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“An Invitation to Look’: The Reclamation of Burlesque in Buffalo”

The smell of beer *will* overtake you. That, mixed with the 90’s carpeting that I can only describe as “festive,” will probably remind you of a bowling alley, but this is no such thing. This is a bar, complete with sticky hardwood floors, low lights, and 80’s classic rock. This is Milkie’s.

This is the kind of place where the pen scribbles on the bubblegum pink bathroom stalls are worth recording. “buttholes,” reads one doodle. “BREATHE.” reads another. “But have you listened to Scathed?!” “PIRATES + WITCHES ALWAYS ROLL WITH WHORES ♡.” “RIP to our fallen trans sisters.” In faint pencil, right next to the toilet paper dispenser: “Look ladies- Don’t take shit from no MAN. EVA.” Just underneath it: “-ure welcome.”

I study my red polka dot shirt in the mirror as I wash my hands. This, I will soon see, was a rookie move. Almost everyone is in black at Milkie’s, and those who are not in black are either in Halloween costumes or they are Mary. Mary is wearing a yellow blazer and flats and a genuine smile at any given time. She has never missed one of Fiona Fatale’s shows. She is my friend here and I am grateful to her presence and unending answers to my bazillion questions.

We’re front and center on the hardwood floor in front of a 10” by 10” stage maybe a foot off the ground. The backdrop is a Jackson Pollocked white sheet, pocked with red paint and crawling with bloody handprints. A banner of strung-together letters spells “GLAM VAMPS”

under glowing pink lights. There are tiny specks of glitter littered all over the stage, and they will soon be all over the dancers.

I realize very soon after a crowd forms behind us that I have zero clue what burlesque actually is. I know it's dancing. I don't know much else. In my mind I see big hair, busting corsets, red lipstick, perhaps a facial mole or two. I feel like it's glamorous, is it glamorous? And would glamor smell this pungent? I'm not so sure.

Mary works in HR, more specifically at my university. I think she rolls her eyes when I ask her about it, or she may as well have. "It's dreadfully boring," she says, and I nod, playing grown up. I'm relieved to notice her hands are void of a drink, not because people can't *drink*, but because I feel less like a misguided child in this very adult space. She tells me that she's never missed a Glam Vamps show. She and Fiona Fatale, whose real name is Carolyn, have been friends since elementary school. *Best* friends. She clarifies that there was never anything there between them, romantically, at least, but they've always been really supportive of each other. She introduces me to Zach, who's wearing a patterned shirt and holding a very nice camera. Zach is Carolyn's fiancée, which shocks me, not because people can't get *engaged*, but because I hadn't dreamed that there would be a supportive husband backing this kind of feminine self-expression.

He's telling me about the way they met when the lights start to brighten on stage. Whoops erupt from the crowd, this crowd, all twenty-six of us and some barflies downing beers.

That familiar sensation that whispers *something's about to happen* blossoms in my stomach. It tells me to breathe, chill. *This is fun*, it says. *Relax*.

I obey.

The opening act is a trio of women who descend from the back of the bar like vampires. They are scantily clad, donning capes and corsets and (*yes*) red lipstick and tight, tight little shorts. The one on the left is blond and plus-sized and looks like she's having the time of her life- that's Juicy Lucy, and she's a chef. She will go on to perform an act in which she rips the bloody entrails out of a beatnik's stomach with her teeth. The one in the middle is petite and brunette and her right (*her* right) nipple pasty falls off while her bare back is turned to the audience- that's Sugatush, and she writes children's books. In a few acts she'll strut to stage as a tooth fairy, miming her wand as a dildo as she grinds on her masochistic patient. The one on the right is the only person of color in the troupe and moves with all the grace and posture of a jaguar- that's Sapphire Sea Queen, and I'm pretty sure this is her full time gig. She'll be the last act, the show's closer, a mysterious witch who pours candle wax on a bookish, totally turned-on bystander.

