

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: OF FLESH AND FEATHERS: A STUDY OF ARTISTIC LABOR AND THE POLITICS OF THE SENSUOUS IN NEW YORK NEO-BURLESQUE

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This dissertation presents an ethnographic study of the neo-burlesque scene in New York City, a group of nightlife artists who perform theatrical striptease. Based on fieldwork conducted from 2015 to 2018, this study uses the lens of labor to explore issues of art making, aesthetics and materiality. Specifically, it focuses on the artistic labor of performers on and off the stage; how the concept of labor is evoked in performance; and the work of material objects on stage.

Looking at labor in relationship to neo-burlesque hopes to advance discussions on costume and materiality, the artist's relationship to concepts of work, and artistic process. In doing so, this project also seeks to broaden the scope of previous scholarship on burlesque and erotic performance that more often than not has read such performance as either oppressive or empowering.

I begin by providing a contemporary history of the neo-burlesque scene in New York, a scene that emerged in the 1990s at late night parties and strip clubs, among performance artists and strippers. I then analyze the heated, emotional choreography in contemporary burlesque acts and consider its relationship to Post-Fordist work modes. In my discussion of neo-burlesque performance I also analyze the active role of costume, arguing that burlesque costumes are actants that cue performers choreographic choices. Finally, I offer an embodied approach to understanding the artistic practices of neo-burlesque in the classes offered through The New York School of Burlesque, illuminating the DIY ethos that undergirds the community.

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NEW YORK NEO-BURLESQUE

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2020

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members at the University of Maryland, Faedra Carpenter, James Harding, Maura Keefe, Jo Paoletti and Jan Padios; but especially my advisor Laurie Frederik, for her guidance, insight, and patience. I would also like to acknowledge Terry Williams at The New School for Social Research, who encouraged me to pursue the New York neo-burlesque scene early on, and in whose field methods class I first began my research.

The exploration of costume in this dissertation benefitted from the talks I engaged in at the CUNY Theatre Department's 2017 Graduate Student Conference, "Objects of Study: Methods and Materiality in Theatre and Performance Studies." Thank you to my panel members for their feedback and suggestions. I also thought through sections of this dissertation at the 2018 Critical Costume Conference in Surrey, where I got to hang with a very cool group of scholars who like me, think costume is critical.

By far, the best part of this process was learning from, connecting to, and creating with the performers who make up the New York neo-burlesque scene. I am continually awed and inspired by their fierceness. A special thank you to Jo Weldon, Darlinda Just Darlinda, Perle Noire, Nasty Canasta, Cheeky Cheetah, Angie Pontani, Bonnie Dunn, and Bambi the Mermaid for their contributions.

I would also like to thank Nancy Green, who listened and helped me through the writing process; and my friends and colleagues at Spencer Pilates Arts, who lifted my spirits. Finally, thank you to my parents, who have been unwavering in their support of

me, and their belief in the worthiness of intellectual pursuits. And although he might not know it, thank you to Francis, for never leaving my side.

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Introduction

I. Anatomy of a Scene and Project Intentions

In the last twenty years, neo-burlesque has become an increasingly popular form of entertainment across the country and internationally. Almost every major city in the United States, including cities in Canada, Europe and Asia, now has a neo-burlesque scene, groups of performers who dress up in uber-glamorous, and weird and wacky costumes, and strip out of them in front of eager audiences. Neo-burlesque shows are typically part of the nightlife of a given city; held in dive bars, upscale restaurants and established performance venues. Although some shows feature aerial, variety and cabaret acts, the term “neo-burlesque” refers to a three to five-minute striptease act in which a performer disrobes in a clever way.

The contemporary burlesque scene began to take shape in the mid-1990s on the East and West Coasts. Performers in Los Angeles were rediscovering and embracing the look of the 1940s pinup. They were also looking for alternative modes of eroticism that differed from mainstream pornography and strip joint stripping. Groups in New Orleans were doing recreations of burlesque acts from the 1940s and 1950s. And in New York, downtown performance artists were incorporating nudity into their acts and strip joint strippers were experimenting with more theatrical modes of undress. Some of these performers referred to their acts as “nude performance art” or “weird nude art.” The scene was diverse and open to interpretation and definition. By the end of the 90s,

audiences, producers and journalists noticed similarities between what these artists were doing and mid-century iterations of burlesque, and began to refer to this new striptease phenomena as the “new,” or “neo”-burlesque.

While artists on the East and West coasts were experimenting with striptease, Dixie Evans, a former burlesque star from the 1950s, opened the “Exotic World Museum and Burlesque Hall of Fame” in Helendale, California. Evans had inherited a trove of memorabilia from her friend and fellow 50s burlesque performer Jenny Lee. When Jenny passed away in 1990, Evans took Lee’s collection and turned part of Lee’ ranch into a museum to honor Lee and to preserve the legacy of burlesque. In hopes of garnering publicity for the museum Evans started to invite some of her friends, former teasers from the 1940s and 50s for a reunion and friendly competition. This competition grew in size and popularity over the years, and eventually became known as the “Miss Exotic World Competition.” Once contemporary stripteasers got word, they started to make the trek to this now nationally famous competition, where they were able to meet some of the “living legends” of the art form. Then in 2001, the first neo-burlesque festival, “Tease-o-Rama,” was held in New Orleans. At the festival, not only did contemporary “retro-strippers” from across the country realize they were not alone, they also discovered they were inadvertently reviving an art form.

Since the 1990s, the “neo-burlesque” scene has grown exponentially. You can take in a show on almost every night of the week in Seattle, Toronto, London and New York, and it has produced stars with cult followings. Dita Von Teese is the most well-known of these performers. She has been able to parlay burlesque into a full-time career that includes national and international tours with lavish set pieces and extravagant

costumes. Dita has also been able offer several other local stars, including New York-based performer Dirty Martini, opportunities to join her on tour. A neo-burlesque festival and pageant circuit, a string of festivals hosted in individual cities, now exists. Performers from around the world can apply to perform in these events and sometimes compete in for a title. “Headlining,” or being a featured performer and receiving top billing at one of these festivals is a highly coveted position. A host of burlesque schools also exist, such as The New York School of Burlesque and Miss Indigo Blue’s Burlesque Academy in Seattle. These schools offer classes for the uninitiated, those who simply want to “flirt” with the art form, and prospective burlesquers, who want to learn how to put an act together and perform. These schools also offer veteran and seasoned performers opportunities to teach.

The two major events the neo-burlesque community participates in are “The Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender” and “BurlyCon.” The Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender (BHOF) is a continuation of Dixie Evans’ efforts to preserve the legacy of burlesque and raise awareness and funds for the burlesque museum she created. Now, instead of competing around the pool under the Mojave sun in Helendale, top performers from around the world compete on the big stage at The New Orleans Hotel in Las Vegas. The event now takes place over four days at which several competitions are held including the crowning the new Miss Exotic World, or Queen of Burlesque. BurlyCon is a burlesque education and social convention held every fall in Seattle, Washington, that offers hundreds of classes and workshops. At these events burlesque performers celebrate each other and reestablish the “community.”

Individual neo-burlesque scenes differ somewhat depending on locale. One

difference has to do with venue and frequency of shows. In Seattle, for example, a burlesque show might take up residence at a theatre for a month, involve set pieces, a script and a cast.¹ In Tucson, a local bar might host a burlesque show once a month. In New York, there are smaller shows, but they happen more frequently and at more venues. Most New York performers ride the subway to and from gigs, and thus must be able to carry their costumes and props or fit them in a small suitcase. The size of stages and backstage areas at venues differ, determining the elaborateness of shows and acts.

