\) In her influential work *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not, as it is often perceived to be, “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow,”\(^\text{17}\) but rather “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance of a natural sort of being.”\(^\text{18}\) Burlesque performers “do” gender in a way that continuously reminds their audiences that it is a constructed role, not a natural state of being.

Neo-burlesque performers utilize overt femininity in this way as part of the project of feminism. Burlesque can be framed as part of the larger third-wave feminist interest in “the reclaiming of girliness – trappings of femininity that are all the more fascinating because they are no longer required.”\(^\text{19}\) When feminine appearance in the form of skirts, bras, heels, makeup, and the like was presented as a “cultural mandate that women perform their gender appropriately,”\(^\text{20}\) these fashionable trappings seemed to feminists to be nothing more than the outward signs of women’s subjugation, which had to be eliminated if they were ever to achieve equality with men. For women today, though, feminine appearance can be viewed as a choice, even a rich, exciting forum for self-expression. (After all, even second-wave feminist author and activist Susan Brownmiller had to admit that

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{16} Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006) 34.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{17} Butler 191.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{18} Butler 45.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{20} Lesa Lockford, *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004) 6.}\]
“dressing feminine can be quite creative.”21) In her third-wave feminist manifesto *The Lipstick Proviso*, Karen Lehrman writes that women today are “capable of *choosing* to engage in many traditionally feminine behaviors and mannerisms.”22 Burlesque performance is just one forum in which women may choose to indulge their feminine side. For Heidi Von Haught, “femininity is something I choose to perform for fun on specific occasions,”23 rather than a constant state of being. She does not wear makeup or shave on a regular basis, only as part of her preparation for performance. In this way, she says, “[b]urlesque allows me to express my sexuality on my own terms.”24 Duchess DuBois describes her approach to performance similarly, saying that burlesque gives her the opportunity to “play girl on stage”25 by her own rules, rather than following mainstream norms and expectations of femininity.

Gender performance of this kind is fascinating because it can be said to question and subvert the idea of normative or essential gender even as it enacts many of its culturally-inscribed symbols. Burlesque performers make use of standard tropes of feminine appearance that have been part of mainstream popular culture for decades, but with several crucial differences. First of all, when burlesque performers step into high heels and tight-fitting clothing, tease their hair, apply makeup, and so on, their feminine display has nothing to do with attracting a mate. Instead, they are putting on a show that has as much to do with indulging their own sensuality as it does with enticing an audience. Also, the burlesque image of


23 Von Haught Interview.

24 Von Haught Interview.

25 DuBois Interview.
femininity tends to be purposefully exaggerated and heightened, often to the point of cartoonishness or grotesquerie. Burlesque performers take signifiers of gender over the top to emphasize the artificiality of all aspects of gender, “blowing up our idea of womanhood” 26 through a display of hyperfemininity.

Scholar Debra Ferreday, in her article “Adapting Femininities: The New Burlesque,” describes the new burlesque movement as “a parody of feminine identity that, by making visible the work involved in producing feminine identity, precisely resists mainstream notions of feminine beauty.” 27 Artificial methods for creating the illusion of beauty (from makeup and clothing to cosmetic surgery) are trumpeted in nearly every mass media outlet aimed at female consumers. But in these mainstream sources, the focus is on looking natural, effortless, and “flawless,” as though beauty were something you were born with, not something you had to create every morning with creams and powders and appliances. Creating an appealing feminine appearance “is hard work,” as Jacki Willson writes in The Happy Stripper, “and the invisibility of all this torturous hard work can even be a point of pride” 28 for many women. Burlesque beauty practices, however, make this hard work extremely visible, reveling in the truth of artifice rather than the illusion of naturalness. For example, while Cosmopolitan magazine might tell women to whittle their waists with hours of crunches, dieting, and control-top pantyhose safely hidden under their clothing, the burlesque performer cinches her waist with a corset, which is proudly displayed as outerwear, thus revealing the mechanism at work.

26 Casino Interview.
27 Ferreday.
28 Willson 115.
By proclaiming the fact that feminine appearance takes work and simultaneously uncovering the mechanisms involved in that work, burlesque performance promotes the idea of the “democratization” of beauty. Christine Rosen discusses this phenomenon in an article for *The New Atlantis*, explaining that our culture increasingly shows interest in redefining beauty as something that, “with enough money and effort, anyone can attain,” thus “blunt[ing] its force as an instrument of inequality.” Rosen is referring particularly to extreme measures such as plastic surgery, which literally allow anyone possessing the necessary funds to purchase the “perfect” body or face, but burlesque also “democratizes” beauty, through more positive – and certainly less painful and costly – means. Not everyone can be born beautiful, but anyone can become beautiful if they so choose through the artificial apparatus of costume and makeup. “In a world in which we are judged by how we appear,” Rosen quotes cultural historian Sander Gilman, “the belief that we can change our appearance is liberating.” Burlesque performer Dr. Lukki concurs with this perspective, saying that there is a “certain power” in the “idea that beauty or glamour can be constructed or put on.” As Susan Brownmiller admits in *Femininity*, “indulgence in the art of feminine illusion can be reassuring to a woman, if she happens to be good at it.” Burlesque promotes the idea that any woman can learn to be “good” at such “feminine illusion,” and can thus use it to her own advantage, “hijacking ‘femininity’” for subversive purposes.

---


30 Sander Gilman, qtd. in Rosen.

31 Dr. Lukki, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.

32 Brownmiller 17.

33 Willson 178.
Eva Pendleton, in her chapter of Jill Nagle’s anthology *Whores and Other Feminists*, argues that, by demanding payment for their performance of femininity, “[s]ex workers provide a powerful indictment of gender roles.” Burlesque performers may not command much money for their brand of gender performance, but simply by making gender a show, a theatrical spectacle, rather than a natural part of everyday life, they are calling into question established expectations about gender. For them, femininity is seen not as a required state of being, but as a carefully-constructed persona that represents a great deal of effort and artistry. Whether or not they demand payment, burlesque performers certainly demand attention and applause for their elaborate constructions of gender.

For most performers, this hyperfeminine performance is just a hobby, a chance to relive the childhood pastime of playing dress-up on a grander and more public scale. For others, though (particularly those few performers who have attained enough prestige to make a living in burlesque), it becomes a full-time, all-consuming physical and mental project. Modern burlesque celebrities like Immodesty Blaize and Dita Von Teese have developed the performance of the feminine into a fine art, and their bodies are their greatest creations.

Both Von Teese and Blaize have emphasized repeatedly that all this artifice comes naturally to them; Dita claims that “the clothes she wears for her shows are the same ones she feels most comfortable in at home” and says that “[s]weatpants (at least spiritually) chafe” her. Neither woman, however, denies the effort that goes into the creation and maintenance of her elaborate and glamorous look. 

---


fact, both Blaize and Von Teese seem to take extreme pleasure in their hard work. Blaize prides herself on her ability to “never switch off,” saying that “[m]y image is paramount to my job and I work very hard to control every aspect of the way I look.” In interviews, she speaks extensively about the personal body project she has undertaken as part of her performance, from exercise and diet, to body modification through the use of corsetry, to detailed implementation of makeup, hairstyling, and costuming. “Of course, I have the same insecurities as every other woman,” she admits, “but my job is to hide the things that are imperfect – that is my art.”

Von Teese has a similarly strict dedication to her regimen of glamour and the “diligent construction” of her body; she even speaks with fondness of the “challenge” of tightlacing a corset, deeming the scars left on her back from the laces “worth it” for “the sense of discipline” she derives from wearing it. Like Blaize, Von Teese is “a woman who is never off duty.” Dita calls herself “the picture of D.I.Y.

---


38 Harris.

39 Immodesty Blaize, qtd. in Harris.

40 Barnett.

41 Willson 114.


admitting that "it's a ton of work, living D.I.Y. Perfecting a look and a style takes a lot of practice." Von Teese began this project early in life, spurred by girlhood obsessions with old-fashioned lingerie and the glamorous pin-ups in her father's Playboy magazines. "Even at eleven I understood the power of illusion," she writes in her book Burlesque and the Art of the Teese. She also understood from an early age that she was a rather plain girl, not a "natural beauty," and so would require "a little practice" to obtain the "luxury ticket to the world" that beauty could offer. Dita has made no secret of her past as "a very ordinary blonde girl from Michigan" named Heather Sweet. She freely admits to each and every one of the modifications she has made to her persona and appearance over the years: changing her name, coloring her hair black (at home with Revlon 10-minute dye), covering up her freckles with makeup, cinching her waist with corsets, and even undergoing breast augmentation. Her honesty is refreshing and significant in our youth- and beauty-obsessed society, which treats measures like plastic surgery and Botox treatments as both dirty little secrets and necessary personal maintenance for women of all ages and walks of life. Von Teese has said she finds it "so tiresome when people lie about their surgery," and calls cosmetic surgery just "a form –


45 Von Teese 95.

46 Von Teese 15.

47 Von Teese 14.


49 Dita Von Teese, qtd. in Barbara Ellen, "This Much I Know: Dita Von Teese, Stripper, 34, London," Observer, 8 July 2007, 1 November 2007 <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/magazine/story/0,,2116789,00.html>.
albeit a dramatic one – of makeup.”\textsuperscript{50} She considers all this artifice to be an integral part of the burlesque tradition she is so intent on reviving, remarking that “we burlesquers tend to be beauties of the created kind.”\textsuperscript{51}

Both she and Blaize encourage fans not necessarily to imitate their retro-glam looks or their rather extreme beauty regimens, but rather their overall philosophy of glamour. Blaize says that it is not appearance, but “confidence” that is “the key”: “the most sexy woman may not be the most beautiful, but as long as she’s confident, she will be radiant.”\textsuperscript{52} Von Teese, on the other hand, urges women “to do exactly what you want to do to make yourself feel beautiful,”\textsuperscript{53} whatever that may be. If you are not satisfied with some aspect of the way you look, she believes, then you should do whatever is in your power to change it. “Glamour is something you can create,” she says, “it isn’t about age, shape or size. You don’t have to be pretty to have it, anyone can create it.”\textsuperscript{54} Thus, though Von Teese’s stage persona represents an elite, expensive construction of femininity, adorned with rhinestones and couture corsetry, she remains a staunch advocate of the democratization of beauty. She may appear as an unattainable goddess onstage, but the message inherent in all of her decadent acts is that, if an ordinary blonde girl from Michigan can turn herself into a raven-haired international star, sex symbol, and style icon, “absolutely in control of her own image,”\textsuperscript{55} then anything is possible.

\textsuperscript{50} Von Teese 109.
\textsuperscript{51} Von Teese 15.
\textsuperscript{52} Immodesty Blaize, qtd. in Harris.
\textsuperscript{53} Von Teese 109.
\textsuperscript{54} Dita Von Teese, qtd. in Dawson.
Obviously, many women today do embrace burlesque as a tool for self-expression and change, but others fail to see it as a step forward for the feminist agenda, and more than a few consider it a definite step backwards. One of the most striking examples of anti-burlesque vitriol I’ve encountered in my research occurred in a June 2007 interview with Dita Von Teese, conducted by *Guardian* journalist Hannah Pool. Pool spends most of the interview attacking Von Teese, questioning whether it is even possible to be both a feminist and burlesque performer and asking her if she wishes she could find liberation “without having to take your clothes off.” When Von Teese counters by inquiring if Pool has ever even attended a burlesque performance, she responds by saying she doesn’t “want to encourage it” and she “hate[s] the women that go,” because she feels they are letting down their entire gender.