The crowd screeches and hollers around me, hurling affirmations like tomatoes to the stage. The dancers are having *tons* of fun. Even when Sugatush's pasty falls off and she's got one hand crossed over her chest like a Girl Scout, pledging her honor while she covers her nipple, she's smiling from ear to ear.

At the end of the song they stand together, the three of them, in one final hand-on-the-hip pose. They are in just their pasties and panties and high-heeled boots, everything bare, all of it

there for all to see. Mary beams at them, Zach is clapping away, but I'm a little concerned.

They're, like, naked, I think to myself. I feel an urge to scan the crowd, expecting to see some man licking his lips, ready to pounce. I suppress it. They know what they're doing, a voice tells me. I clap and smile. Relax.

To understand what burlesque is, you have to first understand what it's not, and it's *definitely* not stripping. According to an anonymous stripper-turned-burlesque-performer who guest blogs for the website "21st Century Burlesque," strippers are independent contractors. They are salespeople. A stripper's job is to make enough money to pay the house, or the club, for rent, and what's left over is their profit. Their job is to use their bodies and their bodies only, which are often well within the realm of supermodel status. There's constant negotiation in stripping, selling and add-ons like VIP rooms and bottles of wine, and strippers are experts in working a room. It's a job, and it's less about the art of dancing than it is about closing the sale. "Stripping did not take rehearsal," the blogger writes. "It took knowing how men are wired[...] and understanding why the man you are talking to came into the club."

Burlesque is also not a free-for-all naked performance. Depending on your definition of "nudity," there's no such thing involved in burlesque. From what I've seen, all private parts are covered by panties and pasties- but the rest of the parts are sometimes available for viewing. Love handles, bare backs, plenty of side boob. It's a lot of skin you wouldn't see from casual passersby.

So burlesque isn't nudity, and it's *not* stripping. It's kind of like dancing. In fact, it is totally dancing. From the Glam Vamps troupe, Fiona Fatale and Sunya Steel are both classically

trained in ballet. Sugatush is a hip hop dancer. There's music and there's movement to that music. It's dancing.

But it's also totally *not* dancing. At least, it doesn't have to be. What a lot of people associate with burlesque is something called stripteasing, which is exactly what it sounds like- teasing the audience by slowly and sensually dancing and removing clothing pieces or accessories from your body as you do so. Some dancers start in a full outfit and strip to their pasties, some dancers only remove their boas and gloves- either will completely and utterly enthrall any crowd.

But burlesque is also *not just* stripteasing or dancing- or, at least, it doesn't have to be. I've been told many times that burlesque is whatever the performer decides they want it to be. Get up there and do a magic show, maybe a tap number in a Victorian gown. Set your hair on fire, for all they care- the crowd will love you any way you slice it. It's entertainment. It's *fun*.

My feet are starting to hurt from standing. Mary intuits this and invites me to sit on the hardwood, the sticky, beer-stained hardwood, and I oblige. Since the opening number I've seen the following:

- 1) A dancer in a thin, tight body suit and blacked-out contact lenses slowly ripping their "skin" off to screamo music.
- 2) A dancer with horns, reminiscent of Satan, dominating a "stage kitten" (a scantily-clad young woman who picks up stripped pieces and props after each set) with a neck collar and a fake whip.

- 3) A dancer (with her face, from cheekbones to temple, covered in black paint, for anonymity's sake) interpretive dance to a haunting lyrical piece.

I have also seen one specific audience member tape every performance in full on their phone, parting through the crowd like a ghost to the very lip of the stage and speaking directly to the dancers as they perform. "YES," this person says, in a tone just above a whisper. "Work it, honey. YES."

