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A BURLESQUE

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Bachelor of Arts in Creative Arts (Honours)

School Of Humanities

Griffith University Gold Coast

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SYNOPSIS

I am a performer of burlesque. This PhD submission consists of a creative component and a written thesis on an individual enactment of burlesque. My burlesque practice commenced in early 2002, with the planning of my first performance. I debuted my act in August 2002 and have continued to perform since then. Burlesque, for me is a long-term creative endeavour and the expanse of time committed to the project offers the opportunity to include documentation from many different moments within my performance career. As such the film and photographic material highlights this artistic and philosophical progression. The combination of film and photography is the most effective form of documentation allowing me to include a greater volume of performance material than would have been physically possible within a single live performance.

The thesis will discuss the manner in which my particular burlesque practice is brought into being. Major theoretical terrains of the body and its awareness of the mask tradition, desire, ballet and fetish will all be considered in detail for the ways in which they construct and contribute to the development, and thus my understanding of burlesque. On occasion, the theoretical discussion gives way to a more creative description of an act, a costume item, or a moment in my performance history – these fragmented moments are designed to illuminate the theory in a specific and evocative manner, and to reflect the evolution of my practice creatively. Each pays tribute to the theoretical understandings which underpin and occur within the aesthetic choices made as a particular work develops. Aesthetic and creative communication adequately mimics both my methodology and intent.

I have examined several key areas beginning with an analysis of the varied feminist stances informing the practice of contemporary burlesque. This is followed by a historical contextualisation of burlesque. Particular attention is paid to the mask tradition and how it is applied to burlesque practice.

The thesis considers how burlesque can be read through a number of theories of desire involving concepts of gender play, sexuality and historical perceptions. I argue that burlesque is able to depict desire in all its contrary guises and historical moments through aesthetic presentation. Returning to the centrality of the body in burlesque, I look to other forms such as ballet for an expression of what can be culturally coded as ‘feminine’.

The written work on the body, the mask process, ballet and burlesque history culminates within this thesis in the final chapter as the fetish object is examined in relation to burlesque. The conscious objectification of the female body, alongside the inscription of

objects with subjectivity confuses the grounds upon which we understand the terms subject and object. The symbolic use of objects is augmented by the engagement of the body in burlesque, in which the performer can be seen to be intentionally objectifying his or her body. The interaction of these two processes is seen as an enactment of the same dissolution of subject and object distinctions. It is in the dissolution of subject and object distinctions that this writing finds its conclusion, opening up to the documentation of creative work *A Burlesque: Lola The Vamp*, as photographic book and DVD.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) _____

Meghann Montgomery

Included in this thesis is a published paper in Chapter 1 for which I am the sole author. Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in the published paper.

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In a unique way, the media interviews I have engaged with have shaped my theorisations and also deserve a mention here; The Australian, The Age, The Courier Mail, The Sydney Morning Herald, Men's Style, The Today Show, Getaway, Mornings With Kerry-Anne, as well as the countless lines of newsprint I have taken up from Street Press Australia, Rave and Scene Magazines in promoting my performances.

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INTRODUCTION

A Thesis in Burlesque

This thesis will discuss major theoretical terrains of the body as they relate to practice particularly the concept of ‘awarishness’ (a quaint Victorian term that denoted the performers awareness of her own sexual persona on stage) the mask tradition, desire, ballet and fetish. Each of these will be considered in detail for the ways in which they construct and contribute to the development of, and understanding of my burlesque practice. Throughout I will draw on cultural theories and analysis presented by Roland Barthes, Elizabeth Grosz, Alphonse Lingis and Giorgio Agamben. On occasion, the theoretical discussion gives way to a more creative description of an act, costume item, or moment in my performance history – these fragmented moments are designed to illuminate the theory in a specific and evocative manner, and to reflect on the evolution of my practice creatively. Each creative component pays tribute to the theoretical understandings which underpin the aesthetic choices made as a particular work develops.

Chapter One, ‘Exotic World Burlesque Museum – An Exegesis in Three Dimensions’ sets the scene for the project and introduces readers to the creative impetus and subsequent development of my burlesque practice since 2002.

The second chapter, ‘Burlesque Spectacle of History’ describes a short history of burlesque in general, contextualising the contemporary burlesque movement and its ties to the history of the form. The work of Robert Allen is considered here in terms of burlesque’s cultural impact. ‘Empowering Submission: The Feminist Stances Informing Burlesque’, a sub-section of chapter two, analyses the varied feminist stances informing the practice of contemporary burlesque. The influence of both anti-pornography protest and sex-positive feminism on the culture is examined through the theories of Andrea Dworkin, Sallie Tisdale, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray and Maria Elena Buszek.

Chapter Three, ‘Awarishness and the Burlesque Body’ examines the Victorian-era tenet of a burlesque performer’s consciousness of her own body. The concept of awarishness is considered for its contemporary relevance and enduring influence on burlesque performance, even as the burlesque form has and continues to change shape.

Chapter Four, ‘The Life Model as Conscious Performative Objectification’, outlines

my lived experience of life drawing modelling and its influence on constructions of objectivity and subjecthood. Alphonse Lingis' work on the erotic object is useful here in describing the female body as it is presented in 'high art'. This text influences my understanding of the body in the burlesque space and the position of the burlesque performer as both artist and canvas even in the realms of the popular.

Chapter Five 'Psychical Affect of Bodily Inscription' follows Grosz's work on the physical affectivity of bodily inscription and how this process is utilised in burlesque. The performer can be seen to be consciously objectifying themselves through their intense use of objects and their bodily exposure. These issues are discussed using Lingis' erotic object and Freleigh's understanding of the body as an object in dance. 'The Body as Inscriptive Surface' a sub-section of chapter five considers that burlesque's aesthetics are both resident in the accoutrements and objects of the mis-en-scene and the aesthetics of the body. The idea of the body as an inscriptive surface presented here is drawn from the work of Elizabeth Grosz.

Chapter Six 'The Burlesque Mask: Costume as Inscription and Affect', the objects of burlesque are considered for their effect on the construction of the burlesque body. Particular attention is paid to the mask tradition through the writing of Keith Johnstone and how it can be applied to burlesque practice. The processes of mask work are directly applicable to burlesque due to the interaction between object and body, subject and persona. The mask is one of the most ancient fetish items. The traditional mask process involves the creation of a heightened persona through the use of an external object. When considered in relation to burlesque's use of objects, mask theory provides valuable insights into the construction of the burlesque persona.

In Chapter Seven, 'Burlesque: An Aesthetics of Desire' desire is considered as a theoretical construct through Freud, Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari with a concentration of aspects of gender play, sexuality and historical perceptions. As desire has been theorised differently at different points in history, burlesque is able to reference these moments through the use of historical objects playing out a historically aware history of the aesthetics of desire.

Chapter Eight, 'Aesthetics/Stylistics of the Feminine: Ballet' examines the particular aesthetics of the body in the world of ballet. Ballet presents a compendium of movement that has both constructed and reflected cultural ideals coded as 'feminine'. In its intimate examination, distillation and cultural creation of the feminine, ballet has provided a model for feminine movements, and despite contemporary critique, may also be seen to provide a subtle form of resistance in a patriarchal culture.

The concluding chapter, 'Fetish: Object and Subject' introduces Giorgio Agamben's

work on fetish as a means of linking together the many and various ideas explored in this thesis. Each chapter has built to this final reveal, mirroring the act of striptease in performance. This chapter describes Agamben's notions of the fetish object as a site of object-subject dissolution. Previous chapters on the body, the mask process, and ballet find their ultimate context within this thesis as Agamben's fetish is examined in relation to burlesque. Agamben's fetish object is an object endowed with meaning, story, idea, history or sexuality and thus the double-movement evident in my practice becomes clearest here. The conscious objectification of the female body, alongside the inscription of objects with subjectivity confuses the grounds upon which we understand the terms subject and object. This can be seen in my practice through the engagement of objects especially objects that carry a history, association or meaning, such as the pointe shoe, corset, or antique prop. The symbolic use of objects is augmented by the engagement of the body in burlesque, where the performer intentionally engages in a process of objectification. The interaction of these two processes is seen as an enactment of the same dissolution of subject and object distinctions in Agamben's discussion of the fetish.

The written work is intended to support and inform a creative component consisting of both still and moving imagery. The live performance of burlesque featured in the creative component chronicles the development of my practice since my first fan dance in 2002. The documented live performances have grown to become a body of work enriched by theory just as the writing is informed by the development of many live performances.

My overall submission therefore is three-fold and features writing, photography and film. I have chosen a variety of presentations in order to effectively present a decade of performance. The addition of photography and film highlights the nuances and intricacies of the aesthetic choices. As much of my research has been engaged with the making and performance of live burlesque, I have also included a list of performances to demonstrate the extent of the exposure my work has experienced in the public sphere. On many occasions my work has been selected specifically for these events by esteemed peers.

The burlesque acts included contribute to my conceptualization and discussion of burlesque. Some have been performed since 2003, namely *The Serpentine Dance*, while others are more recent. Some acts, including *Unicorn*, have had extended exposure, while others such as *Moondrunk* have only been performed a few times. *Milonga Del Angel*, live footage of a four-song performance demonstrates the intimate engagement of the body and prop in burlesque. Taken together they represent a body of work that spans several years.

The inherent problematics of preserving a live act on film have been apparent during

the documentation process. Throughout, I have been conscious that a successful live performance may read differently on film and as such, it often takes a high level of film-making skill to render it authentically. I believe the intricacies of shooting performance for film to be a complex undertaking. It is a specific art form in itself involving research, consideration and experience, and as such I consider it to be a process beyond the scope of my project. Therefore, I have chosen minimal effects in order to keep the focus on the run of a show, not on my skill as a video editor. I have selected films which best convey the intention of each act.

In addition to the filmic presentation, I have included a photographic book, *A Burlesque: Lola The Vamp*, documenting the history of my work in still imagery. This provides an opportunity to showcase the aesthetic detail included in each performance and highlight certain important physical poses such as standing *en pointe* (on toes in ballet shoes) or presenting a set of feather fans. Fed into this imagery are reviews from critics, peers and journalists in order to demonstrate critical response to my work.

CHAPTER ONE

Exotic World Burlesque Museum - An Exegesis in Three Dimensions

San Francisco, 2002

I left the studios on the corner of Montgomery and Broadway alone. Walking down the streets of the financial district, the cool San Franciscan air bit into the lacy holes in my skirt. My life had just altered. My career had been forged.

I'd auditioned for the revival of a burlesque show, once a sensation on Bourbon Street in an era now known as the Golden Age of Burlesque, spanning the 1930s to the late 1960s. The decision was down to a sweet redhead and me. On the judging panel were the current headliners of the burlesque circuit.

The taxi which had ferried me to the studio was driven by an American woman. I was dressed in a long, black, fitted skirt that flared below a piece of crochet just beneath the knee and a pink lace blouse which clung tightly to my torso, my straight black hair was uncurled but knitted into plaits on the top of my head and decorated with a filigree barrette. A long section of hair hung to my waist and I could feel the ends where the sharp strands stabbed through the lace in tiny pinpricks at the curve of my waist. I had on a full face of theatrical makeup.

When I stopped the cab near the studio on a strip famed for nude dancers, the taxi-driver asked whether we opened this early. She asked, she said, because I looked so beautiful.

'No,' I replied, 'I'm going into Broadway Studios.'

She thought I was a stripper. She was close. Yesterday, I'd attended pastie-making and burlesque costuming classes at the studio and, as we spilled out on to the street, past the sign saying 'Tease-o-rama', a small man repeated in an uncertain voice,

'You can tease me if you want to.'

No one wanted to.

A strong ambition emerged in me during the audition. I was surprised to find that I passionately wanted burlesque. I wanted to be a part of the world and to experience burlesque

as a performer. The song was unfamiliar. My hips shimmied and dropped in perfect anticipation of the music. My dance teacher told me this happens sometimes when a belly dancer reaches a certain plateau. She can dance as though she has known the music all her life. As a child of the theatre, I was now ‘vamping’ in the sense of jazz, improvising, in synchronicity with the sound. And I had taken off my brassiere. That these things had happened in an audition amazed me, but I’d felt no fear just pulsing want, a raw ambition. I wanted the role. But much more than that, I wanted burlesque. I wanted to be one of those women who paraded the private, whose work revealed what was usually hidden. The auditions revealed women of charm, grace and mystery. The more flesh they exposed, the more mysterious they appeared, ladies of louche glamour, the illicit; women who, through rehearsal and habit, had taken on public nudity as part of their sense of normality. The headliners of the event were Dita Von Teese, Catherine D’Lish and Kitty West, known on the Golden Age stage of New Orleans as Evangeline the Oyster Girl. These creatures were something other, strange, beautiful, exotic and fascinating. I wanted to be one of them.

Later I would read ‘The Erotic Object’ in Alphonso Lingis’ *Dangerous Emotions* and think of these women as I came to the closing sentence. ‘In the decomposition of the world of work and reason, transgressive and ruinous passions catch sight of the sacred’ (Lingis, 1999, p. 157).

The role would have been wonderful: months in New Orleans, then a tour of America and Europe. It wasn’t to be but in that moment, walking away from Broadway Studios, I already knew the greater prize would be creating my own burlesque performance.

San Francisco 2005

I am sitting behind a white scalloped curtain. The stage lights filter through the folds and I can see the audience briefly in the light and the little gaps near the floor.

I am wearing *pointe* shoes, a white tutu, a yellow corset and a tightly curled white wig with long ringlets which tickle my waist and frame my face with smaller curls at the top. Beneath the corset is a white satin negligee, and beneath that a half-cup bra revealing tassels attached to my pasties, and a nude g-string with a big pink bow in the centre of the t-back. My legs are taut in a seated *plie*; my feet poised in arches, my thighs turned out. I am about to perform. My whole body is poised like a coiled spring; a panther ready to pounce; fight or flight. I am about to do both.

But I cannot hold the pose.

The announcement is taking too long. My body is too pumped with adrenaline to hold still. I rest a moment. I can't let the audience see the quiver in my legs, can't let it grow bigger. I need these legs to be strong while I dance on my toes. The announcement ends, the audience applauds and the white scalloped curtain begins to rise. I assume the position, I am prepared. I am about to dance at Tease-o-Rama 2005, Bimbos 365 Club, North Beach, San Francisco.

Accordion music brings my arms, then my legs, to life in stilted, mechanical movements. I rise to my toes. I dance, turn in a neat circle, and take off my corset. I pull down my tutu – pause – my derriere in the air as the music breaks, my feet perched on toes. The music that brought the doll to life has finished; applause breaks the silence. I move to the ground, in white suit and *pointes*. I move as a stripper does: my legs part and quickly close again, a ready smile when they're open. I love it; I am revelling in the joke, and the audience chuckles. I rise suddenly to my knees as the second song builds and the audience applauds this change of pace in anticipation of more to come. My bodice slides down; my feet fly over my head in a pike which removes the costume in a neat trick. I am almost a naked doll now. The pink tassels sway where the half-cup of the bra cuts away and I hold my hands to the floor beneath me as my *pointes* find their place on the ground. My body takes the shape of a table, arms and legs supporting – navel gazing at the ceiling. I make my torso undulate, hips rocking, and my body in motion, ringlets thrashing. I rise to the audience again, one toe in front, the other knee on the ground.

I move into a luxurious backbend, take off my bra, spinning it around my fingers and throwing it away, shoulders in a tiny shimmy to make the pink tassels sway again, tickling the curve of my breasts. The audience is applauding. The show has ended, the doll has come alive. The curtain goes down. I rise and take with me what I can see of my scattered costume, tossed aside in the heat of performance.

I have become one of 'those' women.

California 2003

Driving halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, I'm on my way to the Exotic World Striptease Museum a collection of burlesque treasures from the Golden Age.

The Miss Exotic World competition is held here annually, but on this occasion, I'm a few months too late. I turn off that iconic American road, Route 66, into Wyld Road, a small lane; all I can see for miles is Mojave Desert. To the right a wrought iron gate comes into

view, the first signal that I have found Exotic World mostly visited by appointment only. They were expecting me. I'd called Dixie, burlesque living legend and manager of Exotic World, from Los Angeles that morning. I'd had to stifle my nerves, but Dixie was gracious, quickly putting me at ease.

After a honk of the horn, prompted by a sign in the carpark, a man with an inch-thick tan arrives to greet us. He shows us the pool, the venue for the annual Exotic World Pageant, where burlesque girls compete every year for titles like 'Legend in the Making,' and performers are awarded names which read like extravagant cocktail menus: 'Little Miss Earthquake' and 'Kellita, Shimmier Extraordinaire of San Francisco'. The pool is empty right now. How the masses of people who congregate here to perform and document the pageant fit in I can hardly imagine. The pool seems so much larger in the photographic and filmic imagery. I'm taken to the hall where photographs of every Miss Exotic World since 1990 adorn the walls: strippers in the 1980s to Catherine D'Lish in the 1990s, resplendent in her champagne glass, to Kitten DeVille, star of contemporary Los Angeles' burlesque, and described in her promotional material as, 'the embodiment of burlesque'.

Dixie is almost ready for us now. Her act once involved her burlesquery version of Miss Monroe and now, her incarnation of Marilyn's voice and physicality is uncanny. Dixie *is* Marilyn today. She was devastated by her icon's death. She loved her even as she parodied her. But perhaps it never really was entirely parody, but something laced with homage, a risqué and humorous tribute. Marilyn, however, didn't see it that way; she tried to stop Dixie's show on several occasions. She was not successful.

Dixie is a stripper of burlesque and a lover of the form. She took over the operations of the museum from its founder Jennie Lee – known in her day as the Bazoom Girl, a tassel-twirler who founded the first union for striptease performers in the USA, The Stripteaser's League. She was very passionate about her fellow performers and amassed a collection of costumes, props and accoutrements: Gypsy Rose Lee's suitcase and Sally Rand's famous feather fans. Dixie came out to live at Exotic World before Jennie Lee passed away.

As she guides us through the museum Dixie is the consummate performer, twirling her cane and moving with all the confidence and panache of a woman who knows just how to entertain. The tour is spellbinding: glitters, gossamers and glass cases. Evidence of what was.

Dixie tells me that Tease-o-rama was on last week in LA and I tell her yes, I performed there. She asks which night and is sorry she did not see me.

'Oh they would have eaten you up!'

She compliments my figure. She says, 'I am so honoured you came out here.'