The performers themselves, of course, are quick to defend the positive effects of the art they love. The World Famous *BOB* says that she has seen “a lot of glamour, positive energy, and self-expression” in the world of burlesque, and she thinks that “any time a woman is utilizing her feminine assets in a positive way [. . .] that’s feminist.” Heidi Von Haught argues that not only burlesque performance, but also more stigmatized vocations like stripping and prostitution, are always a source of empowerment, provided that they derive from a woman’s personal choice: “[w]hen women make the decision to work or play with their sexuality and this decision is born out of their own desire and not out of economic or social coercion, it

---

56 Hannah Pool, “‘You Can’t Say All Strippers are Abused’: Dita Von Teese, The ‘Queen of Burlesque,’ on Fame, Fortune and Feminism,” *Guardian*, 28 June 2007, 1 November 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gender/story/0,,2113331,00.html>.

57 Pool.

58 World Famous *BOB,* qtd. in Baldwin 48.
is empowering.” Dr. Lukki expressed a broader viewpoint in our interview, declaring that burlesque can be at the same time empowering and exploitative. “Because something is empowering to someone does not mean that it doesn’t circulate in an economy of exploitation,” she argues, adding that, while problematic, this is not necessarily a problem: it also constitutes “one of the most dynamic features of the neo-movement, the reclaiming of a potentially ‘oppressive’ representation of women in the public sphere.”

This issue of empowerment versus exploitation has troubled the feminist community for years; burlesque is merely one of its many battlegrounds. Gender studies theorists have devised several conceptual models for grappling with the simultaneously exploitative and empowering, one of which is the idea of “masquerade.” Mary Ann Doane explains her concept of masquerade in her essay “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator.” For Doane, the masquerade “in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask that can be worn or removed.” By creating “a certain distance between oneself and one’s image,” a woman is able to use “her own body as a disguise.” Though the masquerade can serve as a tactic for questioning and subverting gender norms, it is not necessarily subversive in and of itself. The problem, as Carol Anne Tyler explains in her book Female Impersonation, is that “[t]he difference between being resigned to femininity and re-signing femininity” is not always “clearly visible.” A woman in a nightclub wearing stilettos, a corset top, and exaggerated makeup may

---

59 Von Haught Interview.

60 Lukki Interview.


62 Doane 66.

63 Carol Anne Tyler, Female Impersonation (New York: Routledge, 2003) 28.
look quite similar to a burlesque performer at first glance, but her reasons for flaunting femininity are not necessarily the same. In any case, it is very difficult to make such a determination based solely on the visible signs of an outward “mask” of womanliness.

Tyler attempts to mitigate this ambiguity by referring to self-aware and purposeful performance of the feminine (of the type that burlesque performers endeavor to engage in) instead as “mimicry,” which she calls “a witty redoubling of that doubling inherent to femininity” rather than “an unwitting masquerade”: the “female mimic” is “self-aware, self-conscious,” she “apparently knows what she is up to. She is up to her neck in patriarchy, but her head is clear.”[^27-28] I find Tyler’s alternative terminology here to be useful theoretically, but no less troubling in practical application, as it leaves many questions unresolved. For example, what determines the dividing line between masquerade and mimicry? Is context all? Or is it the intent of the individual? The perceptions of the audience? I would argue that burlesque performers are indeed engaging in mimicry, rather than “unwitting masquerade,” but this theoretical framework does little to address the problematic ambiguities at work here.

Another profitable and perhaps more specific way to contextualize burlesque is to locate it within the tradition of camp performance. The term “camp” is most commonly associated with the ostentatious gender performances of drag queens, which has made it historically the purview of male female impersonators. Some feminists have even interpreted campy images of femininity as actually hostile to women, appropriating the feminine in order to mock it. Pamela Robertson, however, argues in her book *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, that the concept of camp has quite a bit to offer feminists as “a model for critiques of

gender and sex roles."\textsuperscript{65} Camp has the ability "to function as a form of gender parody,"\textsuperscript{66} taking as its object "not the image of the woman, but the idea – which, in camp, becomes a joke – that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image."\textsuperscript{67} This aligns perfectly with Judith Butler’s view of gender parody as not merely a parody of gender identity, but rather a parody "of the very notion of an original."\textsuperscript{68}

The camp model still admits many of the same problematic elements as the masquerade and mimicry models, however. In its appropriation and exposure of stereotypes, camp "also, in some measure, keeps them alive."\textsuperscript{69} In order to be a useful tool of feminist ideology, then, camp must "be considered as a mode of productive anachronism, a form of recycling"\textsuperscript{70} with subversive intentions. I think that Robertson’s term "productive anachronism" is a wonderful way to anchor a definition of the art of burlesque. At the most basic level, burlesque is invoking and recycling fashions and modes of expression from the past, but presenting them in a way that provokes new interpretations and meanings. The ultra-feminine aesthetic of burlesque, for example, may at first appear to be just a nostalgic “tribute” to the glamour of burlesque stars past, but it simultaneously functions as a "send-up" of "the extreme version of femininity"\textsuperscript{71} which has been a hallmark of burlesque


\textsuperscript{66} Robertson 10.

\textsuperscript{67} Robertson 12.

\textsuperscript{68} Butler 188.

\textsuperscript{69} Robertson 142.

\textsuperscript{70} Robertson 142.

performance throughout history. Today’s performers intentionally recycle the looks of performers from other eras, but this traditional appearance serves to signify something else entirely in the modern era of neo-burlesque performance.

Some neo-burlesque performers take the idea of the “productive anachronism” of camp even further by actually classifying themselves as “female female impersonators” or “female-to-female drag queens” and celebrating the idea of burlesque as “women in female drag.” According to Michelle Baldwin, burlesque performers “are more woman than the average woman,” “sometimes parodies of women, but more often they are superwomen.” Both burlesque and cross-dressing suggest “that femininity needs to be learnt,” that it is not a natural state but an artificial one that can be put on and removed as a theatrical costume. Cross-dressing, according to Marjorie Garber, “offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural,” and burlesque similarly questions binarity and essentialism in its presentation of femininity. Embracing the connection between burlesque and drag performance also seems to take the hyperfeminine to its logical conclusion; Dr. Lukki, herself a “female drag queen,” says that she has “heard a number of times folks asking about hyper feminine women” onstage at burlesque shows, “[i]s that a DUDE?” Such extreme femininity is often perceived not as a superior incarnation of womanhood, but as something so unnatural and unsettling that it can only be understood if


73 Baldwin 99.

74 Ferreday.


76 Lukki Interview.
qualified as somehow masculine, rather than as a “real” woman. Lukki herself intentionally blurs the line between female and male in her performances; one act features a Carmen Miranda-esque samba routine (complete with ruffled costume and fruit-covered headdress) that culminates with Lukki pulling a banana out of her underwear, consuming the obvious phallic symbol, and then flinging the peel at her audience.

More than a few burlesque performers in fact attribute their interest in burlesque to a desire for drag queendom which had been frustrated by their biological femaleness. Performer Temper Tantrum of the Kansas City troupe the Burly Q Girly Crew says that, “When I started doing burlesque, I would tell people it was because I couldn’t be a drag queen.”

Now, she draws many parallels between her performances in burlesque and those of the drag artists she admires: “like all other drag queens,” she “puts on a costume of iconic womanliness” in order to become “twice the woman – an uber-woman, more woman than most real women have any desire to be.”

Performer Duchess DuBois, on the other hand, recalls a desire to be a drag queen that dates all the way back to her childhood – a dream she obviously found “a bit difficult to achieve” until she discovered burlesque. In my interview with her, I inquired about why she had been so fascinated with drag as a young girl, as opposed to simply wanting to become a glamorous, beautiful woman. The difference, she explained, is that drag “is where this unadulterated femme femininity can exist as a glamorous, gaudy and gorgeous artifice. It shows it for what it really is, and because there is no pretence of being ‘natural’ a drag artist gets

---


78 Kaufmann.

79 DuBois Interview.
to just run with it and take it above and beyond.”

DuBois’s signature act, which she performed in the Best Debut category at Miss Exotic World in 2007, is called “Pink & Rose Fantasy,” and celebrates the ultrafeminine with debutante-inspired costuming (fur muff and wrap, elbow-length gloves, form-fitting gown, and feathered headdress, all pink of course) and self-consciously prim-and-proper physicality. For DuBois, drag performance is “a way to be a fabulous glitzy primadonna but not because it is part of who you’re supposed to be. By choice, and something you can put on and take off whenever you like.”

Drag offers a measure of freedom in femininity, because “[i]t doesn’t have to be your identity, it can remain just play, and then you have so many other options at your disposal.”

Other performers, though associated with the neo-burlesque community, define themselves first and foremost as female-female impersonators. New York-based performer Raven Snook calls herself “a drag queen trapped in a woman’s body” and says she became interested in gender performance because she realized she “only felt like a girl” when she “dressed the part”; “Every morning when I woke up I would look in the mirror and see a blank, genderless slate that needed to be defined.” Drag, Snook believes, gave her the means to define herself because it “allows you to transform into the ideal you.”

---

80 DuBois Interview.
81 DuBois Interview.
82 DuBois Interview.
84 Raven Snook, qtd. in Bussel.
85 Raven Snook, qtd. in Bussel.
burlesque celebrity, the World Famous *BOB*, describes her acts as an impersonation both of “myself and different aspects of blonde bombshells that I love. That sounds very conceptual because it is.”

Both burlesque and cross-dressing suggest “that femininity needs to be learnt,” and this, as Debra Ferreday observes, “also involves unlearning whatever ‘one (usually restrictive) size fits all’ forms of femininity are currently being sold by the fashion and beauty industries” in favor of “a ‘DIY’ approach to femininity” – femininity on the individual terms of the performer, which may involve “being an inappropriate female” in some capacity. Beyond the transgressive connotations of drag and the sexually daring female performer, much burlesque also involves the display of a transgressive body, particularly in terms of weight. As Michelle Baldwin writes, “Part of the soul of new burlesque is size acceptance.” “All figure types,” from the rail-thin to the zaftig, “are accepted in burlesque because there is a broader idea of what is sexy.” Burlesque offers a chance for all women, even those who are average-sized or overweight, to feel sexy and empowered, either by watching “real women” of all shapes and sizes take off their clothes onstage, or by getting up there and doing it themselves.

86 World Famous *BOB*, qtd. in Baldwin 99.
87 Ferreday.
89 Baldwin 30.
Appreciation for larger women dates back to the early days of burlesque, when the philosophy was that “[t]he larger the body, the more flesh there was to display.”\textsuperscript{91} The female body ideal in general skewed much larger in those days than it does now, but certain acts made a point of spectacularizing the “excessive” body. Early burlesque queen May Howard declared that she would not allow any girl who weighed less than 150 pounds to join her company, while Billy Watson’s “Beef Trust” troupe boasted a chorus line of beauties who all weighed in above 200 pounds. Today, troupes like the Glamazons (who recently had a successful run on the network TV show \textit{America’s Got Talent}, and are now modeling for the plus-size brand Torrid) and San Francisco’s Original Fat-Bottom Revue carry on the plus-size burlesque tradition.

Heather MacAllister, a founding member of the Fat-Bottom Revue who also referred to herself as a “fat activist,” has extolled the positive effects that watching a plus-size burlesque performer can have on viewers of all shapes and sizes: “They get to see a woman who is a big woman, who is proud of her body, proud of her curves, and flaunts it in a really joyous and sexy way. It totally empowers other women – even skinny women. They’re really excited because [they say], ‘If you can love your body, I can love my body, too.’”\textsuperscript{92}

Rita MenWeep (of the burlesque troupe the Peach Tartes) told me that when she first encountered burlesque, “It was such a relief to find a community where all sizes, ages, and shapes are welcome.”\textsuperscript{93} She recalls one especially inspiring performance by the World Famous *BOB*: “The first time I saw [her] bend over and showcase her cellulite to the audience I wanted to cry ‘Hallelujah!’” Here is a woman

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{92} Heather MacAllister, qtd. in Nygaard.