When the sardonic emcee, with her feather earrings, voluminous hair and acrylic nails out to here struts onto the stage to introduce Fiona Fatale, Mary is ecstatic. Carolyn walks on with Lucy-esque pinup curls and a simple cotton dress. Lights up, and she's taken command of the microphone, singing "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me" from *Rocky Horror Picture Show* with that high, flighty voice only she and Susan Sarandon could master. She twirls and her dress flutters up to flash a sneak peek to the crowd. With her back to the audience peels one sleeve off her shoulder, peering coyly at the room, then snaps it back into place. We cheer, begging for more. She shakes across the stage, singing and shimmying, and then she lifts her dress over her head. She throws it stage left, revealing 1940's lingerie, pearly, silky, luminescent, that hugs her curvaceous frame in all the right places. She turns again from the audience unfastens her bra, slowly it comes off, *touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me*, and then only her nipples are confined, her breasts flapping with impressive centrifugal force as she shimmies her shoulders. I stare at her face. Her smile is genuine.

Burlesque comes from the Latin word *burla*- parody, joke, trickery, nonsense. It started as one act of many in the Vaudeville song, dance and comedy shows of the late 19th century, a

form of entertainment born of local variety theater shows. The “burlesque” part of Vaudeville was the political parody and social commentary. Comedians (male) would get on stage and poke fun at the world around them, conservatively-dressed but impeccably-adorable women would thrill the audience with a little dance, and then another (male) comedian would rinse and repeat. But this was, like, 1890- these women didn’t even show their *ankles*, but the audience was totally enthralled. As American culture developed and shock value became increasingly profitable, burlesque dancers became a very hot commodity- much hotter than their male comic counterparts. (*Move over, Pinky Lee- we want ankles!*) By the 1920’s, burlesque dancers were baring more than ever (calves and all), and the fun only continued as it travelled to New York City’s famous Minsky’s Burlesque entertainment house.

This kind of job was a superpower for women. A burlesque dancer in 1920 could travel cross country with her troupe, making money, doing what she loved, in a society that was barely beginning to grant other women those same opportunities. She was tapping into the best-selling, most secretly-desired, most widely-lusted-for commodity- the female body- and using it to thrill and entertain an audience, make them laugh, while still keeping some of herself for *just* herself.

Burlesque enjoyed about a decade of glory before the introduction movie theaters drove variety entertainment into oblivion. It wasn’t until the 1990’s, about 30 years after stripping was introduced, that the striptease experienced an unprecedented revival. It’s title: Neo-Burlesque, and with it came things like gorelesque and even “boylesque,” burlesque featuring male bodies. This new burlesque is more DIY than its mother, and has a much stronger focus on the empowerment of women and women’s bodies than it does on the appeasement of a male audience.

“Up next we have a very special act,” says the emcee, which I think she says of all the acts. But she suddenly seems at a loss for words. This time she just shakes her head, the feathers flopping like bunny ears in her hair. “Words can’t even describe her,” she says. “Please welcome, Sunya Steel.”

The person who struts onto stage is tiny, clearing 5’5” only in heels. They (Ari’s pronouns are they/them) wear a tight black corset, tight black panties, and a boa thick with black feathers around their neck. They carry a wooden chair which, when roughly unfolded with a thrust of the wrist, reveals itself to be covered in a bed of nails. Their eyebrows are perfectly arched, their cheekbones perfectly high, their nose perfectly petite to the point of being doll-like. They pose, one calf popped, one hand on one hip, and I feel some heightened awareness ripple through the crowd and reverberate back. The hairs on our arms and necks stand-pin straight. We shut up. We wait.

Throughout all of these performances I’ve been grappling with something, and it’s the tension between these two boxes in my mind. They’re neatly labeled and very far apart- *things that empower women* and *things that don’t empower women*. I thought I understood without question that burlesque falls into the *things that empower women* category. Thanks to Ari, who identifies as neither woman nor man, I’ve since expanded and relabeled my definitions as *things that empower bodies* and *things that don’t*.