No, Dixie, this is Mecca and you are my burlesque fairy godmother. She discounts the merchandise, but I make a big donation to the wooden box. She tells me I look like Hedy Lamarr and we pose for what are now-treasured photographs. She never acts as a judge for the Exotic World competition, preferring to watch and leave the difficult decisions to others.

‘I like all the girls,’ she says.

Exotic World is a mythical place, full of stories, objects, histories and memories. The story goes that Tempest Storm lived out here in a trailer with gold fittings and chandeliers. She performs occasionally now at the annual reunion show running since 1957, held at the same time as the Pageant, joining the ranks of women now immortalised by the new generation of performers as living legends. Performers who have long since hung up their tassles perform here. They give new performers a taste of the burlesque of the past. Exotic World, a museum, a compendium of props, a collection of costumes, is, in a solid, palpable, living sense, the thesis of several lifetimes of work in burlesque. The toys, the cases, the remnants of life beneath the stage lights.

Exotic World Burlesque Museum remains special to me and all those people who visited before the flooding rains destroyed the place in the northern spring of 2006. Volunteer workers scurried to pack the last of the treasures away before the walls disintegrated. Everything is now stored in Las Vegas. Dixie lives in the neon city now, and Exotic World has been renamed the Burlesque Hall of Fame. The Pageant still runs annually in Las Vegas, as it has done since 1990 with contestants now vying for the grand title of the ‘Reigning Queen of Burlesque’.

CHAPTER TWO

Burlesque: The Spectacle of History

Burlesque is a performance form currently experiencing a resurgence of interest worldwide, particularly in America, the United Kingdom and Australia. This renewed interest is fuelled by both an increased level of participation from performers and a more populist audience base, with the media often asking, why now? Why are people so interested in a performance form that seems to be enacting old and problematic ideals of feminine behaviour?

In the Golden Era of burlesque, spanning from the 1920s to the late 1960s (but in full bloom during the 1930s to the 1950s) burlesque, was elaborate striptease with feather boas, lingerie, and the sensuality of jazz music. A female burlesque performer was often termed a stripper, and she occupied a similar social stratum to strippers today. Burlesque was ‘low-brow’ popular American entertainment aimed at the working class, and its sexual focus ensured a lack of respectability. It was not considered a particularly noteworthy performance form, and as such, documentation was unimportant. Burlesque passed from popular culture and in the late 1960s it was less relevant to an audience when musicals like *Hair* were showcasing full nudity without the teasing build-up. A generational shift had occurred, and the act of striptease modified from a slide between costume, prop and body to more explicit display, including the removal of more clothing as the American laws regulating striptease adapted to the audience demand. Even the word ‘burlesque’ passed from western popular culture, replaced by the term, ‘stripping’. The emphasis had altered to a less-embellished removal of clothing, focusing more on explicit display.

My burlesque practice is based in certain aesthetically-aware historical eras. My heightened awareness of the history of this form is common amongst burlesque performers around the world. Much contemporary burlesque owes a debt to the aesthetics of the 40s and 50s. A thorough working knowledge of historical tropes has transplanted the imagery of the past. My shows reach even further back than most – to the Belle Époque of Paris for imagery; the Moulin Rouge for cabaret and the dirty nightclubs and dancehalls like the Elysee Montmartre. Piano accordion and classical compositions enhance the historicism and the construction of atmosphere. The degree to which I am successful as a burlesque performer

comes down to my capacity to make the audience believe in the evocation of another time.

My performance research has been somewhat archaeological; a constant seeking out of the burlesque of the past which has involved watching erstwhile performers, reading books and viewing old burlesque films and photographs from various halcyon days. Burlesque was not a form considered important enough to preserve or document seriously, but recent interest especially in the last decade, has ensured that many treasures, which might have once been lost have been preserved.

Burlesque's American origins can be traced to 1869 when Lydia Thompson toured her 'British Blondes' in America. The performers came from the milieu of European cabaret at that time, when the Can Can was emerging as a popular form in Paris. In America, the British Blondes were a roaring success. *Ixion*, an iconic record breaking production staged on Broadway, made news and theatrical history. Burlesque began cropping up everywhere: risqué caricature of popular plays, women playing men, bawdy parody. And all the stars were women. The actresses and dancers would often portray male characters, still in corsetry, never obscuring their overt display of femininity. In so doing, these women disturbed the binary code of masculine and feminine through their use of aesthetic display.

Even more shockingly, they sometimes appeared wearing only tights – effectively nude by the conventional standards of the time, albeit padded at the hips and bust. Burlesque performers of this era created the first pin-ups, posing for photographers to create high selling small calling cards, *carte de visite*; these cards were popular not only among burlesque performers, but for all those interested in reproducing their image as a photograph. Thousands of these cards circulated at the time; the signature of a new technology and a new way of seeing.

The hallmark of a performer was her 'awarishness' and Burlesque continued as a bawdy entertainment form for some time. In the 1920s striptease became an integral part of the form. Shows had hitherto featured striptease, but with changes in western women's fashion, it was inevitable that a performance form that so relied upon the sexual female body would eventually become synonymous with the reveal of that body. Any female performer of this era was assumed to be some manner of 'fallen woman'. Women in the theatre had not yet thrown off the assumptions of prostitution. The public staged presentation of the female body, even in theatre, was still considered a kind of prostitution. As Buszek writes, "In Europe, visual display of the female performer—whether a dancer or actress—was associated with the same display and commercial 'exchange' of the prostitute, a profession in which

most women in the theatre dabbled, if not took on as a primary source of income.” (Buszek, 1999, p. 3)

Lydia Thompson’s American debut with *Ixion* included themes that burlesque still plays out today, although the forms in which this takes place have differed over time. Robert C Allen wrote extensively on this era of burlesque in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, 1991 only a few years before the resurgence of the burlesque form had taken flight. Since that time, burlesque has become one of the most popular theatre movements of the early 21st Century, infiltrating many aspects of contemporary popular culture, from fashion to music to nightclubbing and entertainment. “From *Ixion* on, burlesque in America was inextricably tied to the issues of the spectacular female performer, and from then on burlesque implicitly raised troubling questions about how a woman should be ‘allowed’ to act on stage, about how femininity should and could be represented, and about the relationship of women onstage to women in the outside, ‘real’ world” (Allen, 1991, p. 21).

This quote could just as easily be applied to the performance of burlesque today. Burlesque, from the Victorian era on, has always possessed the capacity to raise troubling, or problematic questions about the behaviour of women. The time period referred to by Allen was pre-feminist, and the same troubling questions of how femininity should be represented, how a woman should act onstage and what impact these actions have on the world ‘outside’ are just as relevant in a post-feminist age. Almost every media interview I have undertaken has sought to address these issues for the general public. Burlesque, however, does not seek to answer these difficult questions, which can often mean it is read as un-feminist. To raise such questions and not arrive at or reveal the ‘correct’ answers is still a strange and potentially uncomfortable space for a female performer to inhabit. Burlesque’s current popularity can be answered in part by this refusal. Audiences return to see these questions played out in different ways. Burlesque is reduced when performed without knowledge of the complex politics that it incorporates. The act of refusal can be a rebellion; to resist having to deal with these questions in a post-feminist era. Such questions are faced onstage, by ‘aware’ women every day.

Burlesque is emblematic of the way that popular entertainment becomes an arena for ‘acting out’ cultural contradictions and even contestations and is exemplary of the complexities and ambiguities of this process. It is of particular historical import because its organising problematic is gender. It emerges at a time when the question

‘What does it mean to be a woman?’ is constantly being asked in a wide range of forums and answered by many different, conflicting voices. Burlesque becomes one of those forums, and the answers it gives via the image of the burlesque performer are complex and contradictory. Furthermore, the refiguring of woman that occurred on the burlesque stage represents the establishment of a model that will prove to be extremely powerful, influential, and, as regards sexual politics, problematic. At the same time, burlesque also presents a model for the sexual objectification of women in popular entertainment. (Allen, 1991, p. 27)

The question of ‘what does it mean to be a woman’ pinpointed by Allen is just as topical today as it was during the Victorian Era. Sexual politics remain problematic, and the role of a women in culture remains complex and contradictory. Perhaps part of the answer to why burlesque has become popular now lies in the willingness of a culture to accept the examination of gender ambiguity.

Empowering Submission: the Feminine and the Feminist in Burlesque

Burlesque is by nature provocative: sexually, politically, and aesthetically. Burlesque is also often ambiguous in its intent. It presents slippages and at times an uneasy placement of feminist politics. Burlesque is seen paradoxically as feminist empowerment and as submission to pre-feminist aesthetics and values. The display of the female body, adorned according to historical (and thus patriarchal) aesthetics can be read as both feminist masquerade-mimesis and as anti-feminist regression.

The first question posed to me by journalists almost always invokes the politics of the form – chiefly whether Burlesque can be considered feminist. In order to make Burlesque palatable to a mainstream audience, it is often described in the popular media as empowering. The reasons for this are complex – it is problematic on many levels to exploit the body of a female in so obvious a manner. Thus, the term ‘empowerment’ allows performers to continue to embrace a controversial form – one that appears to submit to traditional ideals of the feminine – under a veneer of feminist respectability. Burlesque can be seen as a site of positive body acceptance for female performers, and by proxy, female audience members. No form, however, can be empowering by nature. It is true that the act of performance affords the performer a certain sense of power, but to say that all burlesque performance is empowering is entirely misleading, and as accurate as stating that all music or all art is empowering. A performer may choose to imbue a performance with an empowering message,

but the act of performing burlesque is a tightrope walk between submission to traditional ideals of femininity and feminist empowerment.

Burlesque can be viewed as a subscription to dominant cultural ideals regarding the aesthetic presentation of women. Given burlesque's reliance on historical aesthetics, the form evokes a time before feminism and is thus problematic to the feminist project. To remove clothes in public is to shine a spotlight on any insecurity a performer may possess – from concerns about the body, to concerns regarding the validity of the ideas displayed in the performance.

The feminism summoned in popular cultural discussions of burlesque often follows an Andrea Dworkin-influenced anti-pornographic stance. Dworkin saw all pornography as representing 'actual' violence towards women and advocated censorship as a means to control and retrain the culture into seeking sexual gratification in ways which did not correlate to violence. Lisa Z Sigel describes this stance in the following quote:

The anti-pornography efforts spearheaded by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin claim that pornography teaches men how to treat women like objects. Pornography, in this view, is fundamentally about the degradation and subjugation of women. If women are to be free, then men must cease oppressing women through pornography by making pornographers accountable for the harm they inflict. (Sigel, 2002, p. 251)

This position on pornography and other forms of sexual display equated to it has suited conservative attitudes to sexual expression in Western culture. As such, what began as a radical feminist approach in the 1960s has found an unlikely ally in conservative politics. Set against this anti-pornographic stance are the social and behavioural attitudes that lead Emilie Buchwald to identify the present as a 'rape culture' which he defined as:

A complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women *as the norm*. (Buchwald, 1993, p. vii)

These conditions suggest that to perform acts of titillating striptease in a rape culture is to further invite violence, condone it even, and as such burlesque can be read from a feminist position as taboo. Against this backdrop, any expression of women and sexuality is highly problematic, whether created by women or not. As Lingis writes, 'In our times, the

erotic is a tabooed and prohibited sphere, repugnant and exultant, a sphere of rapture, anxiety and oblivion' (Lingis, 1999, p. 149).

Germaine Greer has critiqued young women's enactments of traditionally coded femininity in her book, *The Whole Woman*. She discusses the high-heeled shoe as a point of sexualised feminist enigma. 'The high-heeled shoe itself is a marvellously contradictory item; it brings a woman to a man's height but makes sure that she cannot keep up with him. All pornography features the high-heeled shoe. American sex manuals advise that women even wear them to bed' (Greer, 1999, p. 300). Greer's discussion of the ambiguity of traditional objects of feminine dress is fascinating for burlesque – a performance that makes direct use of these objects and invites such critique.

Burlesque however, also anticipates this sort of critique by creating a feminist ambiguity through its use of fetishist objects. This ambiguity is seen when a woman 'who knowingly dresses herself in the fetishist garb of stilettos, stockings, and suspenders may claim she is making a post-feminist statement about her ability to *choose* to masquerade as a sex object' (Ussher, 1992, p. 372). But this masquerade still allows the participant to be read as a sex object and, as Greer writes, 'To deny a woman's sexuality is certainly to oppress her but to portray her as nothing but a sexual being is equally to oppress her' (Greer, 1999, p. 319). Burlesque can therefore be read as an enactment of women's oppressed role within patriarchal society – principally the object of a man's sexual gratification. The idea that a woman might take a kind of pleasure in her own conscious objectification is, moreover, dismissed by writers such as Catherine MacKinnon, who describes such behaviours as 'merely denying the "unspeakable humiliation" of the plight of objectified women', who are, she says, 'cajoled, pressured, tricked, blackmailed or outright forced into sex ... if pornography is part of your sexuality, then you have no right to your sexuality' (Strossen, 1995, pp. 111, 161).

Ariel Levy, takes this stance in her 2005 release, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. She discusses of 'raunch culture', of which burlesque arguably forms a part. She identifies what she believes to be the cultural effects of a woman's conscious presentation of herself as a sex object and concludes that, 'Raunch culture then, isn't an entertainment option; it's a litmus test of female uptightness' (Levy, 2005, p. 40). Jennifer Mills responds to this idea when she critiques raunch culture for setting a standard to which all women are pressured to comply:

... on the dance floors of the world, young women strut stripper style in an explicit performance of heterosexuality that has been dubbed 'raunch culture'. Those who object to the new misogyny are labelled prudish, restraining. (Mills, 2006, p. 146)

The flip-side of this interpretation of sexual display, and one often employed by striptease performers and advocates, is informed by sex-positivism. Sex-positivism does not choose to censor pornography or sexual expression. Rather than seeking to decide for the masses what they should consume, sex-positivism instead expands the bounds of pornography to include, for example, pornography made by women. Sex positive writer Sallie Tisdale critiques the stance taken by Dworkin, Greer and Mackinnon. 'That branch of feminism tells me my very thoughts are bad. Pornography tells me the opposite: that *none* of my thoughts are bad, that anything goes' (Tisdale, 1997, p. 279).

Sex-positivism values sexual expression as a tool of female empowerment, a mechanism for women who need such avenues to sustain themselves through what is still largely a patriarchal culture. Sex-positivism reads the inherent sexuality in Burlesque as a powerful statement made by contemporary women and takes a more accepting attitude to raunch culture generally. Raunch culture is viewed as women engaging with the public display of sexuality as mimicry, performed with irony and an 'awarishness' (an attitude I deal with later in this thesis) of the cultural history surrounding such display. *Pin-up Grrls* by Maria Elena Buszek is also interesting in this context as it examines the pin-up through two perspectives: the conventional depiction as seen in publications such as *Playboy* and *FHM*, and the subversive view, which follows the tradition established by Victorian burlesque performers and artists like Bettie Page, whose photographic persona has enjoyed renewed popularity among young women today.

Page's imagery presents a subversive version of the pin-up because, although she posed for *Playboy* and other conventional publications, her images worked to simultaneously undo pin-up conventions by appearing to satirise the construction. As Buszek writes, 'Her brazen, over-the-top poses and pointedly light-hearted approach to performing as a pin-up served to expose the very construction of the genre, revealing both its artificiality and performative nature, as well as its potential as an expressive medium for the woman so represented' (Buszek, 2006, p. 247). Buszek adds:

In her popularity and her successful oscillation between vamp and virgin, Page helped maintain the presence of the complex, pluralistic pin-up in an era that vigorously brought to us the genre to communicate far more binary – and therefore stable – constructions of female sexuality. At once a celebration and parody of the genre itself,

Page's destabilization of the pin-up throughout her brief but unbelievably prolific career would later provide one of the most imitated models for feminist appropriations of the genre. (Buszek, 2006, p. 247)

Both the burlesque tradition and the photographic 'pin-up' originated in the Victorian period and the pin-up genre was subsequently utilised and manipulated by actresses in the realm of burlesque. These inventors of the pin-up instigated their objectification, and it is possible to read their own agency in this process. By controlling the terms by which they are objectified, the performers afforded themselves a degree of control over their representations.

I have not made up my mind as to which stance, or which combination of feminist stances, is correct for my practice. The conclusion I have come to thus far is that it is counterproductive to do so since burlesque itself is undecided – no single position can be ubiquitous since the form constantly shifts from one performer to the next, from one message to another. Different elements of each stance are continually played out in burlesque, some with clearer messages than others, but all richly layered and complex. Burlesque continually refuses to close itself down to singular interpretation.

Two broad kinds of burlesque performer have emerged from the current political environment. Both expressions open out aesthetics and meaning, both are expansive and grow to accommodate each new variation in form, although in very different ways. The first, for the purposes of this thesis I will term neo-burlesque. Neo-burlesque often takes a political feminist stance, deconstructing the aesthetics, histories and conventions of burlesque and 'femininity'. This style is unequivocally powerful, resisting cultural ideals that have impacted negatively on women, displaying clearly conceptualised storytelling and parody. Neo-burlesque sends up the idea that burlesque has a fixed aesthetic expression, and does not necessarily tie itself aesthetically to burlesque's history. The caricatures of neo-burlesque rarely leave the audience in doubt that the performer 'gets' it. She understands that female objectification is something to be openly parodied. Neo-burlesque offers resistance to the roles traditionally assigned to women, thus subverting 'femininity'. Performers 'knowingly play with gender as a performance, twisting, imitating, and parodying traditional scripts of femininity (and indeed masculinity) in a very public, polished display' (Ussher, 1992, p. 366).

Burlesque often caricatures hyper-femininity, standing outside the subject position to draw attention to its artifice. Neo-burlesque subverts femininity in even more obvious ways, and takes the construct past its limit into parody, playing with ideas related to femininity and exaggeration. One example is the theatrical eye make-up and wigs used by Australian

burlesque performer Betty Grumble. In her critique of beauty pageants, her accoutrements are obviously false, drawing attention to exaggeration and a commentary on 'femme'. The moment her use of glamour gives way to hyperbole, neo-burlesque can be considered as comedic and clownish.

Conversely, 'aesthetic burlesque' follows the traditional aesthetics, movements and styling of historical burlesque closely, reflecting both aesthetic ideals and historical ideals of the feminine. Aesthetic burlesque seeks glamour in a play of refined cultural cues and does not subvert them. Aesthetic burlesque produces a consciously self-made feminine rather than a critique of the common ideals of the feminine. The element of burlesque parody is often much more subtle, and the story is told through the use of objects, music and imagery. The political message is secondary... aesthetic burlesque can present as a form of tribute or homage to other burlesque performers and/or everyday women of previous pre-feminist eras. This style can leave the audience questioning the performer's politics; allowing for a complex enactment of femininity that so closely approximates traditional versions of femininity as to appear dangerous to feminism.