\textsuperscript{93} Rita MenWeep, Personal Interview, 23 October 2007.
\end{flushright}
who loves herself, 'faults' and all. It takes so much strength to do it and I admire any woman capable of that feat in the current media climate." *BOB* not only shows off her full-figured physique on stage: in one of her signature acts she actually responds to her critics. The act, entitled “The World Famous *BOB*: She’s a Fucking Genius,” features the blonde beauty performing what seems at first to be a fairly traditional striptease to brassy jazz music. In tandem with the music, however, there are "voice-overs speaking all the terrible and hurtful things that people have said to her over the years.” Male voices intone phrases ranging from the demeaning (“you got nice tits”) to the critical (“you’d be cute if you lost the baby fat”) to the downright cruel (“the only reason I fuck you from behind is so I don’t have to look at your face”). Throughout the performance, though, she “mocks what the voice-overs are saying to her,” continuing to dance defiantly and even mouthing along with the brutal words. *BOB*’s bold, sassy performance makes it clear that she loves her body just as it is and refuses to let the judgments of others affect her self-worth.

*Sunday Times* journalist Michelle Olley is referring specifically to Immodesty Blaize when she writes that, “[h]er full womanly shape seems subversive in a culture that is fixated on surgically enhanced notions of perfection,” but this observation seems a pertinent one to make about quite a few modern burlesque performers. A figure like Blaize’s would have fit right in during the era of burlesque queens which she so explicitly references in her performances, but today, her size-14 frame is much larger than the ideal. In our current, size 0-obsessed society, simply

---

94 MenWeep Interview.

95 Baldwin 60.

96 Baldwin 60.

displaying such a body onstage is arguably a radical act. Although the display of the human body may no longer be automatically shocking, it is possible that the display of this body can be subversive and shocking (or at least boundary-pushing) in its own way. As a woman who, like Immodesty Blaize, falls under the current designation of “plus-size,” the sight of her fearlessly showing off her voluptuous figure and cellulite-laden thighs in front of a cheering crowd did provide me with a vicarious self-esteem boost.

The burlesque show *The Sensuous Woman*, a pet project of comedienne Margaret Cho, is based entirely around issues of self-esteem and body image, with the specific goal of showing “all different types of women’s bodies and how beautiful they can be in various stages of undress.”

Cho, who belly-dances, strips, and performs stand-up in the variety show, says she created *The Sensuous Woman* because of her life-long struggle with eating disorders and distorted body image, which she attributes to the “lack of images of real women’s bodies” available in the media today. By making such images available, Cho hopes to “change and recreate the ideal of what is attractive.”

This focus on positive depictions of women’s bodies is indeed one of the most important things neo-burlesque has to offer contemporary American culture. Even excepting plus-size troupes, audiences are likely to see a far more diversified selection of female forms at any given burlesque show than they are through any mass-media outlet. Performer Virginia D’Vine classifies herself and her fellow

---


burlesquers as "the anti-media females," "everyday women with curves, bellies, tattoos, hips . . . you name it." As Naomi Wolf criticizes in *The Beauty Myth*, women today rarely have the chance to "see what other women look like naked; we see only identical humanoid products based loosely on women’s bodies." Images of women in all states of dress and undress proliferate in our media-driven culture, in everything from magazines to movies to advertisements, but it is difficult to find images to which the average woman can relate in the midst of all this airbrushed, highly-styled perfection. Burlesque is significant because it seeks to address “this lack, this need for female-inspired erotic imagery” and realistic views of women’s bodies. "When I appear onstage as a size 12, with cellulite and (occasionally) smeared lipstick," says Clams Casino, "I’m subverting the mainstream definition of beauty, a definition controlled by men. [. . . .] I feel that just the act of reclaiming a female definition of what is sexy is subverting gender roles.” Instead of presenting female flesh as a fantasy object relegated to “professional set-pieces that reveal little about female sexuality,” burlesque presents a different fantasy altogether: "the fantasy of real women." As Michelle Baldwin points out, instead of resembling emaciated fashion models or plasticine porn stars, burlesque performers look like a glamorized version of the women we see every day. Women

---

103 Willson 124.  
104 Casino Interview.  
105 Wolf 136.  
106 Baldwin 132.
who go to burlesque shows “want to see someone with a body like theirs doing things they only dream of doing,” and a good deal of burlesque’s allure seems to come from this vicarious thrill.

Like most women, I must admit that I constantly make comparisons between myself and the images of females I see around me, and the search for women with bodies like mine in mainstream media often seems like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. When I attended Exotic World, though, I was for perhaps the first time in my life presented with a constant parade of a diverse spectrum of body types – from boyish and lean to voluptuous and fleshy, along with everything in between – all glamorized and glorified in performance. And every woman, from the smallest to the largest, seemed completely comfortable with her body on stage. Sarah Faith Alterman observes that burlesque performers “savor the spotlight” and “seem enraptured by their own naked bodies,” “giv[ing] the impression that they’d be just as enthralled by their own sexuality if there weren’t a room full of voyeurs cheering them on.” After attending Exotic World, I can wholeheartedly concur with Alterman’s description; even outside of the performance venues, I was in awe of the body confidence the women at Exotic World displayed. At the pool party which closed out the festivities, I found myself (after a full weekend of watching people take their clothes off onstage) completely captivated by all the women, many my size or larger, who seemed entirely at ease mingling with the crowd in skimpy swimsuits. I realized that it was their attitude and carriage which created their sex appeal, much more than their appearance. These women thought they were sexy, and so they were. After returning home, I promptly went out and bought a bikini of

107 Baldwin 59.

my own – my first, after years of telling myself I was “too fat” for anything other than a modestly-cut one-piece. I entirely credit my experience at Exotic World for giving me the courage to wear it in public.

This potential for personal empowerment through improved body image is one of the most crucial and tangible benefits burlesque can provide to its female spectators. Michelle Baldwin writes that women today “come to burlesque looking for what they think is sexy and what can make them feel like they’re sexy too” and they leave a burlesque show “with a new or renewed sense of their own sexual attractiveness.”

“By learning to love what they have and who they are,” Baldwin continues, female audience members realize that “they can be just as captivating as the women on the burlesque stage.” Heidi Von Haught corroborates this, telling me that many women have approached her and her troupemates following their shows to say that “they feel empowered watching us perform. I think feeling sexy and acting sexy even with your flaws helps others feel like they are sexy, too, even with their flaws.” Duchess DuBois has had similar experiences as a result of her performances, and says that “[m]ost women who see us, no matter what their age, tell us how great it is, and how much they wish they had the guts to do it, too.”

And many of them are finding that they do, in fact, have the guts to perform themselves. Burlesque has always been seen as the territory of amateurs. “If burlesque ever became too talented,” Irving Zeidman writes in The American

---

109 Baldwin 129.
110 Baldwin 133.
111 Von Haught Interview.
112 DuBois Interview.
Burlesque Show, “it ceased to be burlesque.” Performers today agree that burlesque remains “an amateur art form,” in which “[p]art of the allure is that the audience feels, ‘I can do that.’” Sheila K. Dewan, writing for the New York Times, observes that the neo-burlesque movement has become “a siren call to other women.” After seeing a burlesque show, female audience members might decide they want to get in on the action themselves, whether that means stripping for her lover in the privacy of her own bedroom or concocting an original burlesque act to be performed in public. “Part of the appeal of the burlesque world,” says Tara Pontani of the Pontani Sisters, “is that it’s open to anyone and anyone can get onstage if you put the time into a routine and put a costume together.”

Peach Tarte Rita MenWeep got her start this way: “I had seen a few burlesque shows and always walked away thinking, ‘I could do that.’” MenWeep drew from her experiences acting in a play with a “burlesque element” to begin concocting her own striptease performances. As a theatre actress, the progression from burlesque fan to burlesque queen was perhaps more natural for MenWeep, but for all the neo-burlesque performers who have professional backgrounds in acting, dancing, modeling, or performance art, it seems that just as many are self-taught.

---


116 Tara Pontani, qtd. in Baldwin 32.

117 MenWeep Interview.
amateurs. Though a dance or performance background may be able to enhance a burlesque act, burlesque “can be done by anyone”: no matter “how old you are, how much you weigh or how tall you are – you can do burlesque.”

The burlesque community is, in general, extremely accepting to newcomers; fans and performers alike “are proud of the inclusiveness of their world,” “welcom[ing] outsiders even as they fear more mainstream interest might dilute it.” The performers at Exotic World represented a wide spectrum of age and experience, from the Best Debut competitors, many of whom had just started out in the past few years, to the burlesque queens like Tempest Storm and Satan’s Angel, some of whom have been shaking their stuff for fifty years or more. Neo-burlesque is a rapidly-growing phenomenon, as more new performers and troupes joining the community with each passing year. ABC News reporter Andrew Chang refers to this as the “snowball effect,” occurring because members of the audience “who see the performers breaking molds are often inspired to get onstage themselves.”

During my weekend at Exotic World, I was encouraged by quite a few people to consider performing myself someday, as that is the only way to ever get the “full experience” of burlesque. I haven’t worked up the courage to try stripping on stage yet, but I did try the next best thing: a burlesque workshop, entitled “Burly Gurly 101” and conducted by Washington, D.C.-based performer Kitty Victorian, Headmistress of D.C.’s Burlesque University. I was one of only a few curious students who showed up for the two-hour session on a Sunday afternoon, during which Miss Victorian covered the basics of glove peeling, feather boa work, and

---


120 Chang.
tassel twirling, as well as providing a brief overview of the history of burlesque. For Victorian, the focus of burlesque is not on pretending to be sexy or putting on a show, but instead on regaining the sexual power that women already have.

As the neo-burlesque phenomenon grows, burlesque workshops like this one, as well as longer courses and even established schools of burlesque, are springing up all over the country. Burlesque, it seems overwhelmingly evident, is an art that women are not content simply to sit back and watch; they want to get up on stage and do it themselves. Though some of these curriculums are geared towards pleasing the opposite sex (Kitty Victorian, for example, has another workshop entitled “How to Strip for Your Lover”), for the most part burlesque education today is about having fun and gaining body confidence in a safe environment, surrounded by supportive women (and occasionally, a few very forward-thinking men). Feminist blogger Chloe Emmott describes the burlesque classes she took as “a sisterhood of sequins,” during which she and her classmates “were not taught to please men, we were taught to enjoy ourselves, to revel in our bodies, to enjoy our sexuality, the thrill of the tease and the sensation of being in the spotlight.”