But something strange happens when the music starts to play that has not happened before. Maybe it’s the heightened awareness of the crowd, all of us eyeballing that bed of nails, or maybe it’s because Sunya’s body is especially voluptuous, but I cannot look at her asscheeks

jiggling or her hips rolling or her neatly-cupped breasts pouring out of their bra for more than one fleeting glance. These parts are clearly on display and intended to be looked at, admired, revered, but somehow to look anywhere but at the face, legs, arms, or feather boa of Sunya is to myself feel like the misogynist and the objectifier, both of which I can label *definitely not empowering*. I watch measuredly, careful to keep a small, encouraging smile on my face, and lower my eyes when they spread their legs wide.

By the time the music stops Sunya has artfully stripped down to their nipple pasties and panties, leaving their dozen-or-so tattoos on full display. They stand straight as a rod, catching their breath, and grab a hold of the microphone. “I wrapped myself in barbed wire last week, so let’s take it easy,” they say. (This would explain the near-invisible white scars along their stomach, waist and thighs. The barbed wire show is called “Whorror III,” a show dedicated to a subset of burlesque called “gorelesque” that focuses on the themes of zombies, horror, the supernatural, and blood. Whorror III’s sales pitch: “An erotic bloodbath of an evening... The Rust Belt’s most gruesomely gorgeous drag and burlesque performers will be gracing our stage to serve you death, destruction and domination. Bring a barf bag (purse) because this show is going to make your guts turn and your loins squirm.”)

“Five dollars,” they say as point to their cheeks, chin, and derriere. They touch their stomach and their breasts. “Twenty dollars.” They gesture broadly around their solar plexus, within the general area of where their thighs meet. “Fifty dollars.” They walk back to the DJ stand and grab a staple gun gleaming silver in the soft light of the stage. “Any takers?”

Murmurs spread through the silence. People laugh short, shocked laughs as they start to understand. A young man with an earring walks up to the stage, and he’s come with a five dollar

bill aimed straight at Sunya's ass cheek. "Don't be scared, baby," they say, and then there's a hush as the man's shaking fingers place the bill on their left cheek, he twitches to push the hair out of his face, and Sunya doesn't flinch in the slightest as the rifle-quick sound of a staple meeting flesh echoes through the bar. A 6'5" biker type in the back lets out a moan of disgust. Girls next to me cover their mouth in shock. From the front row I can see the bill flapping like a flag as Sunya struts again to the mic. "Who's next?"

Neo-Burlesque came to Buffalo by way of a woman named Jamie Doktor, otherwise known as Mistress Kiss J. She started her own troupe, The Stripteasers, in 2004. At first, people only heard the "strip" part of "striptease" and dismissed the group, but it's gained quite a following in its sixteen years. Miss J runs classes with titles like "Art of the Tease" and "Burlesquercise" from a small space called Buffalo Burlesque Studio on North Street, not too far from the theater where burlesque was born in this city- the Palace Theatre, now known as 710 Theatre. Her troupe performs every Tuesday night at a notoriously underground and far left bar, aptly named Nietzsche's.

It seems that Neo-Burlesque, like many aspects of women's performance, is a reclamation of women's bodies- and when I interviewed her, Carolyn agreed wholeheartedly. "You're signing a contract that says, 'I'm okay with showing you every inch of my body, and I'm going to have fun and enjoy myself, and you as an audience member are allowed to look,'" she said, "but you also have to respect me and treat me like a person at the end of the day."

The body positivity in the community is also pretty awesome. Carolyn said she's been anything from a size 0 to a size 12 in women's clothing, and she knows that no matter what size she is when she walks on stage, the reception from the crowd will be the same. "If you're having a period day, and you're bloated, and you're in a thong and pasties and they're *still* cheering for you, you say 'Well. I guess I'm not *that* bloated,'" she said.

Carolyn stumbled upon burlesque the way that most people tend to find it- by taking a class (Miss J's class, specifically). Through taking the class and becoming obsessed with burlesque, she was cast in a burlesque musical, then joined a troupe her friend Sugatush (the publisher) was in. When Sugatush decided to start her own troupe, the Glam Vamps, Carolyn was all in.