Ultimately, aesthetic burlesque collapses into ambiguity, implying that its portrayals of femininity can draw attention to an expression of the conventionality of Western ideals of the 'feminine'. The meaning is not explicit and the audience is left to form their own understandings of the performance. Aesthetic burlesque is an inherent paradox. When Giorgio Agamben writes of the enigma, he describes it as, 'the paradox of a word that approaches its object while keeping it infinitely at a distance' (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 138). Paradoxical, subtle and enigmatic, aesthetic burlesque does much the same and undoes any fixed assumption that burlesque has a stable and knowable politics. The better the hyper-feminine showgirl is at manipulating her aesthetics, the more complex and successful her show.

In 2010 the burlesque industry reflected this trend by acknowledging two distinct styles of performance in the Miss Burlesque Australia pageant: 'neo' and what they termed 'classic'. The classic category requires that performers demonstrate their knowledge of burlesque between 1920 and 1960. Points are awarded for effective use of the stock movements of burlesque: the bump, the grind, the shimmy and the burlesque walk. Costuming also reflects the participant's working knowledge of burlesque history. The neo section, on the other hand, requires the use of story and/or parody, and music post 1960. Christa Hughes was one of the first high profile Australian performers of the contemporary burlesque resurgence to use these elements. Her on-stage performances in the band Machine

Gun Fellatio often feature bottomless cartwheels, nipples adorned with moustaches, sexually explicit lyrics and other bold expressions involving the use of the body.

Hughes' performances critique the cultural conditions that result in women engaging in processes such as plastic surgery and extreme dieting. Hughes in full flight is powerful, stripping off a beauty pageant sash that reads Miss Ogyne while her robust voice soars through the auditorium. Performers like Hughes, while often highly aesthetically aware, use all the elements available to them to arrive at an ideological statement. Each performance is brave, strong and commanding. It is important to note here that Hughes's work has not been unequivocally accepted by all feminists. One performance at Sydney University in 2003 was cancelled after a protest due to onstage nudity. When dealing with female sexuality represented onstage, there are as many differing opinions as there are women. Neo-burlesque, while often clearer in its message, is subject to multiple interpretations as much as aesthetic burlesque. The main difference is that aesthetic burlesque invites ambiguity in performance, while political burlesque aims for a clear message.

Other burlesque performers give precedence to aesthetic play over any other aspect. The intermingling of movement, objects, accoutrements and the body functioning as an aesthetic object are the most integral aspects of the performance; creating a complex interplay of signs, art history and dance. In aesthetic burlesque the *mise-en-scene* is the end point, the meaning. This political ambiguity does not have to be enacted without a feminist grounding. My feminist perspective in burlesque is heavily influenced by Luce Irigaray's acceptance of multiple meanings and her embrace of inconsistency. She writes, 'The idea that anything may have a dynamically changing or inconsistent identity, or have contradiction as its very essence or animating principle, is defined as monstrous and abominable to a phallographic culture that can tolerate only the homogenous, the defined, knowable and consistent' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 71).

Many aesthetic burlesque performers choose to appropriate cultural ideals of contemporary womanhood, walking a fine line that could be read superficially as unquestioning adherence to those ideals. The more obvious the conventions of femininity are the more powerful her performance, as she confuses the messages portrayed. But the audience is not given a straightforward political message; they are led through a play of aesthetics, which have no obvious conclusion. Rather than simply stating a resistance to dominant cultural ideals, the aesthetic acts of acquiescence seem to question both patriarchal and feminist ideals simultaneously, thereby confusing any political basis to a play on

aesthetics. The aesthetic burlesque performer can appear to revel in her presentation of femininity, without obvious parody, seeming to reinforce the pre-feminist ideals of an essential and original femininity. At the same time she also raises the possibility that any enactment of femininity, however subtle, can be innately parodic. Judith Butler, in her writing on drag – the appropriation of the ‘feminine’ by male performers – says, ‘The parody is of the very notion of an original ... so gender parody reveals ... an imitation without origin’ (Butler, 1990, p. 138).

This enactment of the parodic use of gender in burlesque is best described by French feminist writer, Luce Irigaray, in her discussion of mimesis:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself ... to ‘ideas’ in particular ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means ‘to unveil’ the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere. (Irigaray, 1993, p. 76)

I would also argue that some performers successfully combine elements of both Neo and Aesthetic Burlesque in their performance. Dirty Martini’s work for example is steeped in traditional tropes, such as classic hand gestures and Golden Age costuming, displaying a thorough working knowledge of burlesque history, however, her bright blue eye shadow and Marilyn Monroe wig provide an element of larger than life parody. Her shows are both a homage to and good-natured parody of burlesque history. Another performer who successfully combines Neo and Aesthetic Burlesque is Imogen Kelly. Her signature performance, a Marie Antoinette act, uses classic music, costuming, and movement, while also displaying overt parody. This can be seen both in her use of a cake, upon which she elegantly, yet messily, performs the splits, and in her use of a toy cat, which she pulls from her many layers of knickers after teasing the audience by asking, ‘You want to see my pussy?’ I believe definitions of contemporary burlesque, as Neo and Aesthetic, or Classic, are always shifting.

Based in this contemporary milieu, the next section will describe the way in which I bring an ambiguous Aesthetic Burlesque into being, and will explore the ways in which certain theoretical perspectives describe and ground the processes at work in my performances.

Aesthetic Burlesque In Motion

As we have seen Burlesque has experienced several intensive resurgences in theatrical history; once a comedy of gender confusion inscribed upon the body of the Victorian-era woman then a mid-twentieth-century golden age of striptease, burlesque subsequently returned in the late 20th century and continues to enjoy a resurgence. Contemporary burlesque functions as a post-modern rendering of an enduring form but one that has always required a high-level of awareness on behalf of the performer, of her body, of the objects adorning that body, and of the sexuality inherent in any expression of the female body, especially those expressions devised by the performer herself.

Burlesque involves a sleight of hand to convince an audience of its artistry. The ordinary act of disrobing requires certain tricks in order to elevate the ‘display’ to the level of performance. The trick of burlesque depends upon the audience’s belief in the authenticity of the fantastical. The success of an individual show relies on the extent to which the performer can convince the audience to believe the fantasy that she has embedded in ‘the real’. This is done through the augmentation of the body with accoutrements of the femme – the fetish objects of adorned feminine history such as corsetry, stockings, lingerie and the objects used to interact with the body such as theatrical props. Objects are important to burlesque practice as each presents the ever-important play of aesthetics for the construction of the burlesque spectacle.

Aesthetics are of particular interest to burlesque due to the manner in which they construct the body and influence the performance. Costumes and props become the performance. The burlesque spectacle begins at the making and selection of these things: the selection of the objects and the selection of choreographic shapes which the body then constructs. In my use of the term I take cues from The Aesthetic Movement of the late 1800s. The Aesthetic Movement incorporated Art Nouveau and was the dominant art movement of the historical period from which the majority of my burlesque performance is drawn. The art movement is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* as a doctrine:

...associated with late 19th Century writers and artists, including Walter Pater, James McNeill Whistler, and especially Oscar Wilde. It holds that the appreciation of art and beauty is the highest aim of human life, and especially that the pursuit of such experience is not constrained by ordinary moral considerations. (Blackburn, 1994, p. 8)

The interplay of the aesthetic elements of a burlesque performance – the stylistics (music, costume, props and set) create the theatrical mise-en-scene of the burlesque show. The aesthetic mise-en-scene embodies the most relevant and important ideas in burlesque. With this understanding of aesthetic engagement we seek the fantastical and the other in the burlesque spectacle.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, in the entry on the Aesthetic Movement, also notes that:

Art itself serves no ulterior moral or political purpose. The Aesthetic Movement was a useful reaction against the didactic religious and moral art of the time and helped artists and critics to concentrate on the formal and internal qualities of works of art. (Blackburn, 1994, p. 8)

However, burlesque as I interpret it, is not just a matter of ‘art for art’s sake’ and to describe my practice more fully, the Aesthetic Movement needs to be supplemented with the thinking involved in another art movement of the Belle Époque period, spanning the late 1800s up until the onset of World War One; the Symbolists of the late 1800s. This movement encompassed a group of artists who never included something within their visual works that did not have meaning or reference to something else (Gott, 1997, p. 116).

While these two movements might seem to work against each other, I see them as working together to create a world of fantasy that has references and ties to other fantasies, as well as to the real. This conjunction produces the effect of an in-between space. My burlesque consequently creates an in-between world of fantasy, where ‘a thing’ always has ties to other things or ideas from other art forms, works or life beyond the stage. Combined together in a mise-en-scene both theatrical and theoretical, the fantasy of the burlesque performer *becomes* the real thing viewed onstage by the audience member. As burlesque shifts into the mainstream, the fantasy inhabits the world. As a performer makes more shows, performs at more events, her fantasy becomes more real, perhaps even everyday. With repetition and visibility the unattainable, the absent becomes present.

At the same time as the Aesthetic Movement and the Symbolist Movement, Art Nouveau was a prominent visual mode in advertising, sculpture, jewellery and design. Women in Art Nouveau are often presented in a state of *dishabille*. They are usually depicted carefully within a scene; lounging languorously amid flowers and drapes of clothing, the rivulets of unnaturally long hair an echo of the folds of fabric adorning the body, in a relaxed

and informal fashion. Often these women were the creations of advertising, ushering in the era of the consumer, placed to entice an audience to buy cycles, cigarettes, and absinthe; projections of popular culture, creatures posed astride commerce and art.

While the Art Nouveau style was employed by artists all over Europe, I have found the Art Nouveau of Paris to be most resonant to my burlesque. Imagery of the Parisian Art Nouveau permeated the Belle Époque, a time of European prosperity stretching from the late 1800s and ending with the beginning of World War One. The Belle Époque heralded the cabarets of Montmartre, the construction of the Eiffel Tower and the Paris Metro and the Paris Exposition; just a few decades after the advent of the Can Can, and the successful export of Lydia Thompson's British burlesque to America, the lives of the people of the Belle Époque were constantly decorated by Art Nouveau or what could be referred to as decadence in elaboration.

By using Art Nouveau references in my performance, I engage in costuming as a clear enactment of this kind of elaboration. The strong use of the female body placed within a set, or mise-en-scene is also a direct influence of Art Nouveau.

Burlesque's aesthetic mise-en-scene encapsulates the major theories demonstrated in this thesis and my practice. The costumes and props all embody ideas, histories or stories and their specific placement gives each of my burlesque shows its particular meaning. That this meaning is derived from the visual play is crucial to an art form that relies on movement and visual communication over written or spoken word.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Awarishness’ and the Burlesque Body

Since its popularisation by Lydia Thompson in the late 1860s, burlesque has existed as a fluid and changeable form. The body, always the hallmark of a burlesque performer, became the ultimate focus as burlesque moved away from text-based parody to imagery, dance and movement.

The takeoffs on venerated objects of high culture and punning rhymed couplets spoken by cross-dressed women were gradually eliminated as burlesque increasingly became centered around feminine sexual display – in the cooch dance in the 1890s; in its jazzed-up successor, the shimmy, in the 1910s; and in the striptease of the late 1920s and 1930s. A full generation before Gypsy Rose Lee took the stage at Minsky’s Republic Theatre on Broadway in the 1930s, Lydia Thompson had declared burlesque of the 1890s to be unrecognizable as the form she had popularised in the United States in 1869. (Allen, 1991, p. 30)

The Golden Age of striptease developed from the 1920s. Performers began to speak less and strip more. Superstar performers, big stage numbers, costumes, props, high fees and feather fans were the order of the day. The female body was revealed piece-by-piece, layer by layer. The removal of each item of clothing was as vital to the performance as the body that was finally revealed. Layering was the nature of the story. This era has fascinated the performers involved in the resurgence of burlesque today.

Victorian burlesque performers were noted for their awarishness. Awarishness refers to the performer’s awareness of her sexuality and its cultural power on the theatrical stage. This word – awarishness, though it sounds grammatically incorrect, has become, for me, the one enduring element of burlesque performance. Awarishness is still key to a successful burlesque performance, but ‘awarishness’ was not always considered a compliment.

Victorian performers’ onstage acts were imbued with this underlying knowledge. To be described as ‘awarish’ denoted a sexual and performative awareness taboo for women of the time. ‘The unsettling quality of these women was not simply their presence on the stage, but the spectacle of their conscious contemporaneity and sexual self-awareness’ (Buszek, 1999, p. 3). Whether based in circus, text or striptease, contemporary burlesque performers are still as ‘awarish’ as their Victorian sisters.

Various cultural forms are indexes of the trend towards an 'awarish' female persona – the notion extended from the burlesque stage and influenced by other popular forms. Photography, became the primary manner in which burlesque performers promoted their onstage personas, thus further exposing themselves and enhancing their reach.

The early carte de visite pin-ups of bawdy burlesque actresses represented a space in which these transgressive stage performers could control and construct what one 19th-century burlesque actress would call an ideal of sexual 'awarishness'. Like the stage identities the images were meant to represent, these photographs not only called into question the legitimacy of defining female sexuality according to a binary structure, but also marked as desirable the spectrum of unstable and taboo identities as imaged between these poles. (Buszek, 1999, p. 3)

Awarishness was a tool through which the 19th Century burlesque performer could explore the contradictions of being a Victorian female. Awarishness afforded her freedom from restrictive notions of what she 'should' be. More than one hundred years later, the contemporary burlesque performer faces similar issues of her own representation, and still controls and constructs her own persona. One of the biggest questions a burlesque performer now faces is whether controlling and constructing the frames by which she is objectified is enough to communicate her own agency and control over her work. The burlesque performer's conscious objectification remains unsettling and disturbing; perhaps no representation of the female form can be free of objectification. It has been my project to explore the idea of objectification and what it means to a contemporary burlesque performer. My use of the politics surrounding female objectification is one way in which I enact awarishness. This interrogation of 'objectification' manifests in stage shows, film, photography and writing, following the tradition set by 19th Century burlesque performers, "It was with this sense of 'awarishness' that female leg show performers approached the new medium of photography in their efforts to promote not only their productions but also themselves as celebrity figures." (Buszek, 1999, p. 4)

While the form awarishness takes has changed, every time burlesque has resurged into the public consciousness, the awarishness of the performers sexual presence has remained a constant marker of burlesque practice. A continuity which explains why we can describe a hula hoop routine as burlesque, even when the performer keeps her clothing on; why a classic striptease can be seen as burlesque, why a singer who takes aim at cultural mores is also burlesque and why a male performer like Mark Winmill can perform a striptease as a macho drunken sailor– and for the first time in the form's history, be accepted

as burlesque. So as long as all these performers display a high degree of consciousness regarding their sexual presence, they are all burlesque.

The performer displays awareness through a complex aesthetic play. Awareness comes into being through the conscious and particular choice of costuming, props, music, lighting, text, choreography; any combination of the aesthetic elements of performance. This is most obvious in the choice of objects as the performance process often begins during the selection of objects. Objects are chosen for their sexual connotations and associations. A misfiring of the aesthetics means the performer can seem un-knowing, not aware enough. Burlesque requires a high degree of aesthetic development – it is here in the aesthetic play that sexuality is laid bare. Burlesque is the moment of elaboration, when function takes flight into fantasy. Burlesque is dance over ordinary movement; the bows on stockings, the frills on lingerie. Burlesque is the sexualised fantastical.

Awareness may surface in the impact of overt sexuality, the historical and cultural ramifications of the display, awareness of the masquerade of the femme, or the elevation of the normal to the fantastical. – Without the sense of awareness the performance might just not be burlesque. In the end burlesque does not exist in a single movement, text, or pose. It exists in this awareness.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Life Model as Conscious Performative Objectification

My experience modelling for artists introduced me to the theatrical capacity of the body in an art space; the act of life modelling is of great importance to my understanding and use of the body in burlesque. The art model is the living body in the *mise-en-scene* of art history, and what follows is a recollection of my introduction to the process.

I spent the final years of high school learning by correspondence while I travelled with my family. Occasionally, the school would organise a day when we would gather together in mimesis of a normal school. One of these occasions was a drawing class. Filled with adult students, the life drawing class was more flexible and less disciplined than our regular classes, and as I discovered, more adventurous.

I remember seeing the life model for the first time. She was wearing a black leotard, tights and a small piece of lace around her head making her appear something like Snow White in the Walt Disney movie.

‘Oh what a beautiful model!’ one of the female teachers exclaimed. Our model sat there smiling. When the teachers raised questions about whether full nudity was appropriate with younger students in the class she exclaimed:

‘I’ve *never* been asked not to be nude!’

Not revealing her luxurious body was an affront to her. Somehow she convinced the teachers that nude was indeed better, so shades were placed over the windows, and our model was happily naked under a pink nightgown. My teacher took the floor beside her to describe a gestural drawing. He began describing the information in detail in as many different ways as he could. We were impatient to start. The model, the very conduit of our impatience, tore off her pink nightgown and stood, naked between him and us, posing, waiting.

My teacher continued. Not even a beautiful naked woman could stop him. Having finished his thesis on gestural drawing and finally satisfied that we had all heard and comprehended the point he retreated; the stage was hers. She held each pose as long as required; changing when she knew the time was up. She had learnt not to wait for the teacher. She was glorious. So comfortable in her revealed body she made me feel a bizarre and

completely new sensation – my clothing felt heavy and uncomfortable on my skin; too long, too hot, too much. The lesson progressed and we broke for lunch. She held court with the teachers while she ate, pale blue hipsters jeans clinging to her. She spoke about a Klimt print hanging above the bed she shared with her lover. Her tattoo was a Klimt design. She said she tried to be nude as much as possible. She was ravishing, enchanting, and her utter refusal to feel or express any kind of shame about her body had a profound effect on my future work.

The long poses filled the afternoon. Our model fell asleep. How comfortable she must have been to sleep, naked, in front of a room of strangers. I adored her. I wanted to be her. She seemed to hold all the romance in the room and I wanted to live that romance. Her unabashed display of the culturally ‘feminine’ body was as disturbing as her high level of comfort. Such open vulnerability was shocking, taboo. Alphonse Lingis describes this in *Dangerous Emotions*. He refers here to Marguerite Duras’s novel *The Lover*, where the dangerous element is the fact that the female is underage. I have chosen this quote because it clearly articulates a sense of danger that can often accompany the display of the body. I also feel it is appropriate in to my life drawing experience as I was school age, around fourteen at the time of this art class.