Another burlesque beginner, Petra Boynton, commented on her experience in a fan dancing workshop for an article in the Guardian: nervous at first, she quickly realized she “needn’t have worried. We were made to believe that whatever our shape we could feel stunning.” By the end of the workshop, Boynton found that she “felt livelier, sexier and happier.” Phoenix online contributor Sarah Faith Alterman was dubious as well when she began a Boston Babydolls workshop that promised to turn her into

---


123 Boynton.
an “instant burlesque queen.” In the end, while she admits that donning “pasties and a G-string” did not make her feel “invincible or even bionic,” she did walk off the stage after her culminating performance “believing that if I could dance, clown, sing, and entertain while shedding my clothes to the din of 100 strangers cheering me on, then I could do just about anything.”\textsuperscript{124}

I had a similar experience following my session with Kitty Victorian. The two-hour burlesque tutorial certainly didn’t make me feel “invincible,” but it did leave me with a lasting boost of confidence. Stripping down in a group of complete strangers and gluing pasties to my nipples pushed me far outside of my comfort zone, but I was surprised by how easy – and how much fun – it was at the time. I walked out of the workshop feeling sexy, exhilarated, and a little more fearless, wondering what else I might have the guts to try. And this, according to renowned burlesque teacher Jo “Boobs” Weldon, is exactly what burlesque education is supposed to accomplish. In her classes, Weldon seeks to teach women “how to feel desirable,” a feat that is “not about the body, but the attitude, the swagger. Everyone can feel like that.”\textsuperscript{125}

Burlesque has always attempted to bring glamour to the masses, and now through workshops and classes like these, that glamour is made even more attainable for the “average” woman. There is no doubt in my mind that burlesque can offer a significant means of sexual self-expression for women, but it seems to me that the approach of commodifying and marketing burlesque as a skill which can be taught in a standardized curriculum provokes new issues of its own. In the following chapter, I will explore some of the possibilities and problems that have begun to arise as burlesque increasingly finds its way into the commercial world of popular culture.

\textsuperscript{124} Alterman.

\textsuperscript{125} Jo “Boobs” Weldon, qtd. in Calhoun.
In her book *Striptease*, Rachel Shteir writes that “neoburlesque striptease remains a minor-league diversion.”\(^1\) Whether or not that claim was true when the book was published in 2004, it certainly seems inaccurate now. Burlesque has gained a much higher profile in recent years, and in the process has become increasingly “appropriated back into the system”\(^2\) of American consumer culture. Burlesque star Dita Von Teese, for instance, has secured lucrative spokesmodel positions with several prominent brands, including MAC Cosmetics and Wonderbra (for whom she will design her own line of vintage-inspired lingerie). As a result of these merchandising deals, Von Teese suddenly seems to be everywhere: advertisements featuring her image (always clad in glamorous, burlesque-inspired garb) now run in mainstream magazines like *Glamour* and *Marie Claire*. At a promotional show for MAC in 2007, Von Teese stripped out of a rhinestone-encrusted cowgirl outfit, then rode a giant, bucking tube of Viva Glam lipstick; video footage of this act has attracted thousands of views on YouTube. The cosmetic company’s website even has a guide to reproducing Dita’s signature makeup look (requiring, incidentally, the use of over $150 of their products).


Of course, while the neo-burlesque community generally welcomes the growing interest in their performance milieu, the concern is always that their aesthetic will become not simply appreciated and popularized, but entirely appropriated and diluted. Burlesque performers have been commenting on this commodification of their art form for years already. In *Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind*, Michelle Baldwin cites the example of an act entitled “McBurlesque,” created by the World Famous *BOB* “as a commentary on mainstream culture’s tendency to dumb down everything to make it more palatable and to brand everything in an attempt to make it seem less foreign and more acceptable.”

Others remain unconvinced that burlesque could ever become truly mainstream. Desiré d’Amour told me that she thinks burlesque “has reached a plateau” in popularity. Because of its “very sexual and risqué nature,” she doubts that it could ever “realize the popularity of swing dancing or punk rock style” and will instead stay relatively contained “in a compact space in popular culture.”

Performer Dirty Martini is similarly dubious; she quipped in a 2002 interview that she’ll “believe it when they start selling pasties at Target.”

Still, there can be little doubt that burlesque is gaining a higher profile in pop culture, whether for good or ill. Aside from Dita Von Teese, the poster girls for commercially viable burlesque in the United States are undoubtedly the Pussycat Dolls, a troupe which was originally founded by choreographer Robin Antin as a Los Angeles nightclub act in the 1990s. Since then, guest appearances from celebrities (including Carmen Electra, Christina Aguilera, and Christina Applegate), numerous

---

4 Desiré d’Amour, Personal Interview, 27 August 2007.
5 d’Amour Interview.
film and TV cameos, and pictorials in *Maxim* and *Playboy* have raised the Dolls’ profile, and in 2003, Antin decided to try for even more mainstream success by reimagining the group as a pop music outfit. They released their first album, *PCD*, in 2005 and have had several bestselling singles in the ensuing years. The Dolls have also spawned two competitive reality shows – *The Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll*, which aired on the CW from March to April 2007, and *Girlcious*, which premiered in February of 2008. The first sought to add another member to the Pussycat Dolls pop-singing troupe, while the second will culminate in the formation of a new girl group in the vein of the Dolls. Both shows focus on the Pussycat Dolls in their current incarnation as a bestselling pop music enterprise; *The Search for the Next Doll* mentioned the Dolls’ burlesque origins only once, when the contestants had to perform an “old-school” medley of the *Pink Panther* theme, “Fever,” and “Big Spender.”

Though they are no longer famous solely for burlesque (the original nightclub revue has been entirely disbanded, though a version of it lives on at the Pussycat Dolls Lounge in Las Vegas), the Dolls do have the distinction of being “the first burlesque act to sashay all the way into the mainstream.”7 They have also been the target of quite a bit of ire in the neo-burlesque community, as a prime example of the effect of “main stream culture commodifying ‘burlesque’ and repackaging it through their stale lens of homogeneity and safeness.”8 In my interview with her, Heidi Von Haught of the Von Foxies complained about “groups like the Pussycat Dolls” who go around “calling themselves burlesque without it having any connection

---


8 Dr. Lukki, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.
to the history or community,"⁹ while Rita MenWeep made sure to emphasize that her troupe, the Peach Tartes, "are not the Pussycat Dolls (don’t even get me started about them!)."¹⁰ Media commentary on the Dolls often focuses on their "conventionally attractive, Maxim-approved figures"¹¹ (a far cry from the wide range of body types and attitude of size acceptance on which the neo-burlesque community prides itself) and their clear intentions to appeal to a heterosexual male audience. In his 2003 article "Faster, Pussycats! Shill! Shill!", Nerve.com’s Ryan Tuthill refers to the Dolls as "frat burlesque," "a straight man’s gay old time."¹² Robin Antin has stood up for her creative vision, though, insisting in interviews that "There’s nothing slutty about it. There’s nothing skanky about it."¹³ She has even argued that it is "empowering to get up there and dress like a Doll. It’s fun and it’s something that every girl in the world – she may think one thing, but I think inside every girl in the world wants to do it."¹⁴ Film director McG, who was an executive producer for The Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll, backs Antin, claiming that "[u]nder no circumstances is this in the service of men," and even presenting the possibility that "this is, frankly, third-wave feminism."¹⁵

⁹ Heidi Von Haught, Personal Interview, 28 August 2007.
¹¹ Patterson.
¹⁵ McG, qtd. in Wyatt.
Traces of third-wave feminism are certainly difficult to locate in the Dolls’ music: in one song, the girls do sing that “I don’t need a man to make me feel good,” but lyrics like “loosen up my buttons, baby” and “don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?” seem more than a bit contradictory to this supposedly pro-feminist, “girl power” message. McG’s claims are not exactly born out on the Dolls’ popular reality show franchise either. At the beginning of each episode, contestants are given lessons in “confidence,” “creativity,” “sexiness,” and other qualities considered essential to Pussycat Dolldom. (It should be noted that the women on the show are rewarded for being sexy, but not too sexy; the Dolls’ most oft-repeated catchphrase is “sassy but classy,” and one Search for the Next Doll contestant was eliminated early on after a choreographer complained that she danced “like a Stripperella.”) In Episode 6 of The Search for the Next Doll, the girls are given a lecture about the importance of cultivating a personal style and “being a unique individual.” The ensuing challenge, however, involves identical choreography and matching outfits, with two hopefuls penalized because they stood out too much from the group. Over the course of the episode, one contestant is criticized for gaining weight (she is shown several times running on a treadmill and vowing to drastically cut her food intake), while another is chastised for not wearing the “boob pads” she’s been given to enhance her small bustline and help her dance in a “more girly” manner.

Whatever their merits as a pop group and a profitable brand, the Pussycat Dolls do seem to exist in direct contradiction to many of the stated principles of the new burlesque movement. There is nothing D.I.Y. about the Dolls; instead, they represent a very limited, commodified, prefabricated ideal of sex appeal, which does,
as The Independent’s Simon Price put it, seem more like “an agglomeration of the tropes of hotness, assembled like jigsaw pieces by a bored child”\(^\text{16}\) than anyone’s idea of genuine sexiness or feminist empowerment.

Another, perhaps more positive, instance of the commodification of the burlesque aesthetic can be found in the medium of pin-up photography. If burlesque exhibits female sexuality in uninhibited motion, the pin-up represents that sexuality captured (though not necessarily contained) in a form that can be reproduced and disseminated on a larger scale. Pin-ups have been popular in one form or another since the earliest days of burlesque (stars like Lydia Thompson distributed “cabinet card” images of themselves to promote their acts), and the pin-up girl constitutes an indelible image that has “fueled the imagination of a lot of future burlesque performers.”\(^\text{17}\) Burlesque performer Bella Beretta, formerly of the troupe The Gun Street Girls, has called burlesque performance “a live-action pinup,”\(^\text{18}\) and the pin-up girl endures as a popular “mascot”\(^\text{19}\) for young feminists today, even outside of the neo-burlesque movement. In her excellent account of pin-up history, Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture, Maria Elena Buszek explains that “[b]ecause the pin-up is always a sexualized woman whose image is not only mass-reproduced, but mass-reproduced because intended for wide display, the genre is an interesting barometer for Western cultural responses to women’s sexuality,” reflecting “women’s roles in the cultures and subcultures in which it is created.”\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{17}\) Baldwin 23.

\(^{18}\) Bella Beretta, qtd. in Baldwin 23.


\(^{20}\) Buszek 5.
The pin-up has, as Buszek points out, been utilized throughout visual culture history as a means of both challenging and upholding conventions of sexuality, sometimes simultaneously. It has appeared as a compelling solution to women searching for “a mediating image between the roles of subject and object, and the languages of transgression and tradition.”\(^{21}\) The appeal of pin-up modeling, just like burlesque, is that it allows women to “disrupt the patriarchal subjugation” they experience while still “retain[ing] the right to use familiar conventions of representing women’s beauty and desirability to make this disruption more accessible.”\(^{22}\) Pin-up and neo-burlesque are often connected through their comparable aesthetics, but they also share a similar discourse about the decoration and display of the female body. Modern pin-up models and burlesque performers alike are “assimilating this visual language largely constructed by men”\(^{23}\) and utilizing it for their own purposes, objectifying their bodies not to become consumable objects, but in order to assert their own subjectivity. This idea of objectification undoes the patriarchal binary of the male gaze, which requires a passive (female) object and an active (male) outside agent of objectification. In contemporary pin-up and burlesque, women are, in essence, able to perform the self by acting as both the canvas and the artist, simultaneously passive and active, object and objectifier. Furthermore, this performance is generally framed as being for the self; pin-up girls and neo-burlesque performers take pleasure in being looked at, but they also revel their ability to look back.

\(^{21}\) Buszek 8.

\(^{22}\) Buszek 7.