Within the scene a range of styles have emerged, but acts are usually talked about in terms of “classic” or “neo”. Classic, or “neo-classic” acts resemble burlesque acts from the 1940s and 1950s. They usually involve a performer stripping out of a long gown, revealing a flowy paneled skirt and corset, then bra and g-string. Classic acts revolve around the strip; the narrative of the act is a presentation of the performer and their costume. The effectiveness of such acts usually depends on a performer’s charisma and emotional energy. As Chicago-based performer Ray Gun once remarked, classic acts are the easiest to put on their feet, but the hardest to perfect.² “Neo” acts look more like performance art in that they sometimes vamp, or burlesque classic burlesque. For example, in her “Lunch Lady” act, New York performer Sapphire Jones wears a hair net, slyly removes a pair of yellow rubber gloves, and manipulates two lunch trays like fans. Neo acts may contain a political message, such as one of Darlinda Just Darlinda’s acts, another New York based performer, who feigns illness but is able to discover the source: an image of Donald Trump stuck in her vagina, which she eventually dislodges and rips

¹In the scripted shows I have observed, the scripts are very loose, a few lines of dialogue meant to string together individual striptease acts.

²Ray Gunn, in conversation, 2017.

up. Two popular sub-categories of neo-burlesque have emerged in the last ten years: “nerdlesque” and “draglesque.” In nerdlesque acts, performers dress up as characters from popular culture, such as Dr. Who or Wonder Woman. In draglesque, performers don a gender different from the one they usually present as or were biologically assigned. Both styles still involve striptease. Some performers embrace these types of categorization; other performers resist them, arguing that once you put a label on something you discourage originality and innovation. Ray Gunn believes it helps burlesque as an art form to identify its characteristics. Ray offered a class in New York City in 2017 in which he identified the following styles of burlesque or types of teases:

STYLES OF TEASES:

- Glamour and spectacle
- Sin and Seduction
- Speakeasy
- Comedic
- Character/Narrative
- Political
- Bondage and Fetish
- Geek and Nerdlesque
- Theatrical (Scripted Shows)
- Drag

TYPES OF TEASES:

- Parade and Peel
- Non-Reveal (Body obscured by object)
- Reverse Strip
- Half and Half
- Bombshell
- Hoochie-Coochie (High-energy)
- Flourish (Fabric manipulation)
- Skills Act (Aerial, Tap Dance)
- Vocal Acts
- Narrative
- Fringe (Fire; Fetish)
- Grindhouse

- Satire (political)
- Puppetry
- Art House (Artistic statement; less sexual)
- Character (Nerdlesque)
- Splatter Acts
- Three-Part or Long Form

A range of artists are drawn to neo-burlesque. The performer Sapphire Jones once remarked that burlesque performers are either actors or dancers. She meant that burlesque performers come to burlesque with some background in either dance or theatre. I believe that is still true, although I would add visual art and circus. Most burlesquers, both newbies and veterans, are drawn to the immediacy the art form. Although burlesquers may spend months or years perfecting an act, they can typically find an opportunity to showcase it fairly easily. Unlike artists in other genres, burlesque performers are independent, solo artists who maintain control over all aspects of their acts, including music selection, costume and choreography. And more often than not they are crafty and know how to sew.

Several neo-burlesquers have transitioned into full-time performers. However, performing only makes up part of their income and most do not make a lucrative living, even when able to do their art full time. They subsidize their earnings by teaching, art modelling, costuming, and other side jobs. The vast majority of neo-burlesque performers are professional hobbyists, part-time artists who hold full and part time “muggle jobs,” or non-burlesque jobs, so that they can perform a few times a week, once a month, or just a few times a year.³

³“Muggle” is a term taken from the Harry Potter series that refers to individuals without magical powers, which neo-burlesquers have adopted to refer to the non-burlesque ways they make

Neo-burlesque is still primarily a “women’s sport,” and in particular, a white women’s sport, but this has changed significantly in the last ten years with women of color now making up a good portion of the community. In order to address the imbalance and lack of representation, several performers of color have curated shows that specifically feature performers of color. Others have organized larger festivals and pageants such as The Asian Burlesque Spectacular and most recently, The Noire Pageant, the first pageant dedicated to showcasing performers of color. The fact that these shows exist indicates that more work needs to be done. Issues of race and racial representation are an ongoing discussion within the community. There is also a significant number of boylesque performers, cis-gendered men and performers who present as men.⁴ For example, the neo-burlesque performer Lou Henry Hoover is a cis-gendered woman who performs as a man in boylesque shows and competitions. The age of performers range from mid-twenties to mid-forties, but many veteran neo-burlesquers are now in their fifties.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly who makes up the audience at burlesque shows. I have observed men and women; couples, both gay and straight; women out with their friends sometimes for a birthday celebration or bachelorette party; and always other burlesque performers. For the most part audiences appear young; in their 20s, 30s and 40s. At more upscale venues and at the larger shows, audience members can be in their fifties and sixties. If there are any “living legends” in the stage line-up or in attendance, the age range can be as high as ninety. In terms of class and cultural worldliness,

money.

⁴ Neo-burlesque performer Darlinda Just Darlinda has used the phrase “women’s sport” to refer to burlesque, conversation with author.

audiences also vary. At Coney Island, I've sat between tattooed-hipsters and bridge and tunnel couples who wanted to take in a show. At Duane Park, an upscale venue on the Bowery, I've witnessed what appeared to be European tourists. At Nurse Bettie, a tiny bar on the Lower East Side, I've chatted with a thirty-something East Asian woman out with her friends and a middle-aged white man who lived in the neighborhood. Audiences are predominately white, but this depends on the show. When there are performers of color in the show, there will often be more audience members of color in attendance as well. Overall, audiences are enthusiastic. They are encouraged to call out, applaud and to cheer for performers. At many shows, the host will ask if anyone in the audience has attended a burlesque show; and if some have not, the host will implore the audience to hoot and holler when clothing is removed.

§

My interest in neo-burlesque began in 2009 when I attended the 8th Annual New York Burlesque Festival. I remember flipping through *Time Out New York*, the city's weekly go-to for cultural happenings and entertainment reviews and noticed "burlesque" had been added to the off-off Broadway theatre listings. One description read something like this: "Grab a drink and watch as performers strip out of crazy costumes at this local dive bar." Intrigued, I looked up "burlesque in nyc" on my computer and discovered the New York Burlesque Festival was being held that weekend. When I arrived at the "Teaser Party," the first night of the festival, held then at the Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg, Amber Ray was on stage outfitted in a pair of gauzy pink butterfly wings

and a spiral cone bra, while several members of the audience were rapidly trying to capture her image on their sketch pads. The host that evening was The World Famous *BOB*, a statuesque woman wearing a blonde wig, drawn on eyebrows and false eyelashes. Before taking the mic, she shimmied her ample cleavage to Little's Richard's song "The Girl Can't Help It." Then told us how happy she was to be there—that she was *at work, can you believe it?*—so thrilled she was, she decided not to wear any makeup and her natural hair color. I liked her immediately.