Before the curves of her idle muscles and the satiny softness of her, skin, shielded from the sun of the working world and offered for touching and seizing, our lustful eyes also feel anguish and repugnance. They feel anguish before her nudity that – Marguerite Duras writes – invites strangulation, rape, ill-usage, insults, shouts of hatred, the unleashing of deadly and unmitigated passions (Lingis, 1999, p. 147).

Our model seemed to offer a space free from such abuse, a space where the body was seen as the site of art, sexuality, objectification, the feminine and the fetishised. It reminded me of my grandmother’s collection of art books. As a painter herself, she had an enormous collection. I found the images of women fascinating, they were so often naked, exhibiting no shame or modesty, but often appearing comfortable in their bodies.

Years later, I too modelled in the name of art and the spirit of Dionysus, in the sado-masochistic world of the life class. I too fell asleep naked, in front of countless rooms full of strangers. I learnt about the rudeness of art teachers, the pain of many poses, and the varied descriptions of my body made by others, the feeling of this or that limb falling asleep and waking up with pins and needles. The romance of the art class was a masquerade, an illusion. If romance existed at all, it existed in the imagination of the students and the artists. But I did learn something very important about the cultural power of the female body in these naked hours and days and later this would inform my understanding of burlesque through the use of

the body. I began to see the complexity of objectification. My body as a model became object, a part of an assemblage moving towards something other, something more culturally esteemed than my everyday body – something called art. I came to see and use my body in a sense best described as objective. I was still entirely situated within my body, but was also able to stand aside, to consider this body as a component of an artwork, much as I might consider a flower in a still-life. I had long considered the bodies of other models as a part of the *mise-en-scene*, of a drawing, but the act of modelling had placed my body in the work. As the participant in the action, a new sense of objectivity emerged; an objectification once removed from the use of the term in gender politics.

As a model I was part of another body's creation. I viewed my body as hovering somewhere between movement and stillness; movement between poses, and moments of stillness. I came to view my body as part of an assemblage, the desire which moves us forward to create art. From the artist's chaise lounge I returned to the position of artist. When the artist and model collide in the same body, an intense double-movement occurs; the body becomes the mode of desire onto which art is made. The body has another purpose outside of normal life; all the distinctions, the psychoanalytic models of understanding failing to explicate the intricacy of such a distillation of subjectivity and objectivity. Sandra Fraleigh describes this process for a dancer, which provides a bridge to my practice in burlesque. 'Part of the dancer's power lies in her ability to objectify, to visualise herself as she may appear to others, to make herself into the dance she visualises' (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 37).

When modelling, one becomes aware, in the Victorian-era burlesque sense of this word, of the power of the naked body in a public space. The burlesque performer adds accoutrements and objects to heighten her selfhood, then removes them, while the life model has nothing else with which to express herself but her unadorned body. Beneath the mask of the objects and accoutrements, the body still expresses in burlesque terms. The processes of accoutrements and bodies, the effects of accoutrements on bodies, and what happens in the interplay between them, is one of the subtle and intricate processes of burlesque.

A good burlesque performer knows the cultural power of the naked body as well as she knows the effect of the adornments she adds in order to accentuate that power. It is not in the accoutrements alone; one simply cannot adorn the body and create an effective performance. The power is in the body, and this power is heightened by the use of accoutrements. The objects have power, but it is a power that can only be brought to life by an intimate understanding of the capacity of the body to communicate and express the myriad

of associations, ideas and thoughts inscribed upon it in the development of Western culture.

The Body as Inscriptive Surface

Elizabeth Grosz's theory of the body is incredibly useful in considering how a burlesque body can be constructed through aesthetics. Within her work, the body is a site of complex cultural texts and images. She writes:

In many recent texts, the body has figured as a writing surface on which messages, a text, are inscribed. This metaphoric of body writing posits the body, and particularly its epidermic surface, muscular-skeletal frame, ligaments, joints, blood vessels, and internal organs as corporeal surfaces, the blank page on which engraving, graffiti, tattooing, or inscription can take place. (Grosz, 1994, p. 117)

Via Grosz's work, we can see that the human body always wears the inscriptions of lifestyle, tastes and aesthetics. The human constructs their body, and bears the signs of its construction to be read by all. This chapter will examine how these processes are heightened and elaborated within burlesque practice.

Burlesque is the moment that the everyday takes flight into the fantastical. Here, everyday processes of body inscription are examined for the ways in which their conscious application can apply to burlesque practice. To perform burlesque is to engage with the process of aestheticising the body, and to engage with the process of constructing a body for performance in a fabricated mise-en-scene. Grosz describes the everyday inscriptions that can occur on a person's body. "Make-up, stilettos, bras, hair sprays, clothing, underclothing mark women's bodies, whether black or white, in ways in which hair styles, professional training, personal grooming, gait, posture, body building, and sports may mark men's." (Grosz, 1994, p. 142)

These inscriptions are augmentations to the natural body. The ones mentioned by Grosz are directly applicable to the practice of a burlesque performer. Many of the inscriptions used by women in daily life are used also used by burlesque performers with varying degrees of subtlety and exaggeration.

There is nothing natural or ahistorical about these modes of corporeal inscription. Through them, bodies are made amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power. They make flesh into a particular type of body – pagan, primitive, medieval, capitalist, Italian, American, Australian. What is sometimes loosely called body language is a

not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation, and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies. (Grosz, 1994, p. 142)

Modes of corporeal inscription occur on every single body. The process is utilised in burlesque in a more conscious and deliberate manner. Through these processes the burlesque performer can heighten the sexualisation of her body, and become 'awarish' in the Victorian sense of the term. The burlesque mask is the use of adornment for theatrical purpose. Adornment, of course, is aesthetic by nature.

Clothing, jewellery, makeup, cars, living spaces, and work all function to mark the subject's body as deeply as any surgical incision, binding individuals to systems of significance in which they become signs to be read (by others and themselves). Food, dieting, exercise, and movement provide meanings, values, norms, and ideals that the subject actively ingests, incorporating social categories into the physiological interior. Bodies speak, and without necessarily talking, because they become coded as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, and ideals become incarnated. (Grosz, 1995, p. 35)

These aesthetic social codes construct the stage persona of the burlesque performer, through an intricate interplay of cultural signs, emblems and motifs and carefully chosen aesthetics. The process of preparing the body for burlesque narratives signifies and incarnates the ideas of burlesque. Often the signification in burlesque will refer to the social codes of traditional western femininity, as Roland Barthes notes here:

The classic props of the music hall ... constantly make the unveiled body more remote, and force it back into the all-pervading ease of a well-known rite: the furs, the fans, the gloves, the feathers, the fishnet stockings, in short the whole spectrum of adornment, constantly makes the living body return to the category of luxurious objects which surround man with a magical decor. (Barthes, 1973, p. 92)

These stereotypical accoutrements of the feminine continue to inscribe the performer's body even after their removal. In setting the *mise-en-scene*, the story told by these objects and adornments continues as the striptease progresses. Burlesque makes use of the history of feminine accoutrements, and a large part of its magic lies in the performer's capacity to make the audience believe the person on stage is not part of the contemporary or 'real' world. The more improbable the scene the more remote the performer remains in her act.

Feathers, furs and gloves go on pervading the woman with their magical virtue even once removed, and gives her something like the enveloping memory of a luxurious shell, for it is a self-evident law that the whole of striptease is given in the very nature of the initial garment: if the latter is improbable, as in the case of the Chinese woman or the woman in furs, the nakedness which follows remains itself unreal, smooth and enclosed like a beautiful slippery object, withdrawn by its very extravagance from human use: this is the underlying significance of the G-string covered with diamonds or sequins which is at the very end of striptease. (Barthes, 1973, pp. 92-3)

Barthes is referring here to the crystal-covered merkin or g-string that is a part of a burlesque performer's costuming. Pasties serve a similar function in American Burlesque history. During the Golden Age of burlesque from the 1930s to the late 1960s, many states required the use of pasties, matching circles that cover and adorn the nipples. They serve to decorate and draw attention to the nipple while also keeping it hidden from sight. The use of pasties was a legal issue inscribed upon the burlesque body, as alcohol was not permitted to be served in the same room as unadorned nipples. This law was reinstated in New York during Major Rudolph Giuliani's thorough cleaning-up of Times Square in the late nineties and into the new millennium coinciding with the resurgence of burlesque in the city. Crystal pasties and a g-string are fundamental elements of burlesque costumes today, visual references to the history of burlesque. Barthes, writing from a French perspective, would not have been as familiar with the use of pasties, as French showgirls danced (and continue to dance) topless, leaving the crystal G-string.

This ultimate triangle, by its pure and geometrical shape, by its hard and shiny material, bars the way to the sexual parts like a sword of purity, and definitively drives the woman back into a mineral world, the (precious) stone being here the irrefutable symbol of the absolute object, that which serves no purpose. (Barthes, 1973, pp. 92-3)

Today many burlesque performers make use of semi-precious stones in their performances, as the use of sparkle will catch stage lights in particular ways, enabling the performer to draw attention to, and emphasise, or hide different parts of the body during the striptease. The burlesque body speaks of particularly chosen ideals, expressed through rehearsal and training (learning fan dancing, or the tenets of classic burlesque such as the bump, grind, shimmy or burlesque walk – and in my case, ballet) as well as the carefully chosen look of each burlesque performer including hair colour, the era in which hair and makeup is based, and the style of historical costuming incorporated into the routine.

Not only does what the body takes into itself (diet in the first instance) effect a 'surface inscription' of the body; the body is also incised by various forms of adornment. Through exercise and habitual patterns of movement, through clothing and make-up, the body is more or less marked, constituted as an appropriate, or as the case may be, an inappropriate body, for its cultural requirements. It is crucial to note that these different procedures of corporeal inscription do not simply adorn or add to a body that is basically given through biology; they may help constitute the very biological organisation of the subject – the subject's height, weight, colouring, even eye colour, are constituted as such by a constitutive interweaving of genetic and environmental factors. (Grosz, 1994, p. 142)

The burlesque performer understands this process of inscription and elaborates it to a heightened level of expression. The creation of a burlesque body is a conscious and deliberate enactment of inscription. Every movement in concordance with a prop or costume carves shapes into and out of the body. Training of the body also inscribes. A girl falls cleanly into the splits in a routine, muscles pulling, the body finding its limit. Years of continual stretching are behind that singular moment of performance, to attain the splits and maintain them. A girl dances upon her toes, legs straight, the weight of her body multiplied and concentrated into the fine bones of her toes. The countless hours that allow this move have also shaped her body in ways that enable dancing on the toes – her posture supports her body in the right way, she is trained to balance herself by the tips of her toes. Here Grosz describes the everyday processes of inscription as being deliberate:

The various procedures for inscribing bodies, marking out different bodies, categories, types, norms, are not simply imposed on the individual from outside; they do not function coercively but are sought out. They are commonly undertaken voluntarily and usually require the active compliance of the subject. (Grosz, 1994, p. 143)

If the everyday subject is voluntarily inscribing their body, the burlesque performer does so doubly. To write onto one's body in burlesque is to magnify the processes of the everyday, to enlarge and exaggerate and eventually depart from the ordinary. One does not wear casual clothes on the burlesque stage; one enters the realm of fantasy, through the careful and deliberate inscription of movement, training, costuming and adornment. Burlesque overstates, exaggerates, voluntary inscriptions and this disturbs the involuntary inscriptions by setting up a confusion of signification.

Burlesque, of course, does not simply adorn the body appropriately for its cultural requirements with costume and accoutrements, it also engages in a process of removal of

these accoutrements. The body which is revealed however is no less inscribed than the clothed one.

The more or less permanent etching of even the civilised body by discursive systems is perhaps easier to read if the civilised body is decontextualized, stripped of clothing and adornment, behaviourally displayed in its nakedness. The naked European/ American/ African /Asian/ Australian body (and clearly even within these categories there is enormous cultural variation) is still marked by its disciplinary history, by its habitual patterns of movement, by the corporeal commitments it has undertaken in day-to-day life. It is in no sense a natural body, for it is as culturally, racially, sexually, possibly even as class distinctive, as it would be if it were fully clothed (Grosz, 1994, p. 142).

The naked body is a rich text, a pillow book of signification and aesthetic play. Burlesque chooses to inscribe the body sexually by selecting items of clothing that can have sexualised meanings and associations – lingerie, garters, stocking, corsetry, gloves, hats, shoes, gowns – and grafts these objects onto the body. Only the objects seen to have heightened sexual power in popular culture find their way into the burlesque wardrobe. The burlesque body seeks to write upon itself (and in turn transform itself into) the sexual object. Layer these objects onto the already culturally contentious and rich site of the naked female body, and burlesque becomes a potent milieu of sexuality, fantasy, and illusion.

According to Grosz, ‘sexuality is in itself a deviation, a departure from the real, from biology, from necessity into the meandering detours of fantasy’ (Grosz, 1995, p. 161). Sexuality according to Grosz is itself fantasy, and burlesque’s fantastical nature makes it a uniquely theatrical space within culture. A burlesque performer who understands and can fully utilise the alchemy of fantasy, costume and sexuality can spellbind a crowd. Her body becomes a fiction, a story told to our culture and written by it; as of-the-moment and as ephemeral as any live theatrical performance. “Bodies are fictionalised, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses, which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, not always or even usually transparent to themselves” (Grosz, 1994, p. 118).

The burlesque body is a living, breathing fiction, whose story is capable of changing constantly. The inscribed body is by nature performative, every body performs its role, and the burlesque body does so with a heightened awareness. “Bodies become emblems, heralds, badges, theatres, tableaux, of social laws and rights, illustrations and exemplifications of law, informing and rendering pliable flesh into determinate bodies, producing the flesh as a point of departure and a locus of incision, a point of ‘reality’ or ‘nature’ understood (fictionally) as prior to, and as the raw material of, social practices.” (Grosz, 1994, p.118)

This is the moment when the body becomes a creative site for the production of fiction, a fiction which in turn crafts and cultivates the reality of the body and its function in the world. The burlesque fiction is more obvious than everyday inscriptions; the artifice of the accoutrements is more obvious, though the processes of construction remain the same. The fictionalisation of the body is achieved through the use of props and costuming. The further the performer sets herself away from the 'real' when she enters the arena, the more she 'burlesques'. As Barthes noted in his study of striptease, one way to do this is to use symbols that are read as exotic by the culture in which the performance occurs.

Exoticism ... transports the body into the world of legend or romance: a Chinese woman equipped with an opium pipe (the indispensable symbol of 'Sininess'), an undulating vamp with a gigantic cigarette-holder, a Venetian decor complete with gondola, a dress with panniers and a singer of serenades: all aim at establishing the woman *right from the start* as an object in disguise. (Barthes, 1973, pp. 91-2)

The burlesque performer surrounds herself with so many objects, both on her body and around it, that the body becomes a part of the theatrical scene. A burlesque performer augments nature, to raise the performance into the fantastical. The performance becomes an interplay of objects, including the body of the performer. Even when burlesque first emerged onto the American stage in the mid-1800s, the form augmented nature, noted here by Allen:

... responses to burlesque still regarded the performer's body as unnatural, one whose sexual features had been artificially enhanced. Olive Logan was particularly incensed by the practice, presumably followed by burlesque performers, of padding hips and legs. 'The art of padding,' she wrote, 'has reached such perfection that nature has almost been distanced, and stands, blushing at her own incompleteness, in the background.' (Allen, 1991, p. 154)

The interplay between costume and body, object and body is crucial to burlesque. It is not only the objects layered upon the body that construct the burlesque show into being, the objects around the body also construct the show. In performing burlesque, the objects are structured within the space with the same care and deliberateness as a costume is grafted onto the body. Props dictate the style of choreography, how the body shall move, the shapes it will take and this in turn constructs the mood, the energy and intention of the work.

... the body is capable of accommodating and incorporating an extremely wide range of objects. Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains

there will be incorporated into the body image – clothing, jewellery, other bodies, objects. They mark the body, its gait, posture, etc. (temporarily or more or less permanently), by marking the body image: subjects do not walk the same way or have the same posture when they are naked as when they wear clothing. And posture and gait, will, moreover, vary enormously, depending on what kind of clothing is worn. (Grosz, 1994, p. 80)

Every choreographed piece is structured around an intimate play between the removal of each article of clothing and each prop. There is an interdependence of body-costume-prop-music that constructs influences and moulds the choreography. Sometimes, when all these elements are in place and all that is left is to map a choreography, the possibilities shuffle themselves together with an ease and precision dictated to by the choices made by a performer before any movements have been plotted; the field of choices is moulded by the objects, both on the body and in the space. The dance between object-costume-music-body is unique in performance. My choices in burlesque seek to write a kind of beauty upon my body. But this idea of beauty is fluid and changeable. According to Lingis, beauty takes on various guises.

There is beauty and there is beauty. There is the beauty of perfection, that of a body integrally adapted to the purposes for which it is put. The beauty of an athlete or marine is like the beauty of a draft horse, exhibiting the engineering of limbs and muscles triumphing over the hardest physical tasks. The salient muscles of a ballerina are not erotic, even though the dance, contrary to work, is a sovereign activity having no significance other than beauty. (Lingis, 1999, p. 143)

When the purpose of the body is erotic by nature, as in burlesque, and the symbols of a craft like ballet – tutus, *pointe* shoes – are incorporated to represent the construction of both dance and beauty, an awarish burlesque body is brought into being. The burlesque performer moves between the dancer and the erotic object. She uses dance to become the erotic object described by Lingis. Her ‘work’ is that of pleasure, of the fantastical and apart from the world of work. Her muscles cultivated by dance or yoga or Pilates or swimming are created as much (if not more) for aesthetic detail in performance as for maintaining the machinery of dance performance. Her use of dance further removes her from the worldly. Here Barthes considers the professional stripteaser’s use of dance form in her performance: “... the dance, consisting of ritual gestures which have been seen a thousand times, acts on movements as a cosmetic, it hides nudity, and smothers the spectacle under a glaze of superfluous yet essential gestures, for the act of becoming bare is here relegated to the rank of parasitical operations carried out against an improbable background.” (Barthes, 1973, p. 93)

For Barthes, the professional striptease artiste negated eroticism. He found the amateur contestant to possess more authentic eroticism in the 'realness' of her technique – the stumbling, the difficulty removing a stocking. "Thus we see the professionals of striptease wrap themselves in the miraculous ease which constantly clothes them, makes them remote, gives them the icy indifference of skilful practitioners, haughtily taking refuge in the sureness of their technique: their science clothes them like a garment" (Barthes, 1973, p. 93).