\(^{23}\) Buszek 12.
These artistic mediums represent “a space in which self-possessed female sexuality is not only imaged but also deemed appropriate for exhibition”\textsuperscript{24} – and, in the case of pin-up art, distribution. Because it is in most cases so easily reproducible, the pin-up can be an effective tool for advertising and popularizing positive, performer-directed views of the burlesque aesthetic. Many neo-burlesque performers feature pin-up-inspired images of themselves on their websites and other promotional materials. Others actually have separate careers in pin-up modeling; Dita Von Teese, who has worked as a pin-up, fashion, and fetish model, has said that “[m]odeling and performing feel like two parts of a whole to me.”\textsuperscript{25}

Many burlesque performers, Von Teese included, also admit at least an aesthetic debt to perhaps the best-known pin-up girl of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century: Bettie Page. Page was a pin-up and fetish model who gained notoriety during the 1950s and is still a beloved cult figure today. Her hairstyle (dark, with blunt bangs) is often duplicated by admirers, but it is her attitude which her many female fans are most eager to emulate. Page always looked as though she was enjoying herself in her photos, and, as Buszek puts it, her “brazen, over-the-top poses and pointedly lighthearted approach to performing as a pin-up served to expose the very construction of the genre.”\textsuperscript{26} No matter what pose or character she undertook, Bettie Page had a knack for “turning perversion into parody,”\textsuperscript{27} destabilizing and

\textsuperscript{24} Buszek 12.

\textsuperscript{25} Dita Von Teese, \textit{Burlesque and the Art of the Teese} (New York: Regan Books, 2006) 95.

\textsuperscript{26} Buszek 247.

dismantling conventions of female sexuality by switching effortlessly between sexual roles (virgin and whore, sub and dom, girl next door and sophisticated vixen), “revealing both [the] artificiality and performative nature” of the pin-up.

Buszek cites Page as “one of the most imitated models for feminist appropriations of the genre,” while Jacki Willson, in her book *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, writes that, “[b]oth Page and the burlesque phenomenon sum up for young women the desire to both counter and take pleasure from the male gaze.”

An examination of the contemporary pin-up would be incomplete without a discussion of the SuicideGirls – arguably the modern daughters of Bettie Page. Launched in 2001 by Sean Suhl and Selena Mooney (better known by their online monikers, Spooky and Missy), SuicideGirls is a website featuring soft-core pin-up pictures of amateur models, most of whom are tattooed, pierced, or otherwise “alternative” in appearance. Since its inception, the site has grown from a small, independent operation run solely by its two creators into an internet phenomenon and lucrative brand, with more than 5 million paying members (nearly half of them female), a bestselling book, and a successful touring burlesque show to its name. There are now almost 2000 SuicideGirls models, with hundreds of new applicants each week. The site is also considered one of the first (and certainly the most popular) manifestations of the “alterna” or “indie” pornography movement, a growing online subculture that seeks to depict sexual imagery somehow outside the cultural mainstream. Despite its relevance and popularity, however, the SuicideGirls phenomenon has yet to generate much significant academic discourse.

---

28 Buszek 247.
29 Buszek 247.
30 Willson 148.
The term "Suicide Girls" comes from the Chuck Palahniuk novel *Survivor*, where the author uses it to describe "women who are gloomy and dark." The enigmatic name has also been called "a play on the saying that if one poses naked, it is suicide for his or her career," while co-founder Missy says "it means killing that part of yourself that is mainstream." Despite all this dark imagery, both Spooky and Missy insist that SuicideGirls is really an attempt to hearken back to the "cute and naughty rather than dirty and sleazy" aesthetic of retro pin-up photography. Missy cites Bettie Page as a primary source of inspiration in the introduction to her 2004 *SuicideGirls* book. "There was something so self-confident, elegant and upbeat about Bettie Page," she writes, and this quality was exactly what she wanted to bring to her "classic pin-up photos of these very modern women." Missy’s goal was to present her "own personal vision of femininity“ with her photography, rather than featuring “the impossibly perfect bodies of the blonde bombshells of soap operas and the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog." Discussing the establishment of the website, she

---


32 Del Curto


36 Missy Suicide, qtd. in *SuicideGirls: The First Tour*, Dir. Mike Marshall, Category 5 Productions, 2005.

37 Suicide 8.
explains that because “the girls were so much more than just their image,” she and Spooky felt it was important to give them a voice, “a place to write, rant, scream, explain, whatever.”

The SuicideGirls phenomenon, it should be noted, is one place in contemporary culture where burlesque performance and pin-up photography clearly meet and cross-pollinate. SuicideGirl Bettina, for one, got into the neo-burlesque scene after posing for the site; one of her profile videos shows her attending the Miss Exotic World Pageant in 2006. The SuicideGirls touring burlesque show, on the other hand, is intended to be “in the same spirit” as the neo-burlesque movement, “but completely modernized” and certainly “not synonymous with old-school, classic-style burlesque.” SuicideGirl Stormy describes the tour as “bitches takin’ their clothes off . . . in a synchronized, classy manner,” though many of the performers in the SG burlesque show do opt for a more fast-and-furious style of stripping, with much less emphasis on the tease; SuicideGirl Pearl, for example, deftly flings her clothes off while hula-hooping. And when the girls do strip down, they sport electrical-tape Xs rather than pasties over their nipples. The show also features a bit more direct performer-and-audience interaction than might usually be seen in a neo-burlesque act. The SuicideGirls often lock lips and grope one another on stage, and have been known to do the same with spectators. Also, the front few rows at each show are designated as a “splash zone”: audience members may have drinks spilled or spit on them, and they are bound to get a bit messy during the show's finale, which involves the performers squirting chocolate sauce, whipped cream, and other edibles all over their bodies.

38 Suicide 8.
39 Sicily Suicide, qtd. in SuicideGirls: The First Tour.
40 Stormy Suicide, qtd. in SuicideGirls: The First Tour.
For the SuicideGirls, though, the burlesque tour is really just a marketing tie-in of sorts, to promote their true focus: the modern pin-up. All of the tour performers started out as models for SuicideGirls.com, and most of the fans who line up to see “The Most Dangerous Burlesque Tour in the World” (as the show is billed on the SG website) seem to be primarily interested in seeing their online objects of desire in action.

So what does it take to become one of the few, the proud, the SuicideGirls? Though many apply, few are accepted to this “punk-rock porn sorority.”41 “It’s not like a mathematical formula,” Missy said in a 2006 interview, “we just accept girls.”42 The application process has evolved over the years as SuicideGirls has grown in popularity: initially, hopefuls had to go through personal interviews and essay questions in order to be considered. Now, the initial application is a simple form on the website, which asks only for your name, date of birth, basic contact information, several photos (which “do not need to be nude” but “must show your face clearly” and “let your personality shine through”)43, and a brief explanation of why you want to be a SuicideGirl. It seems to be relatively easy to make it through this first stage (I sent off an application out of curiosity and received an acceptance e-mail within two hours), but the rest of the process (which includes a rather intimidating Model Release Form giving the company the right to “forever, in any way and in anything,

---

41 Tomlin 91.
without asking you or paying you anything in addition to the [original photo set fee of] $500” make use of “Your SuicideGirls name [ . . . ] and use or change your image and those photos” 44) seems far more demanding and complicated.

SuicideGirls has been surrounded with controversy since its inception, the furor peaking in 2005 with the much-publicized departure of dozens of models amid allegations of exploitation and misogyny, mostly leveled at male co-founder Spooky. Another incident in SuicideGirls history which brought the site quite a bit of negative press was their decision, in 2004, to form a professional alliance with Playboy.com’s “Cyber Club.” As part of this business arrangement, Playboy partners with SuicideGirls to feature a “Suicide Girl of the Week” pictorial on their website. This has raised eyebrows in the media, as well as the ire of many SuicideGirls members, who interpret it as a hypocritical act of “selling out” from a company which has built its reputation by challenging the very conventions of porn which Playboy is essentially responsible for cultivating and promoting. In her 2003 Bitch magazine feature on the site, Annie Tomlin asserted that SuicideGirls “has more in common with Playboy than the minds and bodies behind it would like to imagine.” 45

SuicideGirls has, in fact, never tried to avoid comparison with Playboy; their mission statement even references the famous magazine, saying that they are “at the forefront of a generation of young women and men whose ideals about sexuality do not conform with what mainstream media is reporting,” just as Playboy was for “the swinging bachelor of the 1960s.” 46 SuicideGirls has, though, attempted to


45 Tomlin 92.

establish itself as, if not the “anti-Playboy” 47 certainly a distinctive alternative to the blonde, big-breasted norm that Hugh Hefner continues to endorse. *Playboy* may have been revolutionary when Hefner founded the brand over 50 years ago, but now the magazine and associated merchandising empire represents the mainstream with which a self-styled “anti-establishment” enterprise like SuicideGirls is trying to contrast itself. Proponents of SuicideGirls claim that, unlike *Playboy*, their pornography allows such positive elements as the expression of individuality, a sense of community, room for alternative representations of beauty, and the opportunity for feminist empowerment. But especially in light of their commercial affiliation with *Playboy*, the question remains: is SuicideGirls truly a radical new variety of porn? Or is it, as Tomlin asks, “just the same old boobs in a punk-rock bra?” 48

Tomlin does list several strengths of SuicideGirls, including “the offering of distinct personalities.” 49 Models are encouraged to “show their personality,” “have fun,” and “be real” in their photo shoots, and are also given the opportunity to post their thoughts, autobiographical details, and candid photos in online journals for members to peruse. “The Suicide Girls pose how they want, in what positions they choose, wearing whatever clothes they choose, and showing how much they want to show,” 50 Missy said in a 2002 interview. “For all intents and purposes the models choose the images of themselves they want on the site.” 51

---


48 Tomlin 58.

49 Tomlin 59.


51 Missy Suicide, qtd. in Phillips.
The SuicideGirls website is also often lauded for being more than just a collection of naked pictures; as with *Playboy*, it is possible to be a fan of SuicideGirls “for the articles.” The site contains interviews with celebrities, pop culture commentary, and regular columnists, as well as a vast network of message boards and groups where members can interact with each other and with the SuicideGirls themselves. In conjunction with live events planned through the site, this creates a comprehensive cyber-community which purports to offer access to the models, a glimpse at their “real lives.” This approach also tries to ensure that the models are seen as more than “disembodied piece[s] of ass.”\(^{52}\) In fact, when the debut of the SuicideGirl of the Week was met with a number of derisive comments on the *Playboy* Cyber Club website, the SG models inundated Playboy.com message boards in order to, as SuicideGirl Olivia put it, “rumble with the mean people” and show them “we’re not just faceless models.”\(^{53}\)

It is interesting to note, however, that although the SuicideGirls application calls for “unique, strong, sexy, and confident women,”\(^{54}\) the models are almost exclusively referred to as “girls” rather than “women” throughout the site. The rather petulant-looking, pigtail-sporting SuicideGirl emblazoned on the company’s logo also serves to further this association with “little girl lost” adolescence, though the site’s guidelines for photoshoots do prohibit any “creepy”\(^{55}\) childish imagery (stuffed animals, schoolgirl outfits, and the like) in their photos.


SuicideGirls also maintains a prohibition against penetration shots, and the Model FAQ discourages many other photo elements, from “heavy makeup” and “wig and crazy hair styles” to the use of “blood and weapons” or anything that evokes “old timey sensuality” (fedoras, feather boas, and the like). Other than that, most anything goes, provided it is “fresh, creative,” and hasn’t already been done by another model. The over-4000 photo sets currently posted on the site run a large gamut of aesthetics and sexual proclivities, from the tame to the bizarre. The oldest photo set on the site, posted 3 September 2001, features a SuicideGirl named Rose wearing bondage gear and blue faerie wings. Other sets are far more pedestrian, depicting girls lying around in bathtubs or bedsheets in various stages of undress; one of the most-viewed pictorials features busty SuicideGirl Ember stripping off a filmy négligée in a candlelit bedroom. Some girls go for gimmicks, including common sexual fetishes (the naughty nurse, the sexy schoolgirl, the lusty librarian), animal themes (more than a few pictorials have featured live snakes, while a photoset entitled “Bad Kitty” shows model Nina clad in cat ears and spilling milk over her naked breasts), and pop culture references (SuicideGirl Charlie posted a set entitled “Wolverine” in which she poses with claws like the X-Men character, and a model named James did a black-and-white photo shoot reenacting the shower scene from Hitchcock’s Psycho).