Later that night I watched Trixie Little and the Evil Hate Monkey do a sexy acrobatic routine, and Minnie Tonka perform a satiric homage to ZZ Top's "Sharp Dressed Man," stripping out of a suit and dancing in her underwear. During intermission I perused some of the goods the vendors were selling at the back room of the bar—corsets, Molly Crabapple's recently published erotic-themed comic book, and handmade hair accessories. I bought a flowered hair clip embellished with rhinestones and stuck in my hair. As I left that night, I knew I had just discovered an established cultural world, one I didn't know existed or felt a part of, but that had a look and a following. Not only did this scene have everything a student of gender and performance could ask for—elaborate costumes, inappropriate nudity, and performers who were self-aware—it was a slice of New York nightlife I wanted to document.

In my observation of the New York scene over the years, there was something in the faces of the performers that I continued to pause over. I saw excessive smiling, feigned apathy, and knowing badassery. There was a pronounced emotional labor being performed. But unlike other types of performance, burlesquers wanted you to know about it. I also noticed performers playing with high energy and fatigue. Sometimes this was

done for laughs, as in Boo Boo Darlin's "Slow Motion Fo' Ya" act in which her body and her music vacillate between slow motion undulations and revved up grinding. Other performers seemed to be playing with time for erotic effect and opportunities for showmanship. Like the performer Julie Atlas Muz, who in her "I Hate You" act stares down the audience before tumbling backward into a series of summersaults. Burlesque acts were thrilling, but exhausting to watch! Performers were displaying moves so exaggerated and over-the-top, they were not just undressing to be sexy or ironic, but were displaying the *labor* of doing so.

I also couldn't deny that the costumes were often the stars of the show. One night at The Bell House, I watched Jenny C'est Quoi perform an act inspired by Moby Dick—standing afoot a rock, wearing a large ship atop her head and unfurling her skirt across the length of the stage; while a few other performers held the ends and waved them like the sea. At The Slipper Room, I saw Gal Friday come out on stage and spend most of her set simply presenting, caressing and then finally removing a pair of emerald green gloves. And on more than one occasion I have witnessed Perle Noire dance with a pink iridescent robe. A suitable partner for the Mahogany Queen of Burlesque, the robe spun, flew and then slowed its roll, veiling her when appropriate. In all these acts, the skirt, the gloves and the robe were doing a lot of work—helping to spectacularize the performer's body, establishing an aesthetic, being attentive partners to otherwise solo performers, and helping to evoke a particular poetic narrative.

This dissertation therefore takes a closer look at costume and choreography in neo-burlesque and seeks to understand what these aesthetic tools indicate about larger issues of labor and materiality. I use New York as a case study. New York is one of the

birth places of the 1990s rival and one of the largest scenes in the country, and thus provided me with countless opportunities to observe and take part in the art form. I also focus primarily on female performers, given they continue to make up the majority of the scene.

II. 19th and 20th Century Burlesque

Although neo-burlesque emerged in the mid to late 1990s, it draws on older waves of burlesque and striptease. This section reviews some of the historical antecedents and aesthetic inspirations that inform the current scene.

Several aspects of contemporary burlesque can be traced back to the 19th century. Lydia Thompson and Her British Blondes are often credited as foremothers. Thompson and her troupe arrived in New York City in 1868. They performed literary satires of Greek and Shakespearean plays, infusing them with humor and topical references. What made their acts different from other burlesque performances, however, is they dressed in “scantily clad” attire for the time. They wore tights and costumes that revealed their legs. They also wore make up and dyed their hair. According to historian Robert Allen, they combined literary burlesque with the “leg show,” a shorthand term indicating a mass display female legs on stage. The Blondes were a hit with audiences, but a few cultural critics took issue with what they perceived as a garish display of gender. The cultural critic William Dean Howells once said:

[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame.⁵

⁵Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The

Part of their “horrible prettiness” had to do with the fact that the all-female troupe played male roles and in their burlesque, mocked male affectation. Olive Logan, a prominent feminist at the time also criticized the Blondes, accusing them of lacking talent and not being real actresses. Part of what disturbed Logan was that Thompson and her Blondes did not disappear behind the characters they played. Rather, they were self-aware, they broke the fourth wall, and spoke directly to the audience—they were always uniquely themselves.⁶

Another important development in the 19th century was the arrival of the “cootch dance.” Introduced to America at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair by dancers who were part of Algerian Village, the dance involved the “muscular contraction of the abdomen”—sometimes backward and forward movement of the pelvis, “trembles” and “violent emotion.”⁷ The danse du ventre, or “hootchy-cootch,” as it came be called was associated with the stock character “Little Egypt.” The dance not only attracted fairgoers, but was quickly incorporated into burlesque and vaudeville. Little Egypts also popped up everywhere, becoming a fixture on Coney Island, and eventually the “grandmother of modern striptease.”⁸

Cootch dancing and the fascination with “oriental” dance continued into the first decade of the 20th century. Part of this can be seen in the Salome craze, or Salomania. In addition to Salome, “skirt dancing,” an umbrella term that encompassed English skirt

University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 134-135.

⁶Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 123.

⁷Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 42-43.

⁸Shteir, *Striptease*, 42-43.

dancing, the cancan, Spanish dance (flamenco) and serpentine dance became extremely popular.⁹ English skirt dancing involved the swooshing of fabric. The cancan was a Parisian import involving a high kick, “the quick spinning of the lower half of one leg, the spinning of the whole body while holding one leg up near the head, the cartwheel, and concluding flying split.”¹⁰ While the serpentine dance, created by Loie Fuller, involved the use of a voluminous white skirt that was made transparent with stage lighting: “Fuller moved the skirt with her hands and spun around as strong stage lights, aimed from the front and back of her, alternately illuminated her swirling skirts on her body.” All these dances relied on the tease of flashing undergarments.¹¹

There are some aspects of neo-burlesque that can be traced back to The Ziegfeld Follies, which featured elaborately costumed all-girl revues. Although neo-burlesque is primarily a solo performance and large group numbers are rare, some of today’s costumes are Ziegfeld-esque. Ziegfeld’s chorus girls often wore fantastic headpieces, long trains made of feathers or more fanciful ensembles such as short dresses with balloons attached to the hemline.

According to theatre historian Rachel Shteir, the 1920s ushered in modern striptease; that is, performers began to remove their costumes more fully, and became more deliberate about it. On the Columbia and Mutual burlesque circuits, for example, two new acts emerge: the “teaser” and the “stripper.” A teaser exited the stage after each costume removal and might reappear eight to ten times. A stripper was more

⁹Jessica Glasscock, *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2003), 31-34.

¹⁰Glasscock, 31-34.