The professional stripper in Barthes' France is a remote object, far removed from the everyday and a figure of the fantastical. She is so fantastical as to be rendered un-erotic by her remoteness, nonchalant haughty refuge. In French culture, nudity is not as sexualised as it is in other parts of the West, where nudity and eroticism are often read as interchangeable. While Barthes' critique can appear to be a personal preference of eroticism, he makes many fascinating notes regarding the position and practice of the professional showgirl and the manner in which even her nudity is a kind of clothing. As Katherine Frank writes of her experience as a stripper: 'Naked? No. I am a performer, as fully clothed as anyone here, even without my bikini, if only through my painstaking ministrations to the 'costume' of my bare body' (Frank, 2002, p. 173).

Ecdysiasts are compilations of emblems, markers and signs of the erotic in our own cultures, and the burlesque body, in all its specificity from one performer to another (and the variety of erotic marking is wide), is also far removed from the human in all her cultivated masquerade. The further the performer dives into a masquerade, the more compelling and the greater the mystery and art of burlesque. Even the most subtle burlesque performer 'burlesques' the 'real'. The burlesque body is a fetish object, an erotic object, designed to usher the audience into a world of fantasy, far from the everyday world of work. Lingis describes the erotic object as follows: "The erotic object detaches itself from the continuity of nature and the instrumental connections of the world of work. It maintains itself at a distance from contact, closed within itself, an idol" (Lingis, 1999, p. 142).

The burlesque body is constructed to incite fantasy in the audience, often by placement of fantastical and excessive objects upon the skin. Lingis continues his analysis of the striptease artist here in a paragraph which could similarly describe the showgirl of burlesque.

She makes herself an object by covering herself with brilliant and fluid garments, jewels, and perfumes ... her sumptuous dress, jewellery of precious stones, plumes of exotic birds, and perfumes made of fields of rare flowers represent values, represent

the dissipation of human labor in useless splendour. She tempts the worker to the follies and excesses of passion and dispossession. (Lingis, 1999, p. 145)

As well as being adorned with objects that carry meaning and significance, the body can be viewed as an erotic object, a fetish. Giorgio Agamben describes this moment as: ‘that which, in a human body, seems made by design, fashioned with skill, made-for, and which thereby attracts desire and love’ (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 196). Burlesque is the fashioning of the human body for the performance of desire. Each costume choice carries a series of references that contribute to the larger ‘story’ each act tells. I will return to Agamben’s theories in more detail in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Psychical Affect of Bodily Inscription

In previous chapters we have seen how the everyday act of inscription upon the body, and its processes can be engaged with in an ‘awarish’ manner and exaggerated to create the burlesque body. The process of inscription has a psychical effect, which affects the conscious inscription of the body. Far from being a surface movement, aesthetics enact a powerful play in creating a burlesque body, the burlesque persona and ultimately the burlesque lifestyle. Grosz describes these two processes through an examination of different theorists. She first describes the broad philosophical base on which the earlier concept of body inscription is based, before moving on to the affect of this inscription:

Two broad kinds of approach to theorising the body can be discerned in twentieth-century radical thought. One is derived from Nietzsche, Kafka, Foucault, and Deleuze, which I will call ‘inscriptive’; the other is more prevalent in psychology, especially psychoanalysis and phenomenology. I will refer to this second approach as the ‘lived body’. The first conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed; the second refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body’s internal or psychic inscription. (Grosz, 1995, p. 33)

These two schools of thought, as oppositional as they seem, are able to be linked so that the inscription of the body affects lived experience and vice versa, to the point where movements back and forth become continuous and indistinguishable. The body as inscriptive surface is not just a surface movement sitting upon the skin; this inscription creates the interior of the body – the body’s lived experience. Both the external inscription of the body raised to the form of an art in burlesque and the lived experience of such a constructed body, simultaneously create each other.

These interactions and linkages can be seen as surface effects, relations occurring on the surface of the skin and various body parts. They are not merely superficial, for they generate, they produce, all the effects of a psychical interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness, much as the Mobius strip creates both an inside and an outside. Tracing the outside of the strip leads one directly to its inside without at any point leaving its surface. The depth, or rather the effects of depth, are thus generated purely through the manipulation, rotation, and inscription of a flat plane – an apposite metaphor for the undoing of dualism. (Grosz, 1995, pp.116-117)

My practice has led me to inscribe my bodily surface with the aesthetics of burlesque, costuming and dance, and thus the variant laws, morals and values of these traditions. This has affected changes in the way I consider the body, and in turn how I then inscribe it. Layers of thought cloak and reveal the body like layers of clothing; costuming in burlesque, clothes the body in the thought, presence and history of the form. Remove all the layers of costume and the body is still visibly inscribed by the thought processes that have constructed and shaped it; the body is in turn crafted by the lived experience of this process of inscription.

There are many 'texts' written by the human body, and, particular to this endeavour, the female body. This sense of a female performer's agency is important to how contemporary burlesque constructs itself, namely as being performer-devised and driven. These are the conscious texts that a performer writes, and are the most clearly visible – such as a vintage hairstyle. There are also many texts written upon the female body by society, history and culture. These texts are often less visible, less consciously absorbed into a performer's body. A body onto which social laws, morals, values and rules of appropriateness and inappropriateness are inscribed. To display the female body unclothed is to invoke the laws written onto that body – namely the usual limits and terms of display. Both writings – by and on the body, occur simultaneously. The performed female body aims to exhibit these rich cultural texts. Burlesque displays the lived experience of bodily inscription to a greater degree than the everyday body. This heightening of processes interrogates those writings and traditions of female bodily display. The social, legal and moral governance of the body is challenged – some of the many inscriptions the naked body of burlesque wears and interrogates. Others include the naked female body as an emblem of Western art history. In painting, sculpture and drawing, the naked body is used as both a tool for learning the techniques of Western art production, as well as a recurring theme for resolved works. Burlesque walks a fine line between public and private; when burlesque causes controversy it is often because the body has been presented in too public a space – the display is therefore considered inappropriate. The relative privacy of nightclubs in which burlesque often occurs shields it from intense interrogation but every so often the body bursts forth into a more public domain and causes a sensation; destabilising mainstream notions of appropriate display – an example of how the moral and social laws that inscribe the naked body affect the spaces and expressions of burlesque. Burlesque knowingly engages with these social laws precisely because it is these social laws that make the layered display of the body a fascinating, powerful and often 'naughty' cultural form.

The performance of femininity is something far removed from the everyday female body. Incorporating this performance into the physical body creates something fantastical through the interplay of objects. Femininity is a departure from function. As Lingis writes:

The feminine form, which lacks the sense of heaviness that suggests the instrumental use of the limbs and the skeletal mechanics, whose ethereal shape is disconnected from physiological function, the human animal there. But the designs of coral fish, the colour patterns of Himalayan pheasants, the spots of giraffes, and the stripes of zebras likewise do not outline muscle systems and internal organs.(Lingis, 1999, p. 146)

Inscription is an intentionally placed mask that clothes the body; through this mask, the lived experience of the body emerges visibly and then continues to construct the body. The interior and exterior construct each other simultaneously, the processes envelope, complement and feed into one another.

CHAPTER SIX

The Burlesque Mask: Costume as Inscription and Affect

This chapter explores the use of mask techniques and traditions within my burlesque practice engaging with the theatrical mask tradition in two ways. First, in the use of theatrical theory of mask performance in rehearsal, second, in the process of making a mask act. In both of these arenas, the aesthetic considerations of mask are paramount. Masks are aesthetic objects representing characters or creatures. Here we can begin to consider the edge where creature and object merge through the process of mask making.

Burlesque – with its history in the working-class music halls, paradoxically, owes much to traditions once ascribed to high art. The mask tradition provides opportunity for the body to engage with an object with a heightened awareness of the aesthetic effect; in this manner the mask has become important in my work, whether in actuality, or in the practice of masking the body and the objects of burlesque.

Then they look at the Mask, not thinking about it, but remembering the image. If they perform with the image of the Mask at the forefront of their minds, the suddenly the Mask blazes with power. In the old days actors in the Noh Theatre might look at the Mask for an *hour*. (Johnstone, 1989, p. 191)

Props and costumes are my masks; augmenting and preparing the body for the stage to the extent that the body becomes another mask. To be effective I must have the image of this mask blazing firmly in my mind's eye. To lose the image is to lose 'awarishness'. The clearer the image of the props and costumes, the clearer the performance becomes. The use of mirrors in rehearsal and costuming is integral to this process, just as it is in the creation of a mask character.

This process of working a mirror is an old theatrical tradition. The most well-known mask tradition, Commedia Dell'Arte, was a popular form of performance for over 500 years. Mostly masks are used as a tool for actors 'getting to know' a character; they seek reflection of the mask object in order to find a way into this new being. Masks are larger than life, gateways to the creation of the fantastical, the unreal. As Keith Johnstone says in *Impro*, a renowned improvisation training text: 'These Masks are more extreme, more powerful than ordinary faces! Don't be timid ...' (Johnstone, 1989, p. 167).

Masks augment the actor's normal and everyday body with meaning, tradition, superstition and mythology. To fuse the body with these inscriptions, mirrors are crucial, as they reflect the combined aesthetics back to the performer. The masking process can be seen also with the use of make-up – the aesthetic augmentation of the body with paints and powders will produce a similar effect. The mask process is about the elaboration upon the body to create fantasy. I have always considered layers of artifice as masklike.

Sometimes I say, 'What you saw in the mirror was right! But you only showed a shadow of it. Try the Mask again. You'll never get anywhere if you aren't brave. Sometimes I see a person is transformed for just a moment as they look in the mirror, but then take hold of themselves to cancel it out. I stop them, make them remove the Mask and then start again immediately. (Johnstone, 1989, p. 167)

Theatrical masks come in two forms, full and half masks. A full-face mask removes the capacity to communicate verbally or by use of facial expression. The performer is forced to use their body to communicate all that is needed. These masks are often used to train performers, as are the half-masks of *Commedia Dell'arte*. The Italian masks, as they are often called, bring out stock characters like *Arlecchino*, the catlike larrikin servant, and *Il Dottore*, the highly pretentious, know-it-all.

Each time a mask is worn, the actor builds upon the experiences they have had using the object before. The creature's movements become clearer and onto them an actor works the precise choreography of the *Commedia Dell'Arte* – the attitudes, a handful of 360 degree movements that in totality could communicate the whole emotional repertoire of the company. Traditionally the positions of *Commedia* were designed to be easily viewed from a distance, several poses fashioned to cut through space, onto which a character such as *Arlecchino*, might graft his character.

When I began to perform in nightclubs I thought of the troubadours of *Commedia* having to command attention in marketplaces despite the bustle and business of the street. In closed little environs of pleasure I remember these performers; a nightclub generates its own rhythm and pace even without the performer; a nightclub is not a theatre awaiting a show, but a functioning organism, already in full motion often fuelled by evocative design, legal and illegal substances and loud sound. To interrupt the natural flow of a nightclub, you need the bravado of a *commedia* performer and the physicality of a street troubadour calling out from behind his half mask. In the process of learning the mask, a voice slowly emerges from the glimpses in the mirror which the mask craves, and eventually another being inhabits the

leather face. Those who are taken wholly by the mask are dangerous, they cannot tread the line between abandon and technique, but surrender entirely and have no sense of what they are doing while under the spell. These performers are difficult to work with, difficult to devise with, like small children who have no investment in making a show. The very best mask performers have a unique and special balance of technique and abandon; their bodies are so accustomed to the poses of Commedia Dell'arte they can let go entirely and remain true to the correct physical forms. The very best ballet dancers also have this capacity, this tight relation between holding on to everything learnt and simultaneously releasing another part of themselves on stage. The best performers of any genre walk the tightrope between technique, training and abandonment.

I wanted to know how these magic mask-objects were made; to make a mask in order to try to understand the objects further. When an opportunity arose to work with a Florentine mask-maker while I was at university I begged my lecturer to choose me. He told me he drew my name out of a hat so I sat for a weekend pounding a strip of leather onto a wooden mould; the pungent smell of pig meat sometimes overpowering. First you wet the leather, then pin it against the mould. A small hammer with a pointed end draws pock marks into the animal skin, cleaving the leather into the shape it will take, the small end of the hammer getting right into the edges of the nose, the corners of the eye. Later these pock marks are smothered out with a wider hammer and boot polish imparts a rich colour onto the leather. I made Arlecchino, the cat. Later a teacher of Commedia performance placed my Arlecchino mask down after a lesson.

'A great artist made this', he said. I looked at him closely. Was this artist me? I was only a student. Perhaps the influence of the Florentine master, who had devoted his life to keeping such an old tradition alive had helped. Perhaps both of us had made the mask. But who *really* makes a mask? The person who pounds the skin of the leather onto a wooden mould? The performer who breathes life into the object? I had wanted to understand the mystery of the mask, so I made one out of a pig's flesh but the mask lives on the wearer, the merchant of live arts. There is no secret to be found in the making of a mask.

Masks have a long tradition of assisting, even invoking particular characters in western theatre. Through the use of an object, the performer finds within them a heightened character. Often, as is the case with Commedia Dell'Arte, a particular mask is associated with a particular character. The mask enables an extension of self through the use of an object. This opens the performer to a kind of expression that is inconceivable either singularly or via the object alone. Here the burlesque performer, laden with accoutrements, re-joins a certain

theatrical tradition. Keith Johnstone often notices this mask process in the accoutrements of performers. He notes that the external accoutrements and objects can bring out, or tap into the inspiration of the performer and this had a profound effect on his work. 'Actors can be possessed by the character they play just as they can be possessed by masks. Many actors have been unable to really 'find' a character until they put on make-up, or until they try on the wig, or the costume (Johnstone, 1989, p. 148). The burlesque mask exists in the body, trained and augmented for performance by the make-up that creates a mask of the face and in the objects used as props or costumes. Often a costume or a prop will begin the process of making a new show. From this point of invocation, a *mise en scene* develops, each piece fitting together to create a theatrical tableau in which the body is placed. Sometimes a whole show will be based upon one small visual idea, filled with complementary accoutrements, movements and objects. The process then becomes like a jigsaw puzzle, fitting together a flood of ideas and images into a single theatrical show. The objects of a burlesque performance often provide an initial and passionate inspiration for an act, and will impel the whole process.

Roland Barthes in his essay, 'The Face of Garbo' describes the actress's face as a mask, presenting a way of thinking about the mask that sees the operation of masking even in a human face. In describing her face as a still object, he hints at the incredible symbiosis of performer and mask-object when he writes of the power of her eyes.

It is indeed an admirable face-object ... the make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, clack like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds (Barthes, 1973, p. 56)

These tremulous wounds that command attention are the eyes of the performer. That the eyes are seen here as wounds within a mythical flesh, as sutures of the mask, suggests a site where mask and performer combine to bring something fantastic to life; a meeting of the human and the object. This way of thinking about the eyes of a masked performer leads to a consideration of the symbiosis of object and subject which use of the mask impels. The eyes translate the mirror image back to the mind of the performer and the eyes act as the receptors of the aesthetics of the show. The eyes are one of the few natural features of the performer to remain visible beneath a traditional mask. Without the eyes, the mask cannot exist, not in the mind of the performer, or in the physical expression of the mask. Without the mask applied to

the body, the performer is still human, the representation of the everyday. Burlesque does not exist without the mask or the processes of ‘masking’ in the form of costuming, make-up and props.

Roland Barthes sees Greta Garbo as the great full mask of silent cinema. Her visage hardly moved, but conveyed everything. She could not speak. Before ‘talkies’, the unmoving, silent face of Garbo communicated everything with her eyes and body. Onstage, I am a full mask, a silent cinema star in live motion. My shows are most often silent and movement-based, my body telling most of the tale in its various processes of *deshabille*, carving out shapes against props, in a layer-by-layer presentation of the physical narrative. Onstage, I am presenting a heightened version of myself among these objects. I do not remove my corset offstage and lose my stage persona. The *mis-en-scene* created through the integration of props and costumes is brought alive by the expression of my subjectivity. The eyes in the mask are also my eyes, like the tremulous wounds of Garbo, the expression of the mask-object. The use of ‘feminine’ props and costumes, like the use of a static mask, is brought to life by the subjectivity of the performer, the eyes behind the mask.

A Mask Act

Preparation: I bought a feather boa in the *tissu* district of Montmartre; a dusky yet luminous pink made of ostrich down. In the *tissu* district, fabric merchants spill out their wares onto cobblestone streets under the shadow of the *Sacre Coeur*. Rolls of fabric are piled outside each shop, candy canes of infinite colours and varieties, endless possibilities for homes, curtains, clothing, whatever one can imagine.

I left Paris with a collection of the most elegant and subtly shaded feather boas from a small corner shop so unlike the rough shocks of harshly dyed varieties I was used to back home; these boas were rich, beautiful reds without a hint of orange tone, boas coloured like the flesh of a peach, or a magenta vibrant enough to tickle the imagination. I took home three with no specific intention, no act for them to fit within, waiting for their time under the gaslight. The first to act – the dusky pink boa, with its tiny tendrils of ostrich plume tickling the air generated the beginning of a new show.

A Venetian Mask Number

Venetian masks are refined and stylised, an aesthetic departure from the grotesque leather

masks of the Commedia Dell'arte. Placing the pungent leather over my face, the leather worn and made sweaty by scores of other students, I waited, recalling tales of masks impelling the same character from different students at different times of the day.

I desired a full face Venetian mask, a mask of beauty and silence; a jester's mask, with ringing bells that tingled around the white face, held by one hand and able to be removed with the flick of a wrist. It made a wonderful match for my dusky ostrich boa with a pair of old gloves found in the Haight district in San Francisco.

This Venetian mask is stunningly beautiful to the point of exaggeration. One day I will visit a mask maker in the watery city and have him craft me a mask from a plaster cast of my own face. I want to let the artist make me a face he thinks fits.

Venetian masks disguise the wearer. Once in Veneto, during Carnivale of the Seventeenth Century, citizens were bound by law to wear masks when out in public. 'Venetians wore masks all the time to avoid public scrutiny, particularly in matters of the heart and gambling' (Pilot Guides ABC TV, 2005). The Venetian mask rendered people stunning, but private. They were highly conspicuous, yet at the same time invisible. Even naked, identity can be obscured by a mask. Paradoxically, a person is exposed, yet hidden.