In any case, although the photo sets are in fact conceived by the girls themselves, who have complete freedom and creative control in their execution, they still must follow a rather detailed list of guidelines if they want to have any chance of actually being accepted for posting on the site. These include, among others, the requirement of fully exposing the breasts and buttocks, and of commencing nudity

---


during the first third of the set. Models do not have final say in the order, selection, or editing of the images, either; it is recommended that they send in many more images than the required minimum of 40, so that the site administrators can then assemble sets as they see fit. Even then, many models, especially those new to the site, have to submit several sets before one is ultimately approved for posting. This has resulted in quite a few message boards devoted to the critique of rejected sets, where members, accepted SuicideGirls, and other aspiring models offer advice about what might have gone wrong (which can be anything from bad lighting to poor photography skills to lack of originality). The SG administrators have now established a designated “Hopefuls” section, where applicants can post their rejected sets for community comment; those that receive enough positive feedback may be reconsidered for official publication on the main page of the site.

The interactive community on SuicideGirls.com does, for the most part, seem to be a positive phenomenon. But though members may feel like they have genuine personal access to the girls on the site, the reality is that all of the models use pseudonyms – ranging from the ordinary (Jenny, Mary, Heather) to the literary (Ophelia, Persephone, Voltaire) to the bizarre (Chaotika, Fractal, Peyote), all with “Suicide” taken as a required surname – and many of them elect to list “I’m lost” as their location in lieu of divulging their actual place of residence. Still, the overall effect of this is to perpetuate the profitable illusion of the obtainable object of desire. The SuicideGirls are not presented as untouchable fantasy figures, but instead as “the indie-rock chicks you’d expect to see at a Strokes show but never thought you’d get to see naked.” This dynamic is similar in many ways to the idea of the attainable, friendly, sexually available “girl next door” that *Playboy* has always attempted to foster. On the *Playboy* Cyber Club’s Suicide Girl of the Week page, the

---

58 Phillips.
SuicideGirls are, in fact, advertised as “the sexy girls next door . . . who rock.” The image of the SuicideGirl is different from that of the *Playboy* Bunny – independent, rebellious, and perhaps slightly damaged, as opposed to “young, healthy, simple” – but both are carefully constructed and commodified ideals of femininity that have been successfully marketed to the masses. Molly Crabapple, an artist and disgruntled ex-SuicideGirl who is now active in the burlesque scene, has called SuicideGirls “the Wal-Mart of alt porn.” And as the site continues to grow in popularity (it has now been featured in such mainstream outlets as MTV and the television show *CSI*), it does seem worth asking: what exactly is so “alternative” about this brand of alternative pornography? As SuicideGirls becomes more mainstream, does that mean its mission has been accomplished, or that it has failed? Has it succeeded in gaining acceptance for nontraditional representations of beauty, or has it simply become so thoroughly commodified as to be subsumed into the establishment?

The question of whether SuicideGirls can be viewed as feminist or empowering has been continually asked, but never definitively answered, both in media commentary on the site and within the online community itself (feminism is a hot topic on the message boards, and in the official SuicideGirls Feminists group). Creators Spooky and Missy tend to deflect the subject when asked about it in interviews, saying they don’t consider the site “either feminist or unfeminist,” leaving it up to the models to decide whether or not taking their clothes off on the internet feels personally empowering. The site’s co-founders are fond of saying,

---


60 Molly Crabapple, qtd. in Dodero.

61 Tomlin 91.
however, that their enterprise is "female-friendly," and the guidelines for becoming a SuicideGirl do place quite a bit of emphasis on respect, control, and the creation of a positive experience for the model, rather than on the sexual titillation potentially produced by the resulting images. The SuicideGirls themselves often comment on their motivations for modeling in their journals or on the site’s message boards as well. The reasons they articulate (in tones alternately earnest and sarcastic) range from boosted self-esteem, empowerment, creativity, and self-expression, to narcissism, money, attention, and a love of “boobies.” They do seem to gain, if not power, a great deal of pleasure from this opportunity for self-display, as well as from looking at the images of their peers on the site.

Missy has all along reminded detractors that SuicideGirls was initially conceived as niche-market pornography, not “the end-all-be-all feminist site for everyone out there,”62 or the empowering savior of the porn industry that many seemed to initially hope it could be. That said, the site’s creators do occasionally choose to couch their enterprise in terms of empowerment and radical action, though their mixed messages can make it difficult to take them seriously. For example, in the HBO Real Sex feature on the SuicideGirls, Missy waxed philosophic about how “revolutionary” it is “for women to feel just as sexually secure and driven and empowered as men do,” and how “lucky” she feels “to have been a part of making that change” – all over a shot of one SuicideGirl sucking on another’s nipple for the camera. In that moment, it is difficult to deny that her vision of female sexual security and empowerment looks quite a bit like a frat boy’s pornographic fantasy (with tattoos, piercings, and hair dye, of course).

---

62 Missy Suicide, qtd. in Dodero.
Despite their claim to be “alternative” or “counterculture,” the images on SuicideGirls for the most part do hew closely to the conventions of pornography, displaying young, attractive women clad in corsets and other restrictive, fetishizing garments; supple, wet bodies lying in prone positions; girl-on-girl action, and so on. The composition of the images is even, in many cases, strikingly similar to those displayed in mainstream venues like *Playboy*. As a means of investigating this connection, I conducted my own brief and wholly unscientific, but nonetheless very revealing photo comparison experiment, using images of *Playboy* Bunnies and the pin-ups from SuicideGirls.com. First, I chose several *Playboy* photos which I felt represented common sexual fetishes or pornography archetypes. I then performed simple keyword searches of the SuicideGirls archives to see if I could find similarly-themed images. Within minutes, I had not only found pictures that echoed the *Playboy* centerfolds thematically, but also aesthetically. I was amazed by the resemblances not just between the models’ costuming, but also their body positions, facial expressions, and so on. The only immediately-apparent differences in some cases are the girls themselves, who in the SuicideGirls photos are undoubtedly not toned, tanned, or artificially enhanced enough to be *Playboy* centerfolds. They do indeed look more authentically like the girl next door, or at least the girl sitting next to you at the rock club bar, but they also, underneath their body art and hair dye, tend to conform to accepted standards of beauty.

One of the most prevalent criticisms leveled at SuicideGirls is that most of its models are white, thin, and traditionally pretty. If SuicideGirls really is “alternative” porn, it seems that the “range of alternatives is limited”: “tattoos proliferate, but excess body fat is scarce.”63 Strides have been made towards increased diversity over the years, and co-founder Missy insists that there are “girls who don’t fit into

---

63 Chonin.
the *Playboy* shape" featured on the site, but it seems that the mold has only been stretched slightly, not shattered. “Imagine giving the varsity cheerleading squad makeover at Hot Topic,” Annie Tomlin wrote in her *Bitch* article, “and you wouldn’t be too far off.” Looking at images of SuicideGirls side-by-side with their *Playboy* Bunny counterparts, it does become easy to see how SuicideGirls can be accused of sticking to a limited, commercially-viable “shorthand for sexiness” in which “individuality is erased” because “it is not part of the formula.”

Like many neo-burlesque performers, modern pin-ups like the SuicideGirls often claim to be questioning and dismantling the patriarchal “formula” of female sexual display, rather than simply reiterating it. SuicideGirl Annie calls the site “[r]eal women just being ourselves, saying ‘fuck you’ to the standards imposed upon us, and being fiercely beautiful because of it.” In the introduction to *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, editors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer a quote from art history scholar Marsha Meskimmon regarding this type of representation on “your own terms rather than as an object in another dominant schema which forces you into the margins.” Meskimmon cautions that “the models used most commonly cannot simply be appropriated without critical adaptation.” This would seem to apply to both the pin-up and the striptease: without this element of “critical adaptation,” can the mere appropriation of such common models

64 Chonin.
65 Tomlin 59.
66 Levy 30.
67 Levy 43.
68 Annie Suicide, qtd. in Suicide 115.
70 Marsha Meskimmon, qtd. in Smith and Watson 15.
of objectification really do anything to resist the "dominant schema"? Ultimately, how can we tell if women like the SuicideGirls are actually engaging in critical play with sexual roles, as opposed to simply playing dress-up?

Photographer Cindy Sherman's work – particularly her *Film Stills* self-portrait series, taken in the late 1970s – provide one excellent and often-analyzed example of how the traditionally exploitative conventions of pornography can be critically adapted by both an artist and her viewing public. In these images, Sherman blatantly reappropriates the aesthetic of the soft-core pin-up, but uses it for her own purposes, maintaining complete control over the terms of her own visual representation, as she acts as both the model and the photographer. As art critic Craig Owens put it, Sherman is the subject who "poses as an object in order to be a subject."  

This, Owens says, allows her to pose as a pin-up without being "pinned down." In her work, Sherman is making effective use of the technique of masquerade, "aggressively and exaggeratedly perform[ing] [herself] according to the very rules [patriarchy] has established." Through masquerade, Sherman is able to "flaunt femininity" while simultaneously gaining "distance" from her image, thus allowing it to be "manipulable, producible, and readable." In *Untitled Film Still #39*, for example, Sherman photographs herself from the side, wearing a skimpy camisole top and standing in the middle of a bathroom; rather than looking at the camera, she is looking down, regarding her own body. The framing of the image

---

71 Craig Owens, qtd. in Buszek 302.

72 Craig Owens, qtd. in Buszek 302.


74 Doane 70.
makes it appear as though she is being watched from outside the bathroom door, but since Sherman herself is the photographer, she is also the possessor of the gaze. The photo is an intriguing and slightly unsettling exercise in voyeurism, with Sherman herself as both the voyeur and the viewed.

Like Sherman, the SuicideGirls are in control of their images, and act simultaneously from the subject and object positions, objectifying themselves on their own terms, rather than leaving it up to an outside viewer. This practice of self-objectification remains controversial, however. Can posing for nude photos or performing a public striptease truly be as empowering, exhilarating, and life-altering as so many of these women claim? Or is it, as their detractors allege, nothing but a frivolous, or even demeaning, endeavor?

In the end, it seems that there is really no way to fully grasp the benefits and pitfalls of self-objectification without, well, doing it yourself. Several months into my thesis research, I decided that I wanted to conduct a personal experiment in self-objectification: modeling in my own pin-up photo shoot. The goal was to try to approximate the SuicideGirls experience as best I could, without actually getting naked on the internet (which seemed a bit too far outside the scope of scholarship). I enlisted the help of two close friends who had experience with lighting design and photography, but determined to plan and style the shoot myself, from the costuming to the makeup to the poses. I decided against full nudity (a requirement for SG photo sets), but did go topless by the end of the set.

Rather than creating an elaborate aesthetic concept or theme as many of the SuicideGirls models do, I attempted to follow just one guideline as I was planning my photo shoot: what do I think is sexy? To inspire my costume and posing choices, I spent hours looking through images on the internet, from the SuicideGirls website and elsewhere. Any time an image caught my attention, whether it was the pose or
the lighting or the model’s “look,” I would save it for reference. I tried not to interrogate or overanalyze my choices, but simply to go with my immediate, visceral response.