¹¹Ibid.

straightforward and deliberate, with most of the costume removal happening on stage. In both types of acts, performers still undressed down to their “Union suits”—a flesh-colored bodysuit/leotard. Shteir also notes that the nature of the striptease acts changed during this period from performers *being* stripping to *actively* stripping, and “flinging off garments.” Shteir links this to the role of the New Women who “demanded freedom.”¹²

The first teaser was Carrie Finnell who once carried out a strip over several weeks. Finnell is also credited with inventing tassel twirling during this time. In her book *This Was Burlesque*, Ann Corio compares Finnell’s twirling to the propellers on a WWI plane:

It was Carrie’s idea to attach a tassel to the bra cup of each of [her] educated bosoms, and then let things fly. She would start one tassel on one bosom slowly like a propeller revving up on a WWI plane. Faster and faster it would spin while its fellow tassel lay limp and neglected on the other bosom. Then, the other tassel would come to life. It would start spinning slowly, while the first tassel was at full speed. Carrie looked like a twin-engine bomber. She would walk across stage with the tassels swirling in front of her, and the applause would ring out.¹³

Several performers took credit for the strip. Most accounts name the Minsky dancer Mae Dix as the first “accidental” stripper. One night as she exited the stage she removed her collar “hoping to keep it clean for the next few performances” and apparently the crowd “went wild” so she went back on stage and removed the top buttons of her bodice.¹⁴ Hinda Wassau also took credit for the strip. Apparently as she shimmied, part of her outer costume “started to shake off” so she threw it aside. Wassau was also the first performer to touch and caress her body on stage.¹⁵

¹²Shteir, 87.

¹³Ann Corio with Joseph DiMona, *This Was Burlesque* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968), 74.

¹⁴Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind* (Denver: Speck Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁵Irving Zeidman, as quoted in Shteir, 112.

The 1930s marks the beginning of the golden age of burlesque, and the era of the “burlesque queen,” or big-name star. The most well-known burlesque queen was Gypsy Rose Lee. Lee was referred to as the educated or “literary” stripper because she would weave erudite commentary into her acts. She was also known for her extravagant costumes: big hats, long gowns, and gloves. Sally Rand, another burlesque queen, popularized the “fan dance” during the 30s. In her performances, Rand wore a blonde wig and appeared nude “under a blue light, behind two pink ostrich feather fans” while she “undulated” to Debussy’s *Claire de Lune* and a Chopin waltz.¹⁶ After too many performers copied her act, Rand went on to create a bubble dance, in which she performed with a large opaque balloon, “as if it were a living creature.” Unable to find a balloon large enough, she ended up designing and patenting a sixty-inch, “super-doooper see-through bubble.”¹⁷ “Breakaway” garments also appear in the 1930s, made popular by performer Margie Hart:

In Hart’s hands, the strip dress turned underclothes into a carnival tent. While wearing it, she existed to manipulate the slinky material. She expressed physical awareness against her skin in her lithe stance and confident stare, and of course in the revolutionary way she touched her clothes and herself in front of an audience.¹⁸

By the end of the decade burlesque had become too risqué for the vice squads of New York, and in 1937 Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia bans burlesque in New York.

However, burlesque returns to New York in the 1940s and thrives in other American cities in the “super club,” an upscale venue with tuxedo-clad servers and cloth-covered tables. And Lili St. Cyr emerges as a new, but different burlesque queen. Unlike

¹⁶Shteir, 150.

¹⁷Ibid., 153.

¹⁸Ibid., 201.

the bawdy burlesquers of the 20s and 30s, Cyr performed in silence, didn't smile, didn't tease; remaining aloof, she refrained from bumping and grinding. Cyr also never broke the fourth wall, performing 'miniature' theatre pieces instead, in which "desire made her victim."¹⁹

In the 1940s, several burlesque stars take their shows on the road to various carnivals and state fairs. Since their inception at the turn of the century, carnivals had featured "girl shows." One performer who garnered quite a bit of notoriety in the '40s, eventually running her own show on Coney Island, was Tirza, the Wine Bath Girl. Taking her name from the goddess or handmaiden to Bacchus, Tirza bathed in red wine that sprung out of an elaborate fountain.

In the 1950s, a flamboyant style of striptease emerged, exemplified by performers like Tempest Storm and Blaze Starr. Burlesque performers became almost like superheroes, wielding the costume and props of 1930s striptease like armor. Storm was known for her "highly exaggerated bumps and grinds" and her impressive physical dimensions. While Starr was referred to as "the human heat wave." The 1950s also sees the rise of the Las Vegas Revue, at which the performer Satan's Angel stripped out of a devil's suit and set her tassel's on fire as she twirled.²⁰ In order to compete with *Playboy* on other girlie magazines, acts got more explicit, which led to the advent of floorwork, or "horizontal cootches" in which performers shimmied while lying supine.²¹ In addition to live performance, grind house movies, rough cuts of burlesques shows, also helped to circulate burlesque across the country.

¹⁹Ibid., 258.

²⁰Ibid., 303.

²¹Ibid.

In the 1960s, the proliferation of pornography caused the more theatrical elements of burlesque to fade, replaced by topless dancing. However, the 60s sees the release of the album, *Music to Strip By*, and the opening of a series of striptease schools. The burlesque queen Ann Corio also continued to perform throughout the 1970s, and went on to produce the Broadway show *This Was Burlesque* in 1981.

§

Burlesque striptease has a long legacy and historians and scholars trace it in a variety of ways. Every time I revisit this history, I continue to see parallels in the acts of today—particularly in terms of costume and movement. Characteristics of the art form, including erotic movements, working with fabric and props continue to serve artists today. Burlesque, both new and old reflects the way artists try to find avenues of self-expression and stage versions of self.

III. Research Questions

Given that neo-burlesque is rooted in striptease and predominantly performed by women, most scholarship on the subject has focused on the performance of gender, the types of feminism(s) on display, and the use of spectacle, irony and humor (as well as the presence of no-normative body types) to subvert heteronormative ideas about beauty, gender and sexuality. Although these studies offer rich analyses, they have become a reductive way of reading the scene, performers are either reinforcing normative ideas or subverting them. Furthermore, in these analyses, the aesthetics of the scene—the use of

costume and elements of choreography—are only given superficial attention in order to get to issues of representation.

In order to broaden the scope of this scholarship I am interested in exploring neo-burlesque as an art form, focusing on the artistic labor of the performers and the aesthetics they employ. By examining the methods of the scene, or how neo-burlesque is made, I hope to reveal aspects of neo-burlesque that connect it and distinguish it from other performance genres, to investigate how the art form serves performers, and make connections to larger artistic and socio-economic realities.

Therefore my research questions ask: What kinds of labor are performed in neo-burlesque? And what might this reveal about larger artistic and economic realities? In order to answer these questions, I look specifically at the work of costume as “actants” (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014); zany choreography (Ngai 2012) and stillness (Kunst 2015); and the DIY impulse that undergirds the community (Gauntlett 2011).

IV. Literature Review

This dissertation draws on literature in burlesque and erotic performance, dance and labor studies, costume and new materialism, craft and DIY. In this section I will review some of that literature and explain how my project expands or departs from it.

i. Burlesque and Neo-Burlesque Historiography

Understanding what the “neo” means in any era requires historical grounding. Thus I immersed myself in the literature on the history of burlesque. Robert Allen’s 1991 book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* remains the seminal text on

19th century and early 20th century burlesque. Allen focuses on the impact of Lydia Thompson and her *British Blondes*, arguing that Thompson changed how burlesque would be understood in America by combining literary burlesque with the leg show. He also notes that by the end of the 19th century burlesque performers no longer addressed audiences, and argues that this paved the way for a more passive display of female sexuality. Theatre historian Rachel Shteir's 2004 book *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* picks up where Allen leaves off by focusing on the golden age of modern striptease. She does a nice job of recapping pivotal moments of public undress, arguing that modern striptease embodied a series of contradictions in American culture and "epitomized modern attitudes toward sexuality" often with a unique mix of overt sexual display and humor. Her analysis departs from Allen's, however, arguing that burlesque women were stars, and "by pushing men onto the sidelines," women's bodies were in fact elevated into "the realm of the fabulous."²²