Masks conjure images. Masks are aesthetics in motion; objects which carry memories and history inside them and the Venetian mask holds much: the stinking waters of the canals, the high ecstasy of the castrato. The hidden and the revealed, the mask is a burlesque; revealing all at the very moment it hides and vice versa. The interplay between these processes, the synthesis of the contradictory creates the fantastical of burlesque. Much can be revealed with the mask. Much can be revealed within the hidden. While the face is obscured, the eyes remain open, absorbing and projecting out onto the world, onto the audience. Through the aesthetic object, a dance can be danced.

The Act

Complimenting my Venetian mask is a sedan chair, originating in Asia, the kind used by aristocrats in the late 1700s carried by attendants who hold the chair aloft as they move about the streets of Europe. My chair is covered in brocades of pink and moss-green. The opening section of the performance is all limbs and pieces of the whole, an arm emerges from the curtained prop, then a leg, a mask, hints of the costume, and finally the body. I enter the performance space in a showgirl promenade, and display my costume, removing the elaborate corset embellished with lace and crystal. Following each section of the show, I retreat back

into the veiled confines of my chair – sometimes I perform this show with live music, and this gives the band a chance to play, and for me, a chance to rest.

The next section is a parasol dance, two tiny umbrellas on long sticks trimmed with lush boas and green ribbon, parasols flying around each other in cyclical motion, duelling. More of my layers fall away. I begin this dance in a pink velvet cape, the mask visible.

A reflective piano refrain accompanies the dance. With each note my cape falls open, fluttering to reveal a body crossed with ribbons. I turn my back to the audience to remove the cape and mask – I know I must never remove the mask in sight of the audience. I tie the cape up to the neck of the mask and quickly lunge backwards to show the audience my face. I dance with the mask, now a character in the show, and we waltz together, the mask folding its slippery cape-body against my own, lunging, spinning, before retreating once again to the calm inside the Sedan Chair, hidden from the audience. During the finale, I dance again on my own, covered only in ribbons, which untie one by one, posing inside the chair, bending backwards and removing my hat. The mask sits hidden from the audience each time it is not in performance. To let it be seen lying on the floor would ruin the illusion. The mask is a face, a character and must keep its theatrical power.

In my burlesque practice masks are involved in a play of signification. The burlesque mask is a mime, silent, referring not to an original feminine, but to a series of historical representations of the feminine. As Jacques Derrida writes, ‘the Mime mimes reference. He is not an imitator; he mimes imitation’ (Derrida, 1972, p. 219). The Venetian mask presents a fulfilment of the historical dimension of feminine representation. I use Venetian masks precisely because of their overt ‘femininity’, their feminine faces, glitter, crystals and bows and their capacity to both hide and display.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Burlesque: An Aesthetics of Desire

Burlesque plays out a history of desire, told with images, sounds and shapes of the feminine in culture and art history. As I have also observed, burlesque displays a heightened awareness of that history. Through its use of the aesthetics of past art movements, audiences are able to see the various understandings of desire which have underpinned sexuality and subjectivity since burlesque became a popular theatrical form in the Victorian era. Each notion of desire is portrayed, examined, toyed with and perhaps tossed away in the course of the burlesque performance.

Desire will be examined here in three ways by unpacking those ideas posed by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in various texts. Taken in turn, these ideas allow a reading of burlesque that identifies, as definitively as it is possibly to do so, burlesque's politics. The extent to which these theoretical positions have influenced many perspectives on burlesque is particularly significant. Each of these major descriptions of desire can also be recognised as establishing a kind of methodology for the making of burlesque. Desire is a process of burlesque, a means, indeed a crucial means, of constructing the art form.

The origins of the word 'desire', according to Ryan Bishop, are ancient. 'The English word 'desire' comes from the Latin *desiderare*, literally, to be away from the stars, whence to cease to see, regret the absence of, to seek.' (Bishop R, 1998)

To desire is not to possess but to want to possess. As a version of this understanding of desire, burlesque chases the stars, chases the fantastic, regrets the absence of the extraordinary in the ordinary and seeks to bring the stars to life on a theatrical stage. Desire is read here as lack, but as the lack of something that can be sought, and therefore made real. Desire in burlesque is the making real of the fantastical, an alteration of the real, thus, burlesque's progressive historical referencing of costuming, props and music uses the real and the known to present many different desires.

Freud began to examine desire in the Victorian era, at the same time as female burlesque performers were donning men's suits over the top of their corsetry in risqué parody. He saw desire predominantly as regret for the absence of the stars; he did not

consider it important to desire *seeking* the stars. To Freud, situated in a time before women could even vote, desire was a fundamental lack. Power in culture was directly associated with possession of the phallus. The phallus was accordingly understood as both the physical attribute of the male organ and a symbol of male gender in cultural discourse. In effect, the stars became the phallus, and desire was taken to circulate around the possession, or lack of, or possible threat to, the phallus. According to Grosz's reading, women presented a major problem for Freud, lacking as they did the phallus, "...women have been the traditional repositories and guardians of the lack constitutive of desire, and insofar as the opposition between presence and absence, reality and fantasy, has traditionally defined and constrained woman to inhabit the place of the man's other" (Grosz 1994, p. 165).

Women, because of this lack, signal the potential of the loss for those who do possess the phallus. Women presented the ultimate Freudian fear – the loss of the phallus, and in turn, the loss of power. Imagine, posits Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, a young boy's horror in realising his mother's lack of a phallus. This was the core of what Freud described as the Oedipal drama.

The fear of castration becomes the fear of lack. Women therefore, become objects of the male's greatest fear. To possess something precious means to know the fear of losing that thing. In Freud's work both men and women lived in a precarious balance between desire and fear. When power is so completely resident in the phallus a woman's best option is to associate herself with the one who possesses the sign of power, and, vicariously, enjoy the benefits of a culture skewed towards phallic power. Woman achieves this by what Freud termed female narcissism. Female narcissism is interesting for burlesque practice in the way it describes an almost identical process of adornment. Grosz's summary of Freudian Narcissism is useful here because of its clarity:

In 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914), Freud outlines a series of object-choices open to the feminine, or what he calls the 'narcissistic' type. Here the feminine subject (whether male or female) loves an object according to its resemblance, identity, or connection with the self. Indeed Freud claims that, as a kind of compensation for her recognition of her inferiority, the girl may develop a (secondary) narcissistic investment in her own body, treating it as the corresponding male would an external love-object. She pampers her body, treats it with loving care; it becomes a vital instrument her means of ensuring she is loved. It is also her way of developing criteria for measuring her own self-worth, she phallicizes her whole body. If man believes he *has* the phallus (the object of desire), then woman believes she *is* the phallus. The man's penis and the whole of the woman's body are rendered

psychically equivalent. In Lacanian terms, he *has* the object of desire while she *is* the object of desire. (Grosz, 1995, p. 150)

And so the woman renders herself less an object of fear and more an object of desire by rendering her entire body psychically equal to the phallus. Adornment and decoration become the path to cultural power, albeit by proxy. 'The narcissistic woman ... is far from independent and autonomous. She strives to retain her position as the object of the other's desire only through artifice, appearance, or dissimulation' (Grosz, 1995, p. 150).

The narcissistic woman employs a series of theatrical devices: artifice, appearance, costuming and mask in order to attain a degree of cultural power. 'Illusion, travesty, make-up, enticement become techniques she relies on to both cover and make visible her 'essential assets'(Grosz, 1995, p.150). These processes constitute the 'masquerade of femininity, the site of both excess and deficiency' (Grosz, 1995, p. 150). But as much as she phallicises her own body, her attempts are only ever an approximation of the phallic power. She lives in a hall of mirrors, among reflections of cultural power. Freud saw this enactment of narcissism as necessary to a woman's survival. It was the best she could hope for and her acceptance of this was the Freudian ideal of a well-adjusted woman. To attain female narcissism is to produce a degree of resolution to the Oedipal drama. The woman takes her rightful place in what Lacan termed the symbolic order. She seeks the fantasy in order to change her reality. In other words, she chases the stars in order to survive.

The Victorian burlesque performer padded her body, making her hips and breasts more prominent, dyed her hair blonde and was made up for the stage. Playing a man or a woman, she wore a corset, the processes of female narcissism enlarged, extravagant, and laid bare. All of this produced a caricature of female narcissism; making a joke of the processes of survival within the phallic order became a lucrative business. As Allen notes, 'Burlesque produced a 'horrible prettiness' that provoked desire and at the same time disturbed the ground of that desire by confusing the distinctions on which desire depended' (Allen, 1991, p. 148).

The processes of female narcissism, then, comes into play in Freud's time for both the everyday woman and the performer consciously manipulating and parodying these processes for artistic or entertainment purposes. Chasing the faraway objects of the stars, or for Freud, the phallus, was a way of life as well as, ultimately, an impossibility. The chase itself, with its accoutrements and play on narcissism, became the art.

Female narcissism, underpinned by Freudian desire, is a methodology for the making

of a hyper-feminine persona. Female narcissism is a process of masking, a way of enacting the theatrical mask tradition through the relatively everyday items of make-up and clothing. The same technique is involved – the adornment of the body and its consequent construction of the subject.

Star-chasing is made real through material objects. Objects are what the female narcissist uses to phallicise her body and augmenting the body is the only way to chase the fantasy. Jacques Lacan followed Freud in seeing desire as a fundamental lack by introducing the simultaneous possibility that desire can create the self. Lacan's contribution to our understanding of burlesque is that he saw that the lack of something could be a productive force, propelling the subject to selfhood. Nick Mansfield describes Lacan's thoughts on desire as a drama of demand:

Each separate thing we pursue is called a *demand*. None of them will satisfy desire, which is by definition insatiable. Each demand offers momentarily the possibility that it will satisfy desire. We go shopping for new clothes, electric with the sense of the new self our purchases will offer us. When we get home, we lay our new things on the bed, exultant in the new horizons of selfhood, the sense of identity and completion they seem to offer. But, after we have worn them once or twice, we put them away and our excitement soon passes. This is the drama of demand and desire. We are endlessly drawn towards the selfhood each new success, sexual relationship or night of intoxication may offer. But they are all illusions. There is no new self, except as the endlessly receding horizon of desire. (Mansfield, 2000, p. 46)

Lacan viewed the purchase of material objects such as clothing, furniture and other items as the purchase of subjectivity. In the purchase of functional items or in the case of the narcissist, items of adornment and decoration, people's purchases signal to the world who they are and how they want to be read by others. Chasing the stars is achieved in consumer culture; the fantastical can be purchased at any store. However, Lacan saw this process of desire as ultimately unsuccessful, as no material item could ever fill the fundamental lack. Objects, material purchases, can only ever substitute, for a small time, the fact that we are away from the stars. Our search will never cease, satisfaction only lasting until we desire something newer, better, or bigger, seeking again to overcome our distance from the unreachable with the purchase of new selfhood.

In burlesque performance the acquisition of props, costumes, objects and material items which transforms the female into the narcissist also fulfils the ideas associated with the production of a new self. Burlesque is often devised by the performer, the dancer being responsible for every item seen on stage. Thus it can be read as an expression of self-

negotiating lack. Desire, in Lacan's sense, is also a process by which burlesque renders itself real. While female narcissism changes reality through masking and accoutrements, Lacan expands the relationship to objects from one in which they directly adorn the body, to one involving objects in general. Within Lacanian desire, every object has the capacity to create the subject, a potential that burlesque exploits to great effect in the arena of props. The establishment of the subject, constituted through material objects, thus allows the narrative to begin. An umbrella becomes a dancer's tool for storytelling, a chair becomes a frame, and a model of a unicorn becomes a setting upon which a dance is drawn. Each object brings with it a range of aesthetic references, which in turn construct the narrative spectacle – the story told in a burlesque. Without words, burlesque is a narrative of *mise-en-scene*, of art and social history.

Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have extended thinking on the function of desire in directions that resonate with contemporary burlesque. Daniel W Smith summarises the understanding of desire at issue here:

Deleuze reconfigures the concept of desire: what we desire, what we must invest our desire in, is a social formation, and in this sense desire is always positive. Lack appears only at the level of interest, because the social formation - the infrastructure - in which we have already invested our desire has in turn produced what we lack (Smith, 2007, p. 74)

Deleuze and Guattari do not lament our distance from the stars. To regret the absence of the stars is not desire. Instead, they see the seeking of the stars as productive movement, to desire is to move towards the stars. Like Lacan's constant movement towards selfhood, desire for Deleuze and Guattari is creative. It is not, however, a lack which we fill with Freudian substitutes or Lacanian subjectivity, and in this way Deleuze and Guattari break dramatically with the traditional modes of reading desire. Seeking the stars becomes representative of connections between moments of intensity. Thus, they use a moving stream to describe the break from conceptualising desire as object to desire as movement: 'Between things does not designate a localisable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 25). According to Deleuze and Guattari, we no longer see ourselves as so far from the stars, we seek the journey towards them in many directions. For Deleuze and Guattari, our relationship to the stars is not about seeking the stars and

overcoming our distance from them, but about recognising and exploring that distance, as well as creating new connections.

Deleuze and Guattari have removed the object from desire. There is no desire *for* revolution, as there is no desire *for* power, desire to oppress or *to* be oppressed, but revolution, oppression, power, etc., are the actual component lines of a given assemblage. (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 33)

Desire as understood by Deleuze and Guattari is productive; it produces assemblages and relationships – between ourselves and the stars, or between a performer and a costume or object. The fantasy of the stars, the very idea of our relationship to them, opens up possibilities and creates new versions of the real; fantasy does not substitute for or fill in the real; it comes into contact with it. Both the real and the fantastical in burlesque, are part of the process of the show, ultimately the real and the fantastical are blurred.

Desire, as a process of assemblage, is what produces the burlesque *mise-en-scene* (a term that recognises that the stage is always multiple). The woman in the space, her decorative chair, her mask, her robe, her corset, the audience, the fantasy, the real all become part of the assemblage of the desiring-performance. Desire isn't what is had by or expressed by one body for another; desire in burlesque *is* the relationships between bodies, objects and aesthetics. In this account, burlesque could never be about encouraging desire on the part of one body for the unattainable other (such as the performer), though it may take the performance conventions or fantasies involved in such a version of things as part of its assemblage.

Desire is what produces, connects and makes machinic alliances. Instead of aligning desire with fantasy and opposing it to the real, instead of seeing it as a yearning, desire is an actualisation, a series of practices, bringing things together or separating them, making machines, making reality (Grosz, 1994, p. 165). Burlesque desire can accordingly be seen to produce fantasy as a relation between bodies and between objects rather than being an expression of the absence of relationship. Moreover, desire as the creation of assemblages, of the complex *mise-en-scenes* that occur in burlesque can draw in other bodies and other relations and ideas, even seemingly contradictory interpretations or uses of concepts such as the Freud's 'narcissism' and Lacan's 'objects'. While Deleuzian desire has nothing to do with the phallus, it can still pick up phallic expressions and deploy them in its assemblages, producing new relationships between bodies and new ways of understanding them.

In Burlesque, the fantasy affects the real; it is in fact a real movement. The narcissistic

woman creates the real with her object accoutrements, her props set a scene, the costumes tell a story in layers and the masks produce her characters: the real is made in and of the theatre. A show is performed in the everyday leisure palace of a nightclub, a theatre, a festival. The theatrical space becomes a real movement, displaying the woman, her aesthetics, her tricks, her illusions, her travesties and her subjectivity. As much as the act of removing her clothing piece by piece is a real revelation of each part of her body under the coloured lights, the act of removing her clothes becomes a mimicry of her greater revelation – that of her constructed self (a revelation which desire makes possible rather than seeks to cover up, as the aforementioned psychoanalytic accounts would suggest).

Burlesque is at its best when it has elements of confusion, when it presents a site that both follows and rebels, never quite safely on one side or the other, but constantly flitting between positions, or combining positions to the point of obscurity; a shifting sand upon which ideology finds no firm footing, instead ideology is toyed with. Burlesque remains, as it was in its Victorian days, a ‘horrible prettiness’ that both attracts and disturbs. A process of female narcissism, dark as that may sound, it is also a celebration, a revelling in the methods of being narcissistic presenting the audience with a refiguring of the grounds upon which the process of narcissism is constructed. To read burlesque through a Deleuzian desire, is to identify and emphasise the productivity of this process as well as to reinterpret female narcissism not as a gesture of subjectivity and thus a means of survival or self-expression, but as an opening onto multiple creative subject positions. A more open-ended manner of rendering desire than Freud’s, and a more positive rendering than the unending search to fill the essential lack that underpins Lacan’s view.

Narcissism in the context of the burlesque performance can also be rewritten through Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring body. The narcissistic burlesque body becomes the site of multiple codes, historical, aesthetic and cultural. Audiences made up of many individual subjectivities are able to write their own stories. Each audience member brings their own relations to desire. The performer’s body accommodates many references, both of their own choosing, and those deciphered by the audience, producing an expanding play of signification and meaning. Desire becomes open-ended and multiple; desire burlesque’s its own philosophical history, refusing to be tied down to one connection or interpretation. The burlesque performer machines with her body, different lines of contact with all the observing bodies (even if their observation is organised by an idea of desire as lack). She is the site, to paraphrase Grosz and to fragment Lacan, of a million tiny mirrors of desire.

Here I must not speak only of the performer’s relation to desire – the desire that

constructs the real. As I have already noted, there are many others involved in a burlesque show each with their own connections to desire adding to the Deleuzian assemblage. Sophia Loren was once coached by the famous Crazy Horse cabaret of Paris for a scene in which she portrayed a stripper. She was advised, 'It is the stripper's job to become what her audience wants her to be and to make them want what she becomes' (Schweitzer, 2000, p. 70). These transversal movements of desire between performers and audience are the webs spun in burlesque. Should the desire of one or the other become predominant, the show is not real. If the performer's desire to show is not matched by the audience's desire to see, she has not made them want what she becomes. Similarly, if the audience's desire is stronger than the desire of the performer to show, the performance becomes a base exploitation, devoid of the real, devoid of the reveal. The delicate play of desire is a complex and interactive assemblage in burlesque.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aesthetics/Stylistics Of The Feminine: Ballet

Ballet presents a system of movements that are incredibly delicate, beautiful and graceful, yet notoriously difficult to execute. ‘The ballerina body represented both an extreme construction of idealised femininity and a potential metaphor for mechanical perfection’ (Berger, 1996, p. 168). Because ballet is one of the most obvious and detailed systems of culturally constructed ‘feminine’ I have found it to be the most useful enactment of femininity in my practice.