Her fiance Zach is full-on supportive. They met at a burlesque show - *her* show - three years ago, and he's since been to every performance except for two. I asked him how it felt to see her onstage. "Empowering," he said. "She's just beautiful on stage, and she's showing everybody how beautiful she is. She loves it and it makes her happy, and if it makes her happy it should also make you happy."

Burlesque at its purest is not just striptease- it's variety and comedy, parody and dance. It's gorlesque and go go dancing. It's camp, it's kitsch, it's all the best fringe stuff rolled into one glittering disco ball in a world of crystal chandeliers. For a lot of the performers, it's a healing experience, giving real validation to vulnerability and breeding a certain confidence that other hobbies just don't provide. As one performer told me, burlesque gives you space to be completely, utterly, and unapologetically *fabulous*.

“Should we start with Bubl  or should we do a warm up song?”

Miss J (yes, *that* Miss J), with red lipstick and a butterfly tattoo blossoming on her chest, has directed this question to Mel, the only other woman here.

“I mean, I want to do something *nasty*, you know, but it’s her first time,” Miss J says, gesturing to me with a pen she uses to click around her iPad. “She’s never done it before.”

Mel thinks, shakes her legs out a bit. She has a nose ring, skeleton leggings, kitten heels. She’s 52 but looks 40. Her stage name is “Disco Nap.”

“Do a warm up song,” she decides. “Just so she can see.”

So far in “Art of the Tease,” we (I- Mel already knows all of this) have a) talked about burlesque for half an hour (when I told them I was studying the history of burlesque in Buffalo, Mel snorted and nodded her head at Miss J- “You’re *talking to* the history of burlesque in Buffalo”), b) put on our gloves (black for Mel, her own, blue for Miss J, and maroon for me, all of them stretching to the elbow) and c) learned the three most vital and basic burlesque moves a dancer can know- the bump, the shimmy, and the grind.

To bump, one keeps her torso erect, spreads her feet apart, bends her knees, and jolts her pelvis forward with such force that her inner thighs jiggle (that last part’s critical). “This is how your grandmothers had sex, ladies,” says Miss J as we turn from one side to the next, pushing perverts away with our solar plexus.

The shimmy is likely the most classic move a burlesquer can perform, arms out to the side, shaking what her Momma gave her... But what’s a dancer to do if she was given a flat chest? “Jiggle your back fat,” says Miss J. “Right under the bra strap. Do you feel it?” (I do.)

Completing the trio is the grind. To grind, a dancer assumes the same position as the bump, often with her hands behind her head, and rolls her hips in a suggestive motion. This move is very important because it is procreative in nature- this is what people want to see. Miss J tells me (correctly) that this is often an uncomfortable move for beginners. “I’m told that this gesticulation means I have the ability to lure men to me who will do something dangerous and harmful to my body,” she tells us. “I’m sorry, but did you just hear that? What I heard is, ‘I have the ability.’ I have the *power*.” Her tone is soft, her eyes bright. “Society has told us that the power that we have as women is bad and that it’s dangerous... But we give *life*.” She gestures to her general genital area. “This is *life* giving. Even if some of us don’t have the opportunity to give life, we all know what it’s like to come from life, to come from this. The grinding is just appreciating and respecting the incredible ability to give life.”

Our warm up song is decidedly “Rock Steady.” Having never heard this song, I am expecting an 80’s classic rock hit but am instead met with Aretha Franklin’s powerhouse pipes playing over the Bluetooth speaker. Miss J tells me to just follow her lead- choreographed stuff can be difficult to memorize. We bump. We grind. We shimmy. We peel off our gloves, drag them up our popped calves, helicopter them over our heads.

Miss J is funny and she knows it, uses humor to diffuse anxieties and explain dance moves, yet I am nervous in her presence because of her general aura. She is small in stature, maybe 5’5”, with bony shoulders and petite features, but her face is aglow with the kind of confidence that comes from being exactly who you are. When she mimes dipping her finger in perfume, applying it to her neck, smelling her gloved fingers and wafting the invisible scent to the audience for all of ten seconds, I am completely hooked. Such is the spell of an unapologetic

woman, a woman who knows how to tease. It's this slow sensual stripping, the total opposite of most porn videos, that activates the pleasure centers in the brain. It's this slow sensual stripping that drives an audience crazy, even when the only thing you're stripping is a string of black feathers.