In addition to the above texts, Jayna Brown's 2008 *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* focuses on African American women's performance practices in variety shows, including burlesque, from 1890-1945. Irving Zeidman's 1967 *The American Burlesque Show* and Ann Corio's 1968 *This Was Burlesque* offer great first person descriptions of acts. A.W. Stencell's 1999 *Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind* focuses on the girl shows of the carnival circuit from the turn of the century to the 1970s. including water acts, cooch dancers, and the burlesque queens who took their shows on the road. Jessica Glasscock's 2003 *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight* looks primarily at burlesque in the 1950s but adds

²²Shteir, 120.

important commentary about skirt dancing and other influences on modern striptease. Leslie Zemeckis has also added to this collection with biographies of Sally Rand and Lili St. Cyr. More recently, costume designer and neo-burlesque performer Colleen Scott published *The Costumes of Burlesque: 1866-2018* in 2018. Although mainly pictorial, the book includes commentary on fabrics, construction and several lengthy interviews with neo-burlesque costume makers and designers.

These books allowed me to immerse myself in the history of the art form, trace how burlesque has been historized and put the acts of neo-burlesque performers in context. The more I read, the more similarities I find in terms of agency, movement and use of humor.

There is also now a small body of scholarship on neo-burlesque. The two major books on the subject are Michelle Baldwin's 2004 *Burlesque {and the New Bump and Grind}* and Jacki Willson's 2008 *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*. Baldwin, who is a performer and founder of one the first neo-burlesque troupes, offers an overview of the 1990s revival, its practitioners, and appeal among women. She also offers one of the few explanations of burlesque's resurgence in New York and Los Angeles—noting that West Coast performers came out of the Rockabilly and swing scenes of 1990s, and how New York performers were doing burlesque “without even knowing it.” Baldwin also dedicates an entire chapter to costume and the various styles that make up the scene.

Willson's book is a more scholarly consideration of neo-burlesque. Willson, a performer and lecturer in the United Kingdom, considers the “post(-)feminist” implications of the new wave, by situating neo-burlesque within a history of feminist

performance art. She distinguishes between performers like Dita Von Teese and Dirty Martini, the former who uses no satire, and the latter, who seems to mock the conventions of femininity. Willson argues that neo-burlesque performers bring attention to the fact that they are “trapped within existing value systems and erotic forms.”²³ And the ironic burlesque smile becomes a way of exposing the compliance and limited options of our current system of representation.

In addition to these books, there have been a few anthologies published in the last ten years with chapters dedicated to neo-burlesque. English literature scholar Claire Nally argues that burlesque must contain an element of camp or else it ends up reinforcing hetero-normative constructions of gender and sexuality.²⁴ Theatre historian Geraldine Harris echoes a version of Willson’s argument that burlesque performance “oscillates” between feminisms. However, Harris points to the aesthetic qualities of burlesque, and begins to discuss it as art form.²⁵ That is, she begins to take seriously the gestures, costumes and music, and their affective impact on the audience. Using Eve K. Sedgwick’s argument in *Touching Feeling*, Harris unpacks the limitations of Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity—which for her and Sedgwick have become “paranoid” and reductive ways of looking. Siding with Sedgwick, and utilizing Ranciere’s argument in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Harris claims that Mulvey and Butler’s theories are “profoundly anti-spectacular” and

²³Jacki Willson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2008), 187.

²⁴Claire Nally, “Cross-Dressing and Grrly Shows: Twenty-first Century Burlesque” in *Naked Exhibitionism: Gendered Performance and Public Exposure* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

²⁵Geraldine Harris, “The Ghosts of the New Burlesque” in *A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 147.

“anti-theatrical.”²⁶ Harris prefers Sedgwick’s theory of the reparative that “suggests an attachment to, even love of elements and assumptions of mainstream culture...that can be reassembled into a whole but ‘not necessarily like any preexisting whole’ through the additive and the accretive, the mimetic and the theatrical: ‘surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment.’”²⁷ Harris argues:

The most radical aspect of burlesque is the access it offers women to the pleasures of performance as a social/highly sociable space to attempt to ‘transform’ the shame of the ‘failure’ to embody the idealized images of femininity that surround us and also perhaps the sense of shame engendered by feminism that these fictions remain nonetheless a source of *pleasure*.²⁸

Dance scholar Sherril Dodds’ writing on the subject is more attentive to the choreography of the burlesque performer—particularly her face work. In a 2014 article in *Dance Research Journal*, Dodds uses Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of faciality to argue that the face is a dynamic site of meaning making and in constant conversation or “semantic polarity” with other faces, which contain the possibility to thwart dominant meanings and allow for “irony, polysemy, and hyperbole.”²⁹ I have been interested in the face work in neo-burlesque for some time and hope my dissertation extends Dodds’ analysis. For example, although Dodd’s alludes to the fact that there are different types of smiles in burlesque she does not necessarily explore them, find gestural patterns, connect burlesquers’ face work to the emotional labor called upon to perform it, nor link it to any larger socio-cultural phenomenon. I am interested in exploring how the emotional labor needed to perform such face work not only indexes gender but more broadly, the worker

²⁶Harris, “Ghosts of the New Burlesque”, 147.

²⁷Harris, 152.

²⁸Ibid., 154.

²⁹Sherril Dodds, “The Choreographic Interface: Dancing Facial Expression in Hip-Hop and Neo-Burlesque” in *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2, August 2014, 52.

in late capitalism.

There have also been several documentary films made about neo-burlesque. Three in particular have been of interest to me and this project given their focus on New York. Gary Beeber's 2011 documentary *Dirty Martini and the New Burlesque* introduces audiences to neo-burlesque through the lens of New York performer Dirty Martini. In the film, Dirty talks about her artistic process and how she learned her makeup techniques from the drag queens on the Lower East Side. She describes her multiple trips to Kim's Video where she rented Erving Klaw films to study Lili St. Cyr's hand gestures, and how she collaborates with famed designer Garo Sparo on her costumes. She also talks about her interpretation of burlesque and how she tries to honor former legends, while still make each act her own. James Lester's 2018 film *Getting Naked: A Burlesque Story* focuses on the New York performers Gal Friday, Hazel Honeysuckle and the comedic duo The Schlep Sisters (Minnie Tonka and Darlinda Just Darlinda). It provides a behind-the-scenes look at being a professional, or full-time burlesque performer, following performers from show to show, and is honest about the opportunities given to some and not to others. A major story arc is Gal Friday's decision to cut her hair, which she feels has defined her, but that she's also hidden behind. It also shows The Schlep Sisters rehearsing and then competing for Best Small Group performance at BHOF, as well as Honey Honeysuckle taking voice lessons, making costumes and eventually landing a gig at one of the big hotels in Atlantic City. A highlight is the depicting the particular burlesque "skill set" of these performers which includes, among other things, the making, assembling and/or embellishing their costumes. And most recently, Lesley Demetriades and Nasya Kamrat's 2020 film *Obscene Beauty* considers the performance art roots of the

scene, discusses iconic venues, and addresses the more commercial route the scene has taken.