It is important to note here that my use of the term femininity is not meant to perpetuate a single essential characteristic of woman but to notice the ways in which the feminine can be a creative process in theatrical spaces. It is also important to note that while my use of ballet is not unique, neither is it an integral part of every performer’s burlesque. Ballet becomes a component of my singular expression of burlesque, one that refers to the history of ‘femininity’.

Julia Kristeva says, ‘I favour an understanding of femininity that would have as many ‘feminines’ as there are women’ (Kristeva, 1986, p. 499). Similarly there are as many burlesques as there are performers and burlesque becomes a rich site for a production of both stage characters and expressions of individual subjectivity. Ballet is a silent form, like a mime, a reflection of many performances and systems of movement refined over time.

Derrida writes of the mime:

We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime’s operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking glass. (Derrida, 1972, p. 206)

Ballet’s feminine is equally stuck in a hall of mirrors, referring back to itself without reference to an original; a pure enactment of fantasy, rendered in the use of systems of movement and costuming. In my performances, ballet allows the audience to recognise such systems, as well as the training of the body they depend on. Moreover, like ballet, my burlesque femininity is a culturally loaded signifier used for its aesthetic and meaning effects within the mise-en-scene.

From Kristeva's understanding of multiple femininities, ballet becomes important for its aesthetic possibilities in the careful and conscious creation of 'hyperfemininity'. Hyperfemininity is understood here as a heightened expression of the 'femme'. As Elizabeth Grosz develops it, the idea of the 'femme' is incredibly useful to my project. Grosz, drawing on Teresa DeLaurentis, notes that, 'the femme takes the signs of femininity, sometimes in parodied form, as a fetish, as both her mode of attractiveness for another, and as what provides her with satisfaction' (Grosz, 1995, p. 166). The femme is understood as a masquerade, an enactment of the fantasy and illusion of Western femininity, a heightened and conscious enactment of female narcissism. The femme makes a burlesque of female narcissism. And, in turn, burlesque is a performance of the femme, heightened more for its theatrical and performative possibilities. Accentuated once placed on the stage, the femme becomes the hyperfeminine; it is a double movement of desire; desire that creates a persona for pleasure, while simultaneously constructed in such a way to appeal to others. This can be read as an enactment of the kind of desire Deleuze and Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus*, a creative force but also one that utilises the seemingly contradictory masquerade of Freudian narcissism in a fascinating double-play.

Burlesque takes this enactment of the femme further. By referencing femininities of the past, the performance of the feminine is rendered extreme. On the stage, we are not just looking at a contemporary masquerade writ large, but a catalogue of many histories. Every historical costume used; every corset, antique glove, seamed stocking or reproduction that makes an aesthetic chronological reference signifies and summons up variant historic notions of femininity, sometimes within a single show. Burlesque pays homage to many feminine aesthetics simultaneously; a heady combination of tribute, recollection and nostalgia.

Accoutrements that were often unremarkable to women of the past are now objects of fascination. That this transition is possible denotes a dramatic aesthetic change in the history of women's clothing. By placing the historical in the contemporary Burlesque generates a clever visual impact. The past becomes fantasy as the performance seeks to make the past real, to make the audience believe in the authenticity of the reproduction. A large part of my work circulates around this predicament – how to make fantasies credible. The sleight of hand, the trick of my burlesque expression, is formed in how well I am able to mimic historical aesthetics and convince the audience of the 'authenticity' of my choices. This mimesis of historical aesthetics has emerged as a strong movement for many burlesque performers, and a large part of the success of a burlesque act depends on the audience's belief in the enactment of a particular era, whether the performer chooses to represent or

caricaturise the femininity involved. Whether representing or satirising, burlesque is ultimately a homage to femininity, the femme and the hyperfeminine. One of the most significant ways in which this process comes into play in my practice is through the selective use of ballet stylistics.

While I use an exaggerated femininity (DeLaurentis' hyperfemininity, and Grosz's femme) that exaggeration has a limit. The femme is more important in my work than the exaggeration; my practice is heightened but falls short of caricature. For all the extravagant use of femininity, my practice never sends up or parodies the feminine. Within my own practice, an emphasis on exaggeration over femininity would result in works that exist closer to clowning than burlesque.

The hyperfeminine works from within social constructions of femininity, and may use historical femininities such as corsetry in multiple ways. My hyperfeminine draws attention to the construct of femininity, but instead of deconstructing femininity, points to its subtleties and complexities; a femininity writ large. This is the task of the showgirl, who brings femininity almost to the point of parody, but rather than falling over the line, turns the references into homage and tribute instead. She occupies the position of the hyperfeminine subject.

There are parallels in the connection between burlesque and ballet in the Thompson era when both forms presented the female body in a state of dishabille – wearing tights and stylised tutus which often revealed more than they concealed. There are also obvious differences. Ballet created ways of producing the 'feminine' by converging with conventional ideals. While burlesque presented women as bawdy creatures, ballet used figures such as sylphs, sprites and fairies, elevating the practice and form to the realm of the high arts by connecting to canonical narratives of mythical femininity. This helped to lend a high-art legitimacy to the form of ballet, in contrast to burlesque. Scantily-clad women playing the parts of other-worldly creatures, made the feminine in ballet overtly fantastic and thus sexualised in a respectable and mainstream fashion. In this way, ballet survived as a paradoxical form of 'feminine' expression in a patriarchal society.

Ballet has functioned as a powerful stereotype in dictating the ideal feminine through an enduring set of arrangements in bodily styles and costuming given that the female body is traditionally (although not exclusively) the site of the expression of 'femininity'. Potentially, though, it is also a powerful expression for the female body. Ballet renders its system visible as a process that requires particular and sustained training. Such training changes the muscles in the body; its physical effect is a particular form of bodily sculpture. Both ballet and,

boxing, for example, develop muscle structure, however a dancer's muscles are clearly different to those of a boxer, revealing the specificities of ballet training on the body, while, for example, both involve muscle development, the dancer's thighs are obviously different to the boxer. As Grosz suggests, bodies can be read through physical training. The hours spent training leave their physical effect on that body. The cultivation of precise movements are repeated until they look as though they are the only movements a body could make in that particular moment. Ballet is worn in the muscles, the bones and the carriage, as well as in the aesthetic movement – movement that is not only gymnastic but an embodiment, an enactment of the idea of femininity. Gwen Berger and Nicole Plett notice this in a discussion of choreographer Andre Levinson, 'Levinson's danseuse epitomises woman as an organic construction that stages beautiful emotions, that manufactures and masquerades femininity' (Berger, 1996, p. 168).

The aesthetics of ballet are delicate, strong and beautiful – the flowers that encircle the waist, the long white stockinged stems, the long lean flat leg muscles and the lifted chest carriage. Ballet is a careful, structural distillation of cultural femininity; it is the cultural ideal of femininity-become-movement. Ballet becomes a discipline of the body.

There is a movement in ballet called *battement sur le cou de pied*. The dancer stands at the *barre* and rapidly circles the outside foot around the other and back again. Both legs remain turned-out, so that the arch is visible to the audience. Eventually, the dancer adds to this a jump to become *entrechat*. However, to learn the *entrechat*, the floor sequence is repeated until the technique is absorbed into the body. The technique is designed to develop turnout of the hips so that when the dancer does leap into the air, the feet switch in a manner that creates an aesthetically pleasing line. It requires practice to achieve because it is not a movement that occurs very naturally to the body. Ballet is full of these exacting rehearsed movements which serve no other purpose than beautiful presentation. Developed over centuries, ballet is femininity rendered in the aesthetic.

The process of training the body for aesthetic purposes not only has visual and athletic consequences, it also affects the trained subject. Ballet is the body becoming-object according to Andre Levinson:

You may wonder whether I am suggesting that the dancer is a machine. But most certainly! – a machine for manufacturing beauty – is it in any way possible to conceive a machine that is a living, breathing thing, susceptible of the most exquisite emotions. (Levinson, 1992, p. 117)

Ballet has always been a complex site of femininity, where the female body, in particular, is more than itself; including becoming an aesthetic object, a machine, and even, for Levinson, a machine capable of emotions. As Fraleigh writes, describing the conscious objectification involved in dance:

The dancer objectifies her body, and herself – but in a curious and unique sense that I can describe best in terms of self-evidence. The dance is distanced from me as an object when I visualise it or seek to convert it into my own movement. The object dissolves when I achieve my intentions in motion. My awareness changes as I become the dance, reminding me that the significance of my dance – its signifying power – depends on the inescapable lived moment of its execution in which I experience my body as subject (myself) and object (the dance) simultaneously. (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 37)

This way of viewing the dancer can be further exploited in burlesque through the intimate involvement of objects in costume and choreography. If ballet renders the body object-machine, burlesque complicates this process even further by the manner in which props and costumes are utilised as integral components of the performance. While ballet uses props and costumes in a highly integrated manner, working choreography around the sets and tutus, for example, the dance itself generally remains the primary focus. The burlesque show alters this focus between the body-choreography-prop-costume-set. Often, the props or costumes can be as important to a burlesque show as any elements of dance.

Choreographies are developed directly around the costumes and props, the masks, the number of layers. It is impossible to choreograph a burlesque show without first knowing the costumes layers, the props to be used. The objects adorning the body and setting the scene for the body are as fundamental as the movement; in fact, they dictate movement possibilities and thus the performance itself. This creates a unique *mise-en-scene* in which body and object are folded together, producing a complication inherent to the performance.

Certain objects have particular significance in ballet. The *pointe* shoe and the tutu, in their interaction with the ballet body, alter its way of existing, moving, and presenting in the world. The *pointe* shoe is ballet's ultimate fetish object. A picture of a *pointe* shoe is enough to summon up the whole idea of ballet – what it represents, suggests and evokes.

The *pointe* shoe has become an important object in my burlesque. This is because it disturbs the neat division of object/subject and real/false oppositions. These shoes work only through their association with the body. They are worn and come alive; like toys, they are brought to life by the imagination and body.

In turn, *pointes* write themselves upon the body. When working in *en pointe*, what was once painful becomes a new normality. What was strange and difficult becomes natural. I sometimes have to look down at my feet to see whether I am standing *en pointe*, it feels too normal, the pain not as prominent as it once was. To dance on the toes is to transcend normal boundaries, to take flight into the impossible and into fantasy, like the trapeze artist swinging in the sky.

Artifice, construction and intelligence are evident within every movement of ballet. The creation of a mechanical human doll involves the layering of artifice upon the body to the point where the dancer is both human and machine and neither at once – the manufacture of femininity's masquerade. Ballet thus offers my burlesque a reference point as well as a system of movement. Ballet's view of the female body as object and machine of expression, while on the surface upholding cultural ideals of femininity, also offers the capacity to begin to break down subject/object distinctions implicated in those ideals. Ballet offers the possibility of discovering chinks in the dominant cultural machinery, moments of complex interplay between subject and object that our cultural assumptions and understandings fail to accurately describe. In this way, ballet, a mimesis of femininity of the past has given much to my burlesque, both artistically and philosophically.

CHAPTER NINE

Fetish: The Object and the Subject

Burlesque's reliance on the object (objects that clothe the body, objects that interact with the body and objects that the body becomes through ballet) leads inevitably to the fetish object. Fetish objects occupy an interesting position in western culture. Like toys, they are objects which can be brought to life and gain specific significance by the imagination. Giorgio Agamben has written succinctly and prolifically on the fetish and his work is considered here for the impact of the processes of fetishisation on burlesque.

First I will consider what the fetish is, following Agamben's semantic tracing of the historical uses of the term. Two of my shows will be considered for their use of objects – *Unicorn* and *Firebird*. These body-object-choreography enactments bring me to the key point of my theory of fetishism; that the arrival of the object into the realm of the fetish brings with it dissolution of distinctions between subject and object. As Agamben suggests, 'The object is not only outside of the self but, as modern and contemporary narratives appear to indicate, is the self itself ... The fusion of object and subject demands a new approach for interpreting the writing self and investigating its narratives' (Agamben G. www.egs.edu, 2010).

This fusion of object and subject is at the heart of my burlesque. My shows enact these process of fetishisation on every prop and costume and the objectification of the female body, until finally, the showgirl emerges as the fetish-object of burlesque. New ways of interpreting this narrative become necessary. The showgirl in burlesque is an enigma – her parody is subtle and she does not parody her femininity. This open-ness to ambiguity makes the showgirl into a toy in Agamben's sense of the word.

At the start of his article 'The Toy Fairy', Giorgio Agamben acknowledges that to use the word fetish is to also engage with the history of the word. This, of course, has an immediate connection with burlesque practice, which engages with its own past continuously. Agamben describes a kind of chronology of the fetish. He begins with mask objects of ancient civilisations, describing their place in the culture as conduits to the divine. Then, during the industrial revolution meaning shifted as mass production of objects became not only possible, but commonplace. Freud then conceptualised the fetish as perversion, or, the 'misplacement' of sexual desire onto an inappropriate object. One striking example is that a

woman's glove, removed from the body, can come to represent for the fetishist the entire woman who once wore it. Agamben notes that while the 'semantic migration' (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 366) of the term has been varied, a through-line can be seen.

The entrance of an object into the sphere of the fetish is always the sign of a transgression of the rule that assigns an appropriate use to each thing. It is easy to identify this transgression: for de Brosses, it concerned the transfer of the material object into the impalpable sphere of the divine; for Marx, the violation of the use-value; for Binet and Freud, the deviation of desire from its proper object. (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 366)

The common interpretation of the word follows Alfred Binet, who was the first to place fetishism as sexual deviation in 1888 in a study titled, 'Le Fetichisme Dans L'Amour'. Burlesque can be seen to enact many interpretations of the fetish simultaneously. Mask technique – enacted either with an actual mask or any costume elements – can transfer the material object into an impalpable sphere of theatre. A parasol used for protection from the elements becomes a prop that can disguise or augment the body, violating the correct use of the object in a Marxist sense. Burlesque's costume repertoire consists of objects commonly used as sexual fetish items, such as shoes and corsets, enacting a deviation of desire from its proper object. Following Binet, the act of striptease can be seen as a sexual deviation itself.

Like the burlesque form, the meaning of fetish has altered over time. Agamben also sees the fetish item as intimately tied to the culture in which it exists, for nothing can carry meaning unless there is a culture to create and identify this meaning. Agamben also considers the history of the term 'fetish':

The history of the semantic migration of the term 'fetish' conceals some instructive insights. What is initially confined to the otherness of a 'savage' culture as 'something so absurd that it offers hardly any purchase to the discourse that would combat it' returns first, in the economic sphere, as an article of mass consumption and subsequently as the choice of perverse desire in the intimacy of sexual life. The proliferation of cases of fetishism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (cutters of braids, coprophiliacs, sniffers of clothing, and fetishists of footwear, nightcaps, mourning crepe, lingerie, spots on lingerie, furs, wigs, leather objects, rings and finally words and symbols) goes hand in hand with the complete commodification of objects and, after the transformation of things endowed with religious power into useful objects and of useful objects into commodities, announces a new transformation of the *facticia* produced by human labor. (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 366)

Like any other object, the fetish is an object that has a particular use or function. It becomes a fetish object once it begins to refer to other meanings and uses than what it was

intended for. Once an object begins to make reference to history, story, person, or fires the imagination, it becomes a fetish object. It is an object that refers to something other than itself. A fetish object is an actual thing that is layered by idea, thought and reference. Agamben acknowledges the meaning that exists outside of the object when he writes, 'However much the fetishist multiplies proofs of its presence and accumulates harems of objects, the fetish will inevitably remain elusive and celebrate, in each of its apparitions, always and only its own mystical phantasmagoria' (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 33). The fetishist is grasping the ungraspable. The fetish is both subject and thing that exists elsewhere from the real. Agamben highlights the fetish object's ability to fire illusion, to create something new that fuses the imagination with the physical world, thereby creating a new way of seeing things, a way not dependent on enacting a binary.

There objects ... apparently properly belong neither to the internal and subjective nor to the external and objective spheres, but to something Winnicott defined as 'the area of illusion,' in whose 'potential space' they will subsequently be able to situate themselves both in play and in cultural experience. The localization of culture and play is therefore neither within nor outside of the individual, but in a 'third area,' distinct both 'from interior psychic reality and from the effective world in which the individual lives.' (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 367)

Through the dense layering of objects upon the body, through training of the body for aesthetic purpose, and through the intimate interaction with object-props, burlesque makes of the body a fetish object. Burlesque engages the processes of mask traditions, and of female narcissism to render the subject indistinguishable from its object adornments and surroundings. The body becomes part of the *mise-en-scene*, all for aesthetic purpose, for the fantastical, indeed for the area of illusion.

Agamben leads to a consideration of the body as a fetish when he discusses dolls, being as they are representations of the body in object form. The doll is capable of being nothing – sitting still on a shelf then paradoxically whatever the child (or adult) imagines its purpose or story to be. The doll is the thing through which people play out desires, imaginings and stories.

With respect to things, the doll is, on the one hand, infinitely lesser, because it is distant and beyond our grasp ('of you only, soul of the doll, it could never be said where you really were'), but, perhaps precisely because of this, it is on the other hand infinitely more, because it is the inexhaustible object of our desire and our fantasies ('in it [the doll] we would mix, as in a test-tube, whatever unknowable things

happened to us, which we would see boil up and turn colours there?’ (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 367)

My burlesque practice utilises the idea of the doll/toy on several stylistic levels. One of my shows, *Unicorn*, features a white horse-sized prop of a unicorn, a fantastical and mythical creature crafted in the style of a carousel animal. Her mane and tail are set in a permanent state of movement and painted a vivid yellow. I named her ‘Queenie’ after a pony I had as a child. For me, she is a fetish, an inanimate object whose meaning transcends her objectness – she carries a story and my personal history. Using the toy in performance is a way of instantly lifting the show into the realm of the fantasy. The subjectivity of the unicorn exists nowhere in real life, but in my imagination, and eventually the audience’s. Playing with the toy is a part of the object/subject interaction in burlesque.

When new burlesque performers ‘spread their legs’ to ride inanimate objects such as a unicorn (Lola The Vamp), a carousel horse (Dita Von Teese) and an 8ft rocking horse (Immodesty Blaize), there is a sense of fun, a gentle humour, even an innocence about this gesture. The performers use artifice to exaggerate and artfully construct themselves as erotic object, as fetish. (Willson, 2008, p. 146)

Through the multiple layering of object upon and around the body in burlesque, the body becomes a doll. Burlesque treats the body as a fetish object, enacting female narcissism by adorning it and placing it in an aesthetic mise-en-scene. ‘...the doll, at once absent and present appears then as an emblem suspended between this world and the other’ (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 367).