Ultimately, I ended up with fairly basic costume pieces (a corset-inspired top, a lace garter belt with seamed stockings, high heels, and a bra and panties, all black), which I stripped off gradually throughout the sequence of images. The location for the shoot was rather dark and industrial (the grid of a black box theatre where my friend was employed), and lit with dramatic blue tones. Just like many beginner SuicideGirls, I have absolutely no knowledge of modeling technique, and thus found it very hard to relax and be “sexy” in front of the camera (though I did grow more comfortable as the shoot continued). I was afraid the experience of being photographed topless would be unnerving, but as with my foray into tassel-twirling, it was far easier than I expected to step outside of my comfort zone.

In reviewing the resulting images, I found it striking how squarely they fit into an extremely safe, commodified view of the erotic. My body positions were generally submissive (in several of the photos, the shadows cast by the lights actually made it look as though my arms were being held back with restraints), and my favorite images tended to be ones in which I was looking away from the camera. I was, I admit, very critical of the images, and spent quite a bit of time scrutinizing and Photoshopping, wondering what else I could have done to improve them. Overall, though, looking at such overtly sexualized images of myself did boost my self-esteem and make me feel better about my body. Like most of the SuicideGirls, I do not consider myself to be “the normal girl you would see doing a nude photo set,” and so to be able to display myself in the classically sexy fashion of the pin-up was a confidence-building novelty, if nothing else. I am not sure, however, if “self-esteem-

75 Snow Suicide, qtd. in SuicideGirls: The First Tour.
boosting” should be considered equivalent to “empowering” (though that seems to be what many of the SuicideGirls mean when they use the term). In any case, shooting a semi-nude pictorial is something that, under other circumstances, would have made me extremely uncomfortable, but because I was able to do it on my own terms (and for select eyes only), I found the experience to be very positive and enjoyable.

Striptease- and porn-inspired self-objectification seems to be becoming big business in the United States, for women further and further outside of the neo-burlesque and alterna-porn communities. While most women would never dream of twirling tassels at Exotic World, shimmying with the Pussycat Dolls, or posing for SuicideGirls, they are increasingly embracing a whole range of “safer” alternatives which promise to provide all the fun of stripping without the same level of exhibitionism. Self-objectification has even become part of modern exercise culture and the self-help boom, as women of all ages sign up for pole dancing and cardio striptease classes, which promote “the idea that stripping is good for you as well as being sexy,”76 and buy books which purport to help them “look great naked” and “unleash” their “inner hottie.” Heidi Von Haught credits the growing self-objectification trend to the fact that, in the wake of second-wave feminism, when “women were insisting that they not be treated as sexual objects,” they “now are recognizing how little fun that is and demanding to be treated as sexual objects who deserve respect, self-control, and safety.”77

I enrolled in a six-week pole dancing course with Dolphin Dance, a dance studio in Columbus, Ohio, that offers instruction in exotic, pole, and bellydancing, as well as occasional lapdance and striptease workshop. Dolphin Dance was founded by

76 Shteir 337.
77 Von Haught Interview.
Kristen Titko, a former professional exotic dancer who has appeared in films such as *Showgirls* and *Exit to Eden*. The mission of Dolphin Dance, as stated on their website, is to provide “a combination of dance, exercise, and self-expression!” Their classes are intended to “tone your body and release your inhibitions while boosting your self-esteem,” helping students to “learn to feel good about yourself and your body.” “When you feel good about yourself,” the website continues, “you can accomplish any goal,” from “learning exotic dance” to “getting in better shape physically,” “gain[ing] confidence,” or even “spic[ing] up your relationship.” The site is also peppered with encouraging mottos, like “sexy is a state of mind!” and “every woman deserves to feel sexy!” Though titillation of men is a potential positive side effect (the lapdance workshop promises to teach students “an entire dance to show off at home!”), the philosophical focus is kept squarely on self-fulfillment and the fostering of individual confidence. The Dolphin Dance studio is also, significantly, a completely female environment: all of the instructors are female, and though they have recently begun offering a two-hour pole dance workshop for interested men, the regular classes are for female students only.

Each class started with typical aerobic warm-ups and stretches, after which we were taught individual dance moves (including drop steps, backbends, and a hip-swiveling motion called the “Siren Song”), and then given free time to practice them in sequences of our choice. Our instructor, unlike Dolphin Dance founder Titko, did not have any professional background in exotic dancing, and so her focus tended to

---


82 Dolphin Dance, 10 March 2008 <http://www.dolphindanceexotic.com>. 84
be on technique rather than sex appeal. Though I had fun attempting to master the
dance moves, and the class did indeed provide a decent workout, I can’t say in the
end that my experience at Dolphin Dance did anything to boost my self-esteem or
release my inhibitions. Unlike the burlesque workshop in which I took part, the pole
dancing course fostered an atmosphere in which I found it very difficult to feel sexy
or even comfortable. I was by far the heaviest student in the class, and the
environment, at least in my particular group, was far from body-positive. Exercise
tips were a constant subject of conversation, as was plastic surgery (two of the
women had augmented breasts, and several more expressed desires for the
procedure). In general, the women in the class seemed to be primarily in
attendance either for fitness benefits, or for the benefit of the men in their lives (one
student announced excitedly that her boyfriend was having a pole installed in their
home so she could put on a show for him). My issues may have been unique to the
class I was in, but over the course of the six weeks, I felt that this obsessively body-
conscious environment took a serious toll on my self-esteem – quite the opposite of
my experiences with the burlesque workshop, Exotic World, or even my photo shoot.

For the woman who would rather learn the fine art of self-objectification in
the comfort of her own home, there are a number of burlesque and striptease-
themed sex-advice and self-help books currently on the market. Over the course
of my research period, I reviewed several of these titles, including A Piece of Cake:
Recipes for Female Sexual Pleasure, The Stripper’s Guide to Looking Great Naked,
Bad Girl Sex. These books are all, I should point out, careful to differentiate
themselves from the “How to Please Your Man”-type advice women might find in
Cosmopolitan magazine. The focus here is ostensibly on pleasing yourself, finding
ways to feel sexy, confident, and powerful.
A Piece of Cake was written by Melinda Gallagher and Emily Kramer, founders of the organization CAKE, which they define on their website as “a female run, women’s sexuality enterprise.” CAKE is most famous for hosting notorious private sex parties for women in the New York City area—a phenomenon which author Ariel Levy spends nearly an entire chapter disparaging in her 2005 book Female Chauvinist Pigs. Gallagher and Kramer have said that they decided to write their book in response to Levy’s criticisms, offering a manifesto of their own views on female sexual pleasure. Their advice is fairly straightforward: “Objectify Yourself: Find pleasure in your own image.”

Gallagher and Kramer are enthusiastic advocates of the simultaneous subject\object position that supporters of neo-burlesque and modern pin-up photography often tout, writing that “even when we are being looked at as sexual, we are looking right back.” (144). Women “can derive a lot of pleasure and power from playing the role of ‘object of desire,’” they explain. “The crucial point is that we knowingly choose this role as part of an equal sexual interaction.”

Books like Jennifer Axen and Leigh Phillips’s The Stripper’s Guide to Looking Great Naked and Jessica “Kayla” Conrad’s Dance Naked: A Guide to Unleashing Your Inner Hottie suggest playing the role of a very specific “object of desire”: the stripper. Conrad, a former stripper herself, believes that “[e]very woman has an inner hottie that is dying to be unleashed.” She presents the stripper as an excellent role model for women seeking to improve their self-confidence or

---


84 Gallagher and Kramer 144.

85 Gallagher and Kramer 144.

appearance. "A dancer’s self-confidence,” she writes, “comes from having a deep level of comfort with her body that ordinary women don’t have.” Axen and Phillips agree, pointing out that “[t]o look good naked, you have to be comfortable naked” – something at which strippers excel. Both books claim that “every woman can look hot,” emphasizing (just as burlesque performers do) that beauty is “a construction – something that can be created with the right mixture of products and poise.”

The style tips offer in *The Stripper’s Guide* and *Dance Naked*, however, seem geared towards a very specific, commercial archetype of sexiness. Axen and Phillips insist that the point is to “showcase you [ . . . ] you are cultivating your own individual sex appeal,” but the beauty advice in the book is organized entirely around stripper stereotypes. In Chapter 3 (entitled “Wear It & Bare It”), Axen and Phillips recommend finding costume ideas by first asking “Who would you be in your own fantasy?” “Any costume,” they continue, “should be an extension of your persona, a reflection of your own style and flair.” The pages following, however, focus on favorite “Cliché Costumes” – “The Schoolgirl,” “The Nurse,” “The French Maid,” etc. – which they say are “sure to get you the attention you want.” They do have a few “more original” suggestions, but these, too, fit into common sexual archetypes, with little room for improvisation: they include the “Spy Girl” (which involves a fedora.

---

87 Conrad 24.


89 Conrad 77.


91 Axen and Phillips 9.

92 Axen and Phillips 82.

93 Axen and Phillips 82.

94 Axen and Phillips 82.
and a long trenchcoat for flashing your audience), “The Executive” (stronger and more feminist than “the sexy secretary of yesteryear!"\(^95\)), and “The Burlesque Showgirl” (corset, fishnets, feather boa, G-string). The authors also include a quiz at the end of the book so that readers can figure out their “Stripper Style.” There are only five choices: “Punk Rock Girl,” “Lap Dancer,” “Boudoir Betty,” “Vintage Vamp,” and “Daisy Duke.”

In their defense, Axen and Phillips’s book, as well as Conrad’s, seem to be intended mostly in good fun, rather than as serious advice for sexual fulfillment. Professor of human sexuality Barbara Keesling’s *The Good Girl’s Guide to Bad Girl Sex*, however, seems quite a bit more earnest in tone. The book, subtitled “An Indispensable Guide to Pleasure and Seduction,” offers a comprehensive and rather demanding program for women who want to become “bad girls.” “Every good girl I have ever known,” Keesling begins the book, “wishes somewhere in her heart that she could be just a little bit bad.”\(^96\)

The ensuing chapters give advice on what it means to be “bad” (“Bad Girls Feel Good About Being Bad,” “Bad Girls Have Sex on the Brain,” “Bad Girls Dress the Part,” “Bad Girls Know Their Bodies,” “Bad Girls Break All the Rules”), as well as exercises to help readers cultivate the “bad girl” state of mind. “You need to feel bad so that sex can feel good,”\(^97\) Keesling insists. Her advice is, for the most part, very positive: she is encouraging women to feel confident, be proud of their bodies and sexual desires, and express themselves fearlessly. Her methods, however, advocate an almost cartoonish vision of female sexuality that requires certain

---

\(^{95}\) Axen and Phillips 86.


\(^{97}\) Keesling 2.
clothing, mannerisms, and even vocal work (Keesling devotes several pages to centering your voice in the diaphragm, thus locating your low and sensual “Bad Girl voice”) in order to be effective. Her program presents itself as a means of getting back in touch with one’s “true self,” “the Bad Girl within,” but it feels much more like insincere roleplaying. Are there no other choices for women in between the “Good Girl” and the “Bad Girl”?

All of the books in question try to emphasize how a woman feels over how she looks, but they also provide only a very limited range of suggestions for obtaining a sexier appearance and demeanor. The authors encourage the idea that anyone can be sexy, that beauty is something which can be manufactured, but in the end they are manufacturing a nearly-identical product. By so exclusively glorifying the stripper or the “bad girl” as the role model for women to emulate, they necessarily confine themselves within an extremely restricted script of what it means to be “sexy.”