In addition to the burlesque historiography and scholarship on neo-burlesque, this dissertation is also in conversation with literature on other forms of erotic performance including strip club stripping and lap dancing. Although neo-burlesque has been referred to as more nostalgic and ironic compared to mainstream stripping, there are many similarities. For example, both Judith Hanna (2012) and Katherine Liepe-Levinson (2002) have looked at some of the choreography in strip clubs. Both note the use self-touch, grinding and eye work. Levinson also offers an excellent analysis of the gendered implications of costume.

These books and articles offer important findings about the subversive possibilities of neo-burlesque, but they also follow a similar mode of analysis. Although they take into consideration the aesthetics of performances, they move quickly past them to issues of representation, agency and subversion. Having reviewed these texts, it seems clear that the conversation about neo-burlesque is stalled: it is either feminist or not, subversive or exploitative. My dissertation departs from these writings by focusing on the concept of labor in the New York scene, exploring it on stage in relation to costume and choreography, and off-stage, in the DIY practices employed in neo-burlesque classes.

ii. *Art and Labor*

Karl Marx defined labor, or labor-power, as the human potential to complete a task, “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being.³⁰

³⁰Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 336.

This labor could be bought or sold and was then embodied in the use-value of the commodity, or the product produced. My project focuses on artistic labor, the work that goes into creating a piece of art or performance, sometimes referred to as creative labor.

When the topic of art and labor have been taken up in sociology, it has usually been an attempt to demystify the trope of the artistic genius, or to disprove that art exists in a realm outside of politics. However, there has recently been an increased interest in sociology and economics in the labor practices of artists and the “creative industries” (See Livingstone and Ploof 2007; Sholette 2017; Stahl 2012). Stahl, for example, looks at the creative work of recording musicians and argues that it is not as autonomous as we might think, given the restrictions the music industry puts on their labor. Part of this interest stems from the 1990s emergence of what Richard Florida has coined the new “creative class” coupled with an attention to the impact of new technology on how people work.³¹ According to scholars like Richard Sennett and others, people’s working lives under late capitalism have become increasingly individualized, less financially secure and require or increasingly demand more and more of a worker’s subjectivity.³² This description, of course, sounds a lot like how artists have always labored, and thus the artist has become a kind of prototype for studying the worker under this new economy.

In theatre and performance studies, scholars have looked at artists’ involvement with labor movements or their struggle to unionize (See Hyman 1997; Filewood and Watt 2001; Fuoss 2011). Similarly, in studies of sex work and erotic performance, scholars have looked at the environments, the kind of work performed and their relationship to the

³¹ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

³² Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

larger economy. Although these are interesting avenues of exploration, this dissertation will not examine the labor conditions under which burlesquers toil, or their relationship to the exotic dancers' union. The claim that exotic dancers labor just like any other type of worker has been made many times before. Rather, I am interested in exploring the artistic labor that goes into creating a burlesque act, and the affective and cultural work produced by that labor.

My project is more in line with Osbourne and Woodworth's 2015 study *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History and Labor*. In their volume, not only do contributors look at the creative work of theatre artists like dressers and stage hands who are often invisible to audiences. They also explore how ideas of work have been taken up in performance. Like the contributors to this volume my project hopes to shed light on the labor of neo-burlesque performers both on stage and behind the scenes, and contemplate the idea of labor in performance. However, unlike traditional theatre artists or dancers, neo-burlesque performers work alone, and are not part of a production team. They are primarily solo artists who work independently and maintain artistic control over all aspects of their acts.

iii. *Labor, Dance and Physicality*

There have been several studies in dance scholarship that have helped me to think about and analyze labor in neo-burlesque performance. Marc Franko's 2002 book, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement and Identity in the 1930s*, looks at how modern dancers in the 1930s embodied the labor debates of the era, brought attention to the dancer's body as a laboring body (not merely an ornament or passive art object), and

contributed to the ideological discourse of the time. He also looks at how the choreography of the chorus girls in the Ziegfeld Follies embodied a Taylorist form of capitalism—large group numbers with legwork that was mechanically precise. And found that what distinguished Radical Left dance (as opposed to modern or popular dance of the time) was an intense emotionality. Although the focus of my dissertation is contemporary burlesque performers, Franko sets up a framework for thinking about how dance might embody and respond to larger political realities. Furthermore, Franko’s attention to emotionality, its link to the body and appearance within choreography, are what I explore in neo-burlesque performance.

In addition to Franko, Andre Lepecki’s writing on modern dance emphasizes the relationship between movement and politics, and how dancers have responded to changes in late capitalism. In *Exhausting Dance* he looks at the starts and stops enacted by contemporary dancers in the 1990s and argues that their choreography resisted traditional definitions of dance, which has been seen as performance of flow.³³ More recently, in his 2016 book *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*, he examines modern dancers use of thingness, animality, persistence, darkness, and solidity to resist categorization and aesthetic identification.

Like Franko and Lepecki, Bojana Kunst examines how art dovetails with late capitalism in her 2015 book *The Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. Her chapter on “Movement, Duration and Post-Fordism,” Kunst offers a possible revolt to the increase in flexibility and “acceleration of life” put forth by contemporary capitalism. She

³³Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

writes: “Today’s subjectivities are flexible because its bodies are organized by means of constant protocols of the acceleration and organization of everyday and common movement... There is no time for hesitation when you move with the world.”³⁴ Kunst believes the way to resist this is to slow down. I use her analysis and argument to think about the choreography I have observed in neo-burlesque performance, specifically the increased popularity of floorwork, offset by moments of “holding space.”

Finally, although she does not write about dance per se, Sianne Ngai’s theoretical writing on aesthetics and their link to capitalism has also been a tremendous resource for thinking about the choreography in neo-burlesque. In her 2012 book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Ngai looks at exactly what the title indicates: the zany, the cute and the interesting—three aesthetic categories she argues reflect three aspects of our late capitalist historical moment: production, commodification and exchange. In her discussion of “zaniness,” a hyper-charismatic performance mode, I found incredible parallels to the physicality, gestures and affective work occurring in neo-burlesque. Although zaniness can be traced back to the “zanni” merchants and clowns of the 16th century *commedia dell’arte*, Ngai sees the aesthetic of zaniness as particularly attuned to our current historical moment of late capitalism, in which workers are called on to give more and more of their subjectivity to the job. Ngai looks at (among others) the performances of Lucille Ball, and finds that more than anything else, Ball’s humorous antics really seem to be about work. The scenarios Ball finds herself in often occur in factories, or have her trying to secure a job for herself or her husband, and

³⁴Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: The Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 115.

invariably require a good deal of physical exertion. Although we often think of the performances of comedians like Lucille Ball as lighthearted, on closer examination, there is a striking laboriousness about them. Neo-burlesque is similarly seen as silly and jocular, but performances can be quite exhausting to watch. Performers play with timing and levels of exertion—slow then fast, frantic than exhausted—and in doing so, draw attention to the labor needed to perform those actions.

iv. *Emotional Labor and Affect Studies*

Crucial to my analysis of the artistic labor neo-burlesque performers has been the observation that much of that labor is emotional work. Not only do neo-burlesquers employ intense physicality, the intensity of that physicality is laced with strong emotions. In fact, discussions of affective and emotional labor undergird all the writings on dance and physicality mentioned above.

There are several texts on emotional labor and affect that inform my understanding of its use in neo-burlesque. Arlie Hochschild's study of Delta flight attendants in *The Managed Heart* began a rich discussion of emotional labor, arguing that in addition to the physical labor of pushing carts full of drinks, and the mental labor of organizing emergency landings, flight attendants cater to their "guests," making sure they feel safe and cared for:

This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.³⁵

³⁵Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 2003), 7.