I like to think my interest in performance lead me here, to the Buffalo Burlesque Studio on a snowy winter's Sunday, here with Disco Nap and Miss J. I've had the bug since I was four and took my first tap class. It quickly matured through elementary school, middle school and peaked in high school, when the auditorium and the empty cafeteria and the music room and the girl's bathroom were domains reserved solely for us, the drama club. The thespians. The *stars*.

I've peered into the dusty, rouge-stained mirror of that music room and bathroom and cafeteria as many different Amandas'- one with a leopard print dress and hair teased to oblivion, another in a floor-length cotton dress with fruit superglued to the bodice. I've seen a nurse in that mirror, a construction worker, a street urchin, a chorus girl. I've seen fake eyelashes and foundation streaks, extravagant earrings, too much glitter, not enough eyebrows. I've seen that girl run in to catch her breath after learning she had a solo, or emerging from the bathroom stall wounded from her boyfriend (air quotes) ignoring her. I can still see her alone, staring at her protruding stomach with the quiet, unfettered rage distinct among rages, the kind that brings tears of shame and thoughts of unlovability, the kind that falls away like a robe when she steps onto the stage.

In the Buffalo Burlesque Studio, with "Feeling Good" by Michael Bublé blaring it's brassy tones, I sway, shimmy, shake, drop my feather boa at the wrong time, cock an eyebrow at

the imaginary audience in the mirror, let my eyes flutter closed in pleasure as I drag my gloved hand delicately over my cheekbones- and as I do this, I am reminded of that girl in the mirror. She was desperate for this. She yearned for this unleashing of femininity and hungered for that recognition of desire, but her explorations, like those of many other young people, were stunted by shame and secrecy. I wish she'd known where we'd be five years later.

When I'd brought up my concerns about vulnerability and objectification to Carolyn, she was gracious and thoughtful and articulate in her response. "It's the difference between someone objectifying you without your consent, and inviting that person to look," she'd said. It dawns on me as I dance that I have never offered this kind of invitation. When I've been on stage performing or at a conference presenting, the focus has been on my character or my consciousness, not my body. When I've been with a romantic partner, it's been about the loving feeling and the exploration of what love feels like *together*. But rarely, if ever, have I stood alone in front of a crowd of people, or even just one person, and actually "invited them to look." Miss J told me that in stripteasing, using your hand to feel the softness of your body or your boa sends a message to the audience- *Don't you wish that hand was your hand?* I've never said *Look here* or *Touch there* or *Check out my hand slowly moving up my body- doesn't that just drive you nuts?*

When these moments arose I have historically hid, giggled nervously, looked to appear shy or coy or whatever. But being here, flapping around in synchronicity with these beautiful bodies, shaking absolutely every inch of my flesh, I feel... reclaimed? Liberated, for sure. Most of all I feel something spreading in my solar plexus like ink on wet paper, like the wings of the butterfly on Miss J's chest, some kind of visceral thing that's saying that I'm powerful, I'm wild, and I'm worthy of this. It's the same voice that told me to chill at Milkie's, the same voice that

talked me out of starting the engine and heading back home when I pulled up to this studio, the same voice that asked me to let go of my inhibitions and be present. *See yourself*, it tells me as I roll my shoulders back. *And let others see you, too.*

The me that I see when I look in the mirror is smirking back at me. Miss J, Mel and I all look the same, with one hand on our hips, one leg pointed out, a sultry smile on our faces, and our gloves, now properly stripped, held at an arm's length next to us. Bubl  draws in a breath for his last note and Miss J looks at me directly through the mirror. "Drop it," she commands, nodding at the glove. I look back at my reflection. One last note from the band, one last look at this body, one last sip of this juice, and the glove falls to the floor.