In her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, author Ariel Levy makes a compelling case that this limited, commodified view of sexuality is a product of what she terms the “new raunch culture.” Raunch culture, which Levy locates in everything from cardio striptease to *Girls Gone Wild*, is presented as a triumph of postfeminism, “evidence that the feminist project had already been achieved.” Levy interrogates this premise, however, asking why this is regarded as “the ‘new feminism’ and not what it looks like: the old objectification?” She also expresses concern that

---

98 Keesling 96.
99 Keesling 8.
100 Levy 3.
101 Levy 3.
102 Levy 81.
“[w]hat we once regarded as a kind of sexual expression we now view as sexuality,” wondering why women can’t “be sexy and frisky and in control without being commodified.”

Whether or not it always achieves this objective, neo-burlesque has the stated goal of celebrating individual, personal, creative sexuality in all its vast and various incarnations – just the sort of open-minded, multifarious approach to sexuality for which Levy yearns. This, however, makes it too “unwieldy” to be fully integrated into mass market pop culture; in order for burlesque to continue to grow in popularity, it seems that it must also become increasingly commodified, packaged as “something simple, quantifiable,” which renders it “easier to explain and to market” to the masses. In the process, the neo-burlesque movement runs a very real risk of becoming trapped in raunch culture’s endless reiteration of “one particular – and particularly commercial – shorthand for sexiness.”

---

103 Levy 5.
104 Levy 43.
105 Levy 184.
106 Levy 184.
107 Levy 30.
CONCLUSION

With the neo-burlesque movement, the striptease has transcended its roots as a titillating form of entertainment intended to indulge the male gaze. Today’s burlesque is, for the most part, a vibrant, female-positive performance medium, in which women are able to take pleasure in their own sexuality from both the subject and the object position, whether they choose to be on stage or remain a spectator.

But although burlesque performance generally succeeds in its attempts to distinguish itself from the mass market “shorthand for sexiness” that dominates popular culture today, it does have certain limitations as a method of feminist resistance. First of all, the burlesque aesthetic possesses its own “shorthand,” readily identifiable in the costuming and physicality of its performers. Corsets, cleavage, high heels, fishnets, pasties, red lips, false eyelashes, swaying hips, shimmying shoulders – all of these visual cues transmit the burlesque ideal of sexiness. In this “mainstream ‘look’ of the new burlesque scene,” Jacki Willson points out, we are “again faced with the same seemingly pre-given, although more exaggerated, aesthetic”¹ as that which exists in mass-market venues like Playboy or Cosmopolitan, albeit utilized for a different purpose. In many ways, burlesque is just one more entry in the history of sexuality which serves to demonstrate women’s

---

“failure to imagine their pleasures outside a dominant male economy.”

Despite its ironic and transgressive intentions, burlesque does reiterate and promote entrenched images of femininity, which originated within this dominant male economy and, even when they are not being used with the intention of catering to men, cannot ever be entirely divorced from their associations with misogyny and subjugation. In burlesque performance, women are able to control the terms of their erotic representation, but for the most part they continue to reproduce the prevailing sexual images of patriarchy, with only the slightest and most superficial alterations.

Thus, although new burlesque performance provides an unprecedented public forum for the expression of female fantasies, these fantasies so far have remained clearly based on patriarchal originals. Jacki Willson suggests that the neo-burlesque movement “knows that it does not yet know any new forms” that go beyond this “smiling, winking imitation of stereotypes and ‘male’ fantasies.” As Chris Bruckert points out in her book *Taking It Off, Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade*, women seeking to express themselves sexually are always “at some level constrained within the discourse of what is sexual, what is erotic, what is acceptable,” but I must wonder, along with Willson, if there could be “a sexy ‘look’ that we can’t even picture yet, because we can only see the standard versions passed down to us that are based on male fantasies?” If there is such a “look,” neo-burlesque is still a long way from discovering it.

---


3 Willson 46.


5 Willson 46.
Rather than creating a wholly new idea of what is sexy, then, burlesque simply stretches the existing dominant paradigm to make room for a few new elements. The overweight or cellulite-ridden body, for example, is rendered erotic through accepted visual cues such as reshaping corsetry, overtly-feminine makeup and hairstyling, and stereotypically sexy body language. In this way, the “rules” of female sexual display are bent without being broken or discarded. Burlesque performers do successfully “tweak what often seems like society’s monolithic idea of what is sexy.” But that is all they do: the monolith stands, and they respond in its shadow. As Robert C. Allen puts it, this strategy is “more negotiation than resistance.” This type of negotiation is significant as a precursor to substantive change, but its own impact will always be limited.

With its focus on outward appearances and the construction of glamour, burlesque also maintains a rather troubling emphasis on what Joan Jacobs Brumberg has termed “the body project.” In her book The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls, Brumberg explains the harmful effects that can result from making the body “into an all-consuming project” as women today are encouraged to do from adolescence. In the burlesque community, women are not encouraged to “work” on their bodies by dieting or going under the knife, but the overwhelming focus is still on the body as a project, something to be perfected (through makeup and costume rather than through starvation and surgery). The beauty standard in burlesque promotes positive body image and self-esteem because it is, through its very constructedness, more attainable. Even so, I would argue that it continues to

---


foster potentially destructive "appearance obsession."9 Burlesque performers, even those who participate in burlesque only as a hobby, spend a great deal of time and money perfecting their looks. Often, if their performing careers bring in any payment at all, that money is poured right back into their acts, dedicated to the development, upkeep, and adornment of their bodies. Unlike women who change their bodies because of a slavish desire to keep up with fad diets or the latest fashion trends, the typical burlesque performer obsesses over her appearance out of self-love and pride. The resulting level of effort and dedication, however, is similar. Is this "radical narcissism,"10 "looking and self-assessment as a defiant act"?11 Or is it simply an extravagant waste?

In the more commodified incarnations of burlesque and striptease discussed in the previous chapter, this emphasis on the body project can actually become even more pronounced. The cardio striptease fitness trend, for example, indoctrinates the burlesque aesthetic into mainstream American exercise culture, in the process negating many of the positive messages about body image that neo-burlesque attempts to espouse. Rather than encouraging diversity and size acceptance, it becomes part of a system which promotes a very specific body ideal and thrives on self-improvement rather than self-love. Similarly, the striptease-as-self-help genre presents a particular kind of sexual display as a way for women to "help" themselves or "fix" something which is wrong with their natural appearance or attitude towards sexuality.

---


11 Buszek 294.
In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo argues that, as a result of this culturally-mandated body obsession, women “are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification.”*12* “Arguably, we are more in touch with our bodies than ever before,” Bordo writes, “[b]ut at the same time, they have become alienated products, texts of our own creative making, from which we maintain a strange and ironic detachment.”*13* Again, Bordo is referencing the fitness and diet craze, which promises to allow women to “choose’ our own bodies”*14*; but it seems that burlesque can result in a similar “ironic detachment” from the body, through its focus on appearance and image-making. The burlesque performer typically constructs an alter ego different or separate from her self, standing aloof from her sexuality as part of her theatrical performance. Through burlesque, women may be learning to express and perform their sexuality (mastering Mary Ann Doane’s concept of “masquerade”), but not necessarily to embrace and embody it.

All of this obsession with the surface of things is symptomatic of what author Naomi Wolf calls the “beauty myth” – a method of “social control” that has taken over the “lost ground” of the “feminine mystique of domesticity.”*15* In essence, Wolf believes that our culture keeps women so obsessed with outward appearances and attaining the mythical quality of “beauty” that they are rendered unable to make any great forward strides for feminism. Susan Brownmiller made a similar argument in her 1984 book *Femininity*, writing that “absorption in the drive for a perfect

---


*13* Bordo 288.

*14* Bordo 247.

appearance [. . . ] is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind."\(^\text{16}\) As a solution, Wolf advocates the return of “play” to beauty, allowing women to engage in “a masquerade, a voluntary theatricality that emerges from abundant self-love.”\(^\text{17}\) Wolf could practically be describing the neo-burlesque movement here, but I do not believe that burlesque ultimately meets her criteria for radical, lasting change. “Women will be free of the beauty myth,” Wolf writes, “when we can choose to use our faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of self-expression out of a full range of others.”\(^\text{18}\) Burlesque can be counted as a positive step in this direction, but it does not succeed in securing a means of expression for women that goes much beyond the physical canvas of face, clothes, and body. Burlesque allows women to “play” more freely with this particular form of self-expression, but it has not yet opened the door to the “full range of others” that Wolf seeks. “The pleasure to be had from turning oneself into a living art object,” as burlesque performers do, “is some kind of power,” Wolf reasons, but only “when power is in short supply.”\(^\text{19}\)

Burlesque performance is an admirable and important attempt to produce a transgressive, potentially empowering performance of sexuality, but due to the historical conventions and contemporary context of the medium, the performance always takes place strictly within the bounds of traditional gender roles. Thus, though burlesque may challenge these roles or provide ironic commentary on them, it will never transcend them fully – and maybe burlesque itself does not have to. If anything, perhaps the new burlesque can be used as a signpost to help us see how far we still have to go in the search for truly feminist sexual expression, a site at

\(^\text{17}\) Wolf 290.  
\(^\text{18}\) Wolf 274.  
\(^\text{19}\) Wolf 285.
which we can represent and address the contradictions and messiness inherent in any discussion of feminine sexuality or female spectatorship.

As Ariel Levy argues in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, “[i]f we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire.” Burlesque represents only one of those options; it has forged a new archetype which is more accepting, affirming, and attainable than that of the runway model or *Playboy* Bunny, but it nonetheless, by virtue of being an archetype, remains standardized and limited. Burlesque looks beyond breast implants and size-zero thighs, but we must try to look even further if we want to locate truly unconventional, radical, and liberatory images of beauty, and further still to find ideals of feminine power which do not rely on the physical or sexual. “Sexual power,” as Levy reminds her readers, “is only one, very specific kind of power.”

The new burlesque movement offers women a fun, positive way to explore and express their sexual power, as a performer, a spectator, or both. While this does constitute a sassy step forward for modern women, it is far from enough.

---


21 Levy 197.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Casino, Clams. Personal Interview. 29 August 2007.


d’Amour, Desiré. Personal Interview. 27 August 2007.


DiNardo, Kelly. “Burlesque Comeback Tries to Dance With Feminism.”  

160251_burlesque12.html>.


Durling, Henry. “The Sex Life of a Stripper.”  

Dworkin, Andrea. Pornography: Men Possessing Women.  

Dziemianowicz, Joe. “Margaret Cho’s Strip Show is Barely Any Fun.”  
08/2007-10-08_margaret_chos_strip_show_is_barely_any_f.html>.


Edwards, Tanya L. “Christina, Gwen Stefani, Dita Von Teese Help Bring Back Burlesque.”  
aguilera_christina.jhtml>.

Egan, R. Danielle, Katherine Frank, and Merri Lisa Johnson, eds.  
Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance.  


Jones, Amelia, ed. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader.*


La Diva, Miss.  Personal Interview.  17 July 2007.


Lix, Cherry. Personal Interview. 28 August 2007.


Lukki, Dr. Personal Interview. 28 August 2007.


Queen, Carol. *Exhibitionism for the Shy: Show Off, Dress Up and Talk Hot.*

Queen, Carol. *Real Live Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex Positive Culture.*


Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide.*

Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna.*


Weldon, Jo. “From Tassels to Taxes: Burlesque Advice From Those in the Know.” Shimmy Magazine 1.2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 52-55.