Although often overlooked, I contend that the emotional labor Hochschild is describing is directly linked to the body. One manages feeling so as to “create a *publicly observable facial and bodily display*” which is then commercialized and sold for a wage.³⁶ And when enacted by female performers—actresses, exotic dancers, or other service workers—it takes on deeper significance given that women are already associated with bodily pleasures and feeling labor.

In *Theatre and Feeling*, theatre scholar Erin Hurley reminds readers that along with being a form of waged labor, theatrical performance has always been engaged in the making, management and display of feelings—or “feeling-labor.”³⁷ And she sees female performers, whom she describes as “a talent pool always already associated with bodily pleasures and feeling-labor because of its gender,” as the ultimate “feeling technology.”³⁸ I make a similar claim about burlesque performers. Burlesquers perform feeling labor through their sexually charged, satiric and spectacular performances, through their interaction and negotiation with audience members, and in classes at the New York School of Burlesque.

In addition to the more sociological studies done on emotional labor, scholarship in affect studies helped me to identify and explain some of the distinctive emotive qualities enacted by burlesque performers and encountered by audiences. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth define affect as “a force or forces of encounter,” something visceral other than conscious

³⁶Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 7.

³⁷Erin Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 9.

³⁸Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling*, 67-68.

knowing. This might occur between bodies or between bodies and objects, like works of art. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and Anne Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), have also provided a foundation for thinking about affect in burlesque.

v. *Costume, Fashion, and Object Theory*

In my effort to explore the work of neo-burlesque costumes, I draw on scholarship on costume, fashion studies and new materialism. Most of the literature on costume consists of technical books on construction and surveys of historical dress.³⁹ There is significantly less scholarship devoted to costume's role *in performance*. Notable exceptions include Anne Hollander's *Seeing Through Clothes* (1993), which looks at costume in visual art as well as Margorie Garber and Laurence Senelick's writing on drag.⁴⁰ Therefore, Aoife Monks' 2010 book *The Actor in Costume* was a breakthrough in costume studies. In her book, Monks imagines the various effects costume has on audiences and what kind of bodies costume creates. She argues that costume is both indistinct and distinct from an actor's body: "costume is a body that can be taken off."⁴¹ Monks even includes a chapter on nudity, arguing that "it is the presence of clothes in the act of undressing, rather than their absence" that makes nudity spectacular; and that nudity itself is a costume. Most recently, Donatella Barbieri's 2017 *Costumes in*

³⁹ See Tina Bicat's *Making Stage Costumes: A Practical Guide* (Crowood Press, 2001) and James Laver's *Costume in the Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

⁴⁰ See Anne Hollander's *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Senelick's *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴¹ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11.

Performance: Materiality, Culture and the Body has added to the field. Barbieri's book reads like a textbook, taking up select analytic frameworks and applying them to costume in different historical periods, including applying theories of the sublime to the skirt dancing of Lois Fuller. My focus on burlesque costume seeks to add to this recent scholarship that sees costume as critical to shaping performance.

In order to investigate the relationship of costume to the body I turned to fashion studies in which a rich discussion of clothes began. Fashion studies has produced a plethora of scholarship on the relationship of clothes to gender, sexuality and the wearer, including Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* (1993/2013), and Jane Gaines' *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* (1990). Valerie Steele's oeuvre on fashion's relationship to sexuality, including *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Age Through the Jazz Age* (1985), *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power* (1996), *The Corset* (2003), and *The Fan: Fashion and Femininity Unfolded* (2002), was essential in providing historical background for thinking about costume pieces in neo-burlesque, particular the corset, fans and the accoutrements of fetish.

Dorinne Kondo and Llewellyn Negrin's work also proved useful. Kondo's writing on non-Western fashion examines how Japanese avant-garde designers in the 1980s were "enact[ing] oppositional gestures to convention" through their clothing and staging of their runway shows:

Contesting the boundaries between fashion and art, challenging the conventions about what counts as clothing, rethinking the relationship between form and function and the relationship between garments and gendered, raced bodies, refiguring the beautiful, enlarging the possibilities for enacting gender, and subverting the gender binary.⁴²

⁴²Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 105.

Unlike Western designers whose cutting and tailoring articulated a curvy feminine body, “creating idealized version of feminine curves,” the designs of Kawakubo, Miyake, and Yamamoto changed with the wearer—they conformed to the shape of the person who wore the garment and could be worn in multiple ways. In their use of elastic and unconventional tailoring in one item of clothing, “wearers could choose where to put their heads.”⁴³ Kondo’s analysis caused me to consider the interactive quality of garments in burlesque, how they might be affecting performers and the sometimes unusual materials burlesquers incorporate into their ensembles.

Negrin’s writing on ornamentation and its historical association with femininity helped me to think through the embellishment of burlesque costumes. Negrin points out that several feminist postmodernists have sought to reclaim ornamentation such as Schor’s work on aesthetic detail, which celebrates ornament’s lack of utility and unintentionality. For Schor, detail “appears as a luxurious extra that participates in an ‘economy of excess’.”⁴⁴ Detail appeals to the senses and defies interpretation. Negrin ultimately argues that the postmodern reclamation of ornament actually reinforces modernists’ view because it ignores the semiotic meaningfulness of “sensuous embellishment.” Most neo-burlesquers embrace ornamentation, they spend hours embellishing costumes and making headpieces. In many respects, burlesque costumes are the epitome of self-ornamentation; however, costume pieces in burlesque remain quite useful, they must be able to be removed and last through many performances. However,

⁴³Kondo, *About Face*, 118-120.

⁴⁴Llewellyn Negrin, “Ornament and the Feminine” in *Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 131.

what Negrin and the other scholars she sites neglect is the affective quality of ornamentation—rhinestones and feathers create an emotional response in the wearer and in the viewer. Part of why audiences are drawn to artists like Dita Von Teese *and* more avant-garde performers like Julie Atlas Muz is because their bodies and costumes are incredibly sensuous.

The studies in costume and fashion offer a rich discussion of clothes, gender and the body, yet they stay within the realm of semiotics and meaning. Beyond representation, the costumes in neo-burlesque play a phenomenological role as well. In order to analyze the pivotal role costume pieces and props play in influencing choreography in neo-burlesque, I was drawn to scholarship in new materialism and object theory. Voicing a renewed interest in the power and vibrancy of material objects, scholars of new materialism argue that, among other things, non-sentient objects have agency. Schweitzer and Zerdy's 2014 book *Performing Objects & Theatrical Things* makes clear how studies in new materialism and object theory can be used to study the theatrical objects of theatre and performance. Like some of the scholars included in their volume, I have found Robin Bernstein's work particularly helpful in discussing how costume performs in neo-burlesque.⁴⁵

In my analysis of burlesque costumes, I hope to add to recent publications in costume studies that place costume at the forefront of analysis and believe in its criticalness to performance, as well as move beyond semiotic analysis by incorporating the ideas of new materialism and object theory that emphasize the power of objects in

⁴⁵Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race" in *Social Text* 101, Winter 2009.

cueing human actors.

vi. *DIY and Craft Studies*

New York neo-burlesquers pride themselves in being independent and maintaining artistic control over their acts, which includes making or assembling their own costumes, developing their own choreography, and promoting themselves through various social media outlets. Their artistic process is best categorized as DIY, or do-it-yourself.