I use many fetish objects in my performance, from corsets to pointe shoes. My burlesque practice is an aesthetic enactment of the kind of paradox described by Agamben as an enigma. “An event and an enigma which demand, moreover, that we rethink what an event and an enigma might be – even if, stumbling stupidly about in their wake, we may never quite manage to fully grasp what is going on” (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 2).

The doll, the erotic object, the burlesque performer, exists between the world of the object and the subject. Her subjectivity constructs her body into an object; a whole body can become an erotic object, as Lingis writes:

It can happen that erotic excitement is fastened on a whole human body. Apart from the pattern of lips, breasts, hands, and genital zone accentuated for sexual contact,

beauty organises the entire body into another pattern, linking up its contours, colours, and movements into a snare for the eye. (Lingis, 1999, p. 143)

Meaning in my burlesque act is created through objects which reference art imagery, burlesque history and movement traditions such as mask and ballet, where the body can even be conceptualised as an object. Objects with histories, objects with cultural meanings and objects that can suggest these things if not directly quote them, are the objects of burlesque; objects which confuse the foundations upon which we conceptualise subject and object. Naming is one example of the way in which I engage with the accoutrements of my performance. To give a corset a name confuses the objectivity of the item, elevating the object to the level of toy. The object enters the realm of the imagination, of character. Through aesthetic play, burlesque seeks a narrative of spectacle that has as many references as each object within the mise-en-scene. As Allen noted in his discussion of Victorian burlesque, spectacle opens out meaning, rather than freezing narrative to a singular interpretation.

Spectacle can have the effect of freezing the dramatic narrative's movement toward closure and the (attempted) imposition of final meaning. It can open up the stage to pleasures other than those generated by words, ideas and narrative logic. It reminds us that what is staged is staged for us to see. (Allen, 1991, p. 81)

My burlesque is a spectacle deliberately enigmatic at several levels. Aesthetically, the mise-en-scene is often a phantasmagoria of several references to history, story, music and art. Politically, my practice exists in the paradoxical non-space of the showgirl – where the presentation of the female body can evoke a multiplicity of contradictory political stances, feminist to non-feminist, simultaneously. The *Firebird* show is possibly my best example of all these enigmas. On the surface, it is simply an extravagant showcase, a feast for the eyes, but each aesthetic choice I have made has been deliberate, to tell a story and to obscure meaning at the same time. The *Firebird* is inspired by the Ballet Russes' 1910 choreography based on a Russian folk tale about a bird in a mythical land. I devised my costume on a description of the fairytale's namesake, 'a large bird with majestic plumage that glows brightly emitting red, orange, and yellow light, like a bonfire that is just past the turbulent flame'. (www.wikipedia.org, 2010)

My firebird is clothed in a tutu of burnt orange, black and amber feathers, with a large headdress standing approximately half my height and studded with crystals and sequins bringing to mind the costumes of Follies Bergere, Moulin Rouge. The firebird of the Ballet

Russes is a strong creature, freeing the mythical land of a tyrannical king, and her choreography is robust and energetic, full of fast arm movements and swift elegant hands. For my interpretation I chose gypsy-jazz with many short, sharp accents to introduce a character reminiscent of carnival or circus. The fact that the music chosen is not of the era is also deliberate, to suggest the show could be occurring at any moment in history. I dance this show *en pointe*, partly to link it back to the tradition of ballet and partly to enhance the elevation of the firebird. I enter to a bright prelude, covering each side of the stage. In the centre of the stage stands a garden arch, painted gold to match the costume. The prop is also designed to resemble a gilded bird-cage. As *Firebird*, I remove the feather costume to reveal a golden corset, and a skirt that releases from the body to sway through the dance as a set of golden wings, unfurling as the firebird takes flight.

As the layers of the costume fall away, the music becomes slower, more sensual, and slightly sadder. I have removed the costume of the firebird, my wings, and even my headdress-plume. I have become a woman now, unclothed but for glittering crystals in the most taboo of places. I climb into the garden arch which in moments can also be seen to represent a cage, and perform the most spectacular sequence of the dance inside it, curling my body around, balancing, and finally elevating myself in a circle. In *Firebird*, the free, dancing bird removes her layers to become a caged woman, performing the spectacle of the naked feminine body. This storyline is deliberately subtle, deliberately obscured by the dazzle of the sensory elements. Whether the audience always understands this piece is not important to me as a performer, the multiple references (to cabaret showgirls, to Russian folklore, to ballet history, and to musical history) are the points of departure the show is made from, and the finale of the woman in the cage-like garden seat is deliberately politically ambiguous – it can be read as a now-human body frolicking in a garden, or as a caged end to the bird-become-woman.

In *The Firebird*, I become a bird-toy, a doll dressed up in a fantastical costume, placed in imaginary situations that I have lifted from folklore. In each of my shows, I become a doll. The doll comes to life through the adornment of objects, and these objects find life through meanings, histories and memories. The doll in my shows is subject become object, a fetish in her complex interplay of objects and meanings. The human becomes doll through the application of objects with histories and stories. Over the years I have come across many objects which have been useful in enacting this process of confusion between subject and object. One such object was a corset I found in a market in Montmartre – red satin, old, ripped and barely there. I held my breath, the intricate lacing down the back, the rip at the

breast, exposing the boning and fabric beneath; this was certainly from the Belle Époque, and here, in Montmartre, I was looking at and holding in my hand the property of a showgirl from the past. ‘Living history of Montmartre,’ I whispered, to which my companion noted that in my world, corsets were living things. This position is further articulated by Agamben:

Like the fetish, like the toy, things are not properly anywhere, because their place is found on this side of objects and beyond the human in a zone that is no longer objective or subjective, neither personal nor impersonal, neither material nor immaterial, but where we find ourselves suddenly facing these apparently so simple unknowns: the human and the thing. (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 367)

And thus the fetish is between object and subject, human and thing. My work in burlesque operates through the subject and the object, placing both objectivity upon a subject and subjectivity upon objects. Thus ‘the thing’ becomes inseparable from the human, and the foundations upon which we describe object and subject, material and immaterial, become unstable. The fetish dissolves distinctions between subject and object going beyond a way of seeing the world as divided between subject and object. Through the fetish, the binary of subject and object is exposed, and transcended. This drastically reconfigures the grounds upon which subjectivity is perceived. That objects can have subjectivity, and that subjects can conversely have an objectivity is a new way of understanding the subject and the object. This has ramifications for understanding female objectification and what can be a dangerous and old enactment of female narcissism (namely burlesque) by a culture that treats women as objects. The term female objectification is built upon distinctions of subject and object as binary oppositional positions. The male has been the subject, the female the object of the subject’s possession. Burlesque’s enactment of the fetish, however, is a drastic disturbing of the grounds on which subject and object are defined.

Agamben describes similar subject/object confusion, via a description of an ancient Greek sculpture – revealing that the subject/object binary has always been a construction dependent upon the way in which we view the object.

Williamowitz tells of archaic statues that bear the inscription *Chares, ‘eim, ’agalma tou Apollonos*, which must be translated ‘I am Chares, statue and joy of Apollo.’ The genitive is here the subjective and the objective in exactly the same degree. In the presence of these statues it is wholly impossible to decide if we find ourselves before ‘objects’ or ‘subjects,’ because they gaze at us from a place that precedes and transcends our distinction subject/object. This is the more true if we take, rather than a Greek statue, any object whatsoever from a primitive culture: such an object stands on this side not only of our distinction between subjective and objective, but also of that

between human and non-human. At the limit, however, the same is true of every human creation, be it statue or poem. (Agamben G. t., 1993, p. 368)

The created burlesque body finds its place as it gazes at us from a place that exists between subject and object. It exists beyond subject and object, both at once, yet neither discernibly one nor the other. The fetish object gazes at us from a place that both utilises and transcends our definitions of subject and object. I layer objects upon the objectified body in an aesthetic narrative to the point where the body and the object are indistinguishable. I become doll, the inexhaustible fetish of desire. The enigmatic showgirl who will not make clear whether she is performing as a subject or an object – because she is both, and neither, transcending each. A process of rewriting the self beneath the stage lights, where a new set of understandings come to light, imagination is fired and through the fantastical the showgirl creates and recreates, the real. How ironic that the fluff of feathers and feminine accoutrements is responsible. But also how very obvious.

APPENDIX

Below is a list of performances that have informed the research of this thesis. Where applicable, ethical clearance has been granted and conducted with the approved protocol.

August 31 2002, Decadence, The Boardroom, Gold Coast, Australia, *Fan Dance*

September 2002, Tease-o-rama. San Francisco, USA. Performer *Evangeline Auditions* hosted by Kitty West (Evangeline the Oyster Girl), Dita Von Teese, Catherine D'Lish.

January 2003, Big Day Out, Gold Coast, Australia. Performer, *Fan Dance*

April 2003, Alliance Hotel, Brisbane, Australia. Performer, *Fan Dance*

June 2003, Decadence II, Gold Coast Arts Centre, Gold Coast, Australia. *Burlesque*

September 2003, Tease-o-Rama, USA. Performer *Serpentine Dance*

January 2004, Big Day Out, Gold Coast, Australia. Performer *The Vamp Hour*

April 2004, The Basement, Sydney, Australia. Performer *The Bumblebee* and *Rumble in the Jungle*

May 2004, The Cotton Club, Byron Bay, Australia. Performer *The Bumblebee, Serpentine Dance*

June 2004, The Crazy Good Show, The Zoo, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Romance*

July 2004, The Jubilee Hotel, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *The Bumblebee*

August 2004, The Crazy Good Show, The Zoo, Brisbane, Australia. Performer, *Absinthe Fairy*

October 2004, 2High Festival, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Serpentine Dance*.

January 2005, Big Day Out, Gold Coast, Australia. Performer, *Lola The Vamp and the Saloon Bar Soiree*

January 2005, Big Day Out, Sydney, Australia. Performer *Lola The Vamp and the Saloon Bar Soiree*

January 2005, Big Day Out, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Lola The Vamp and the Saloon Bar Soiree*

February 2005, Riverside Theatres Parramatta, Sydney, Australia *Go Go Burlesco* for Big Laugh Comedy Festival dir. Sue Broadway with Ursula Martinez, Miss Behave, Imogen Kelly, Christa Hughes, Miss Josephine, Judith Lanigan. Performer *Fan Dance and Serpentine*

Dance

February 2005 Hellfire Club, Sydney, Australia *Oriental Fantasy*

March 2005 QBar, Sydney *Fan Dance* and *Serpentine Dance*

June 2005 Miss Josephine Presents Gertrude's Bar, Melbourne performer *The Doll, Romance*

July 2005, Vulture Magazine Launch, Brisbane Powerhouse, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Oriental Fantasy*

August 2005, Assembly Ballroom, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, UK season, *Go Go Burlesco* dir. Sue Broadway with Christa Hughes, Imogen Kelly, Judith Lanigan performer *Fan Dance* and *Serpentine Dance*

September 2005 Tease-o-rama, San Francisco, USA *Oriental Fantasy* and *The Doll*

December 2005, The Zoo, Brisbane, Australia. *Moondrunk*

February-December 2006, 34b event headliner for events in Sydney, Australia. Performer, *Your Fate, The Doll, Oriental Fantasy, Maypole, Fan Dance, La Rouge*

March 2005, Rivoli Gallery Brisbane, Australia. *The Lola Show* performance and model for 5 Brisbane artists, *La Rouge*

May 2006, Manfred's Bar Student Graduation night, Brisbane, Australia. Teacher and performer *Maypole*

May 2006, Miss Exotic World Pageant (now known as Burlesque Hall of Fame), Las Vegas, USA. Performer *Maypole* (first Australian to perform)

July 2006 Cherrybomb Bar, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Your Fate, The Doll*

September 2006, Bar Burlesque month season to open first burlesque club in Brisbane, Australia. *La Rouge, The Doll, Maypole, Serpentine Dance* October 2006, Valley Fiesta, Brisbane, Australia. *Unicorn*

November 2006, The Burlesque Ball headliner, The Eastern, Sydney, Australia. *Serpentine Dance, Your Fate*

December 2006, The Globe Theatre, Student Burlesque Graduation Event, Brisbane, director/narrator

February 2007, The Absinth Show, Sydney and Brisbane, Australia. *Serpentine Dance*

February 2007, The Absinth Show, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Serpentine Dance*

June 2007, The Dreaming Festival, Woodford, Australia. Performer *Jezebel*

September 2007, The Troubadour, Brisbane, Australia. Performer in solo show *Bohemia*

September 2007, The Irish Club, Sydney, Australia. Performer in solo show *Bohemia*

September 2007 Sylvia Staeli Theatre, Melbourne, Australia. Performer in solo show *Bohemia*

October 2007, Valley Fiesta, Brisbane, Australia. *La Rouge*

October 2007 Lismore Show, Lismore, Australia. *Bohemia*

October 2007, Nick Cave Solo and Grinderman, The Tivoli, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Unicorn, Fan Dance*

December 2007, Woodford Folk Festival, Woodford, Australia. Performer *Milonga Del Angel*

February 2008, The Big Joke Comedy Festival, Byron Bay, Australia. *Milonga Del Angel*

July 2008, The Troubadour, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Milonga Del Angel*

July 2008, The Irish Club, Sydney, Australia. Performer *Milonga Del Angel*

July 2008, The Butterfly Club, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Milonga Del Angel*

August 2008, 34b Penthouse Awards, Sydney, Australia. Performer *L'Absinthe Fontaine*

September 2008, Tease-o-Rama, North American Tour , USA(Seattle, Portland, Ashland, San Francisco) headline performer *L'Absinthe Fontaine, Serpentine Dance* with Cirque Du Soleil

February- October 2009 BConfidential weekly performances, Brisbane, Australia. Various shows

March 2009, Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Byron Bay, Australia. Life model and performer

September 2009, Under the Blue Moon festival, Sydney, Australia. Headlining performer *Serpentine Dance, Shimmy*

October 2009, Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Sydney, Australia. Life model and performer.

October 2009, Valley Fiesta Brisbane, host and performer of Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Brisbane, Australia.

December 2009 The Parlour, Woodford Folk Festival, Woodford, Australia.performer *Shimmy, Fan Dance*

December 2009, The Parlour, Woodford Folk Festival, Woodford, Australia.performer for Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Brisbane

February 2010-February 2011 Glass Bar, Brisbane, Australia. Host and performer Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Brisbane.

February 2010, Burlesque Ball, Luna Park, Sydney, Australia. Performer *Firebird*

February 2010, Burlesque Ball, The Thornbury Theatre, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Firebird*

February 2010, Burlesque Ball, The Tivoli, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Firebird*

February 2010, Burlesque Ball, Perth Town Hall, Perth, Australia. Performer *Firebird*

February 2010, Burlesque Ball, Adelaide Fringe Festival, Adelaide Town Hall, Adelaide, Australia. Performer *Firebird*

June 2010, Australian Burlesque Festival, Melbourne, Australia, *L'Absinthe Fontaine*

July 2010, Brisbane French Festival, Brisbane, Australia. *The Crystal Bowl, Your Fate*

August 2010 Swingin' Safari, Gold Coast, Australia. Performer *The Crystal Bowl*

September 2010, 34b 5th Birthday. Sydney Australia. Headline performer *Crystal Bowl*

September 2010 Ruby Review Sydney, Australia. Performer *Serpentine Dance, Shimmy*

October 2010, Big Top Burlesque Follies Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Unicorn*

September 2010, Ric's Bar Brisbane, Australia. Headline performer *The Crystal Bowl*

December 2010, The Parlour and Amphi, Woodford Folk Festival, Queensland, Australia. Performer *Firebird, Serpentine Dance*

March 2011, Ruby Review, Sydney, Australia. *Ballet, New Orleans*

March 2011, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia. *White Stripes*

March 2011, 34b, Sydney, Australia. Headlining performer, *Paper Parasol*

March 2011, Red Bennies, Melbourne, Australia. Headline performer *Fan Dance, Serpentine Dance*

June 2011, Australian Burlesque Festival, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, Australia *Oriental Fantasy*

June 2011, Australian Burlesque Festival, Red Bennies, Melbourne, Australia *Oriental Fantasy*

August 2011, 34b Good Girls Gone Bad, Sydney, Australia. Headlining performer *Neo Fan Dance*

August 2011, Sydney, Ruby Review, *Fan Dance, Oriental Fantasy*

September 2011, Melbourne Fringe Festival, An Awful Lot of Vaudeville, Red Bennies, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Fan Dance* and *Carnivale*

September 2011, Burlesque Bar, Melbourne, Australia. *Fan Dance*

October 2011, The Burlesque Ball, Enmore Theatre, Sydney, Australia. *Oriental Fantasy*

October 2011, The Burlesque Ball, Tivoli Theatre, Brisbane, Australia. Performer *Oriental Fantasy*

October 2011, The Burlesque Ball, Princess Theatre, Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Oriental Fantasy*

October 2011, The Burlesque Ball, Fremantle Town Hall, Fremantle, Australia. Performer *Oriental Fantasy*

December 2011, The Parlour, Woodford Folk Festival, Woodford, Australia. Performer, *Whatever Lola Wants, Libertango*

February 2012, A Living History of Australian Burlesque, Sydney, Australia. Performer *Tableaux Vivant*

June 2012, Australian Burlesque Festival, The Thornbury Theatre. Melbourne, Australia. Performer *Libertango*

June 2012, Australian Burlesque Festival, Judith Wright Centre, Brisbane, Australia. June 2012. Performer *Enter The Dragon*

July 2012, Dead of Winter Festival, Brisbane, Australia. Headline performer *Libertango*

November 2012, 34b final show, Sydney, Australia. Headline performer, *Heatwave* and *Carnivale*

FILM CREDITS

Serpentine Dance

Filming and editing: Meghann Montgomery

Milonga Del Angel

Filming: Hayden Shaboo

Editing: Meghann Montgomery

Unicorn

Filming and editing: Meghann Montgomery

Moondrunk

Filming: Miles Marley

Editing: Meghann Montgomery

Fan Dance

Filming and Editing: Meghann Montgomery

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

This submission also includes the following material:

Artist Book

A Burlesque: Lola The Vamp

DVD

A Burlesque: Lola The Vamp