Scholarship on DIY spans the visual arts, media and technology and subculture. I have found literature in art history, specifically the writing on craft helpful in thinking about the DIY ethos in neo-burlesque. Craft studies is not only attentive to the skill of the artist/artisan, but also to the affective qualities of the objects they produce. The anthologies *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and *The Craft Reader* (2010) offer excellent overviews of the history of craft dating back to the 19th century and the Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as the theoretical debates over the applied vs. the fine arts, the technical vs. the conceptual. I also consulted Roszika Parker and Elissa Auther writing on women artists and the gendered implications of craft materials. Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* reevaluates the relationship between women and the art of embroidery, while Auther's *String, Felt Tread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* looks at materials that have been dismissed as merely decorative and associated with women's work. Although burlesque costumes are first and foremost garments, these books were helpful in thinking about how burlesquers labor and the materials they use.

I also found helpful resources in studies of Punk and other subcultures, such as

Brent Luuvas's 2012 study *DIY Style: Fashion, Music and Global Digital Cultures* as well as David Gauntlett's writing on DIY practice as a form of connection.⁴⁶

V. **Methodology**

The primary research method I used to obtain information on the neo-burlesque scene in New York was ethnographic fieldwork. I have followed the New York scene intermittently for over a decade, but began my fieldwork in earnest in June of 2015. In many respects, I jumped into the deep end by attending one of the largest burlesque events in the country, the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender (BHOF) in Las Vegas. The Weekender is an annual four-day fundraiser for The Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum and attracts the biggest names in the burlesque community. One highlight is the Legends Show in which the "living legends" of burlesque take the stage. The year I attended I was able to see April March, Camille 2000 and Toni Elling perform. I also met Tempest Storm. The other highlight of the Weekender is the Miss Exotic World Competition, which culminates in the crowning of Miss Exotic World, or the Queen of Burlesque. In addition to attending shows, I sat in on panel discussion with prominent performers on gender and a workshop on documenting burlesque history during the day, traversed the Burlesque Bazaar (a huge room of burlesque vendors) and visited the Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum.

In November of 2015 I participated in the neo-burlesque community's other large-scale event, BurlyCon, a burlesque convention held every fall in Seattle,

⁴⁶David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Washington. Unlike BHOF, BurlyCon is educational in focus and does not center around performances. Rather, each day is full of craft and movement workshops, topical lectures and social networking events. I participated in a workshop on how to incorporate LED lights into costumes, a lecture on body image and stigma and a performance review in which two performers workshopped acts-in-progress and received feedback from an esteemed panel. Although BHOF and BurlyCon were not focused on the New York scene per se, they were invaluable in terms of observing the neo-burlesque community on a larger scale (and how New York fits in). Furthermore, at BHOF I was able to witness how the community festivalizes and commemorates itself, and at BurlyCon I was able to participate in the community's artistic practices as well as listen in on its prevalent issues and concerns.

Punctuated by these large-scale events in June and November of 2015, the majority of my fieldwork over the next three years consisted of attending shows and observing performances around New York City. Over the course of my fieldwork I observed about 100 shows. Some of the venues where I observed performances were The Slipper Room, the House of Yes, Nurse Bettie, and Coney Island. However, I made a point of attending as many different venues and types of shows as I could; my goal was to get a feel for the scene as a whole. Thus, some shows/performances were at high-end dinner theatres, others were at smaller bars; and still others were part of The New York Burlesque Festival. In the beginning I would bring a small notebook to jot down my observations, but it was often too dark in the venues to do so, so I began taking a few photos on my phone and then video of a few acts per show to review later. By attending shows on a regular basis and for an extended period of time I was able to see some

performers and their acts multiple times and get a feel for their style and how they depart from what they normally do.

In addition to observing performances, the other significant part of my fieldwork consisted of participating in classes at The New York School of Burlesque. Founded in 2003 by Jo Weldon, the school is a jumping off place for many would-be burlesque performers. Classes are held in the studios at Playwright Horizons Theatre School at 440 Lafayette Street. I began by signing up for the four-week “Essentials Series” in July of 2015, in which I learned a chair dance, acquired basic skill in tassel twirling and experimented with feather fans. An “Act Development” class soon followed, and then a few classes per month. Overall, I participated in fifty-two classes. Like the Essentials class, some of these classes met once a week for three to four weeks, others were single two to three-hour workshops. These classes served as my entry into the New York scene and my unintentional foray into burlesque performance. I was able to perform in five student showcases (three group performances and two solo acts). I also participated in several burlesque-related events, including The Coney Island Mermaid Parade and the New York Easter Bonnet Parade.

Through the school I was able to establish relationships and cultivate friendships with performers, witness the artistic labor of my informants and be privy to the conversations about the art form that now serve as the basis for this dissertation. Taking classes at the school also served as a kind of home base for reestablishing and deepening those connections throughout my fieldwork. Through the relationships I established at the school, I was able to conduct eight in-depth interviews and numerous in-formal interviews with performers. The in-depth interviews were one to two hours long and took

place in person, at restaurants or in the home of the performer I was interviewing.

In addition to the more conventional forms of ethnographic methods, I also conducted participant observation through social media and on the Internet. Neo-burlesquers utilize social media like Instagram and Facebook to advertise their shows and promote themselves. I have been a member of two Facebook groups on which I observed calls for shows, and performers' questions, concerns and grievances: "NYC Burlesque Shows and Related Arts" and "NYC Burlesque Performers-Industry Only." The performer Facebook group is a private group where producers share calls for gigs, performers may share which stores in the garment district are having sales on trim, and/or who in the city might be available to tailor your spandex pieces in a pinch.

Archival research was also done in libraries in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and New York City. I collected flyers, programs and looked at playbills when available, researched available footage of filmed performances, and studied newspaper reviews and commentaries.

VI. Chapter Overview

In chapter one I present a contemporary history of neo-burlesque in New York City. My research is based on four in-depth interviews with Bambi the Mermaid, Angie Pontani, Bonnie Dunn and Jo "Boobs" Weldon. Each of these performers/producers played an important role in the emergence and development of the neo-burlesque scene in the 1990s. Bambi the Mermaid started to incorporate striptease into her sideshow acts on Coney Island and along with The Great Fredini started "Burlesque at the Beach," the longest running neo-burlesque show in the city. Angie Pontani got her start as one of

Dutch Weismann's showgirls, a revivalist show in the early 90s and then went on to form The Pontani Sisters, and produce the New York Burlesque Festival. Bonnie Dunn was a performer and later took over producing duties at The Blue Angel, an important incubator for neo-burlesque. While Jo "Boobs" Weldon founded the New York School of burlesque in 2003, which has contributed to the growth of the scene.

In chapter two I zoom in on the contemporary neo-burlesque stage and describe and analyze performance. Assuming the role of an expert audience member, I discuss the work of costume and choreography. Specifically I argue that burlesque costume pieces cue choreography as well as establish aesthetic and character, moving beyond a semiotic analysis typically utilized in discussions of costume. In the second half of the chapter I look at what I refer to as performances of exertion, overworked and emotive physicality that seems to be about work itself. I use the theoretical insights of Bojana Kunst and Sianne Ngai to note how accelerated flexibility and moments of stillness align and/or resist prominent modes of late capitalist production.

And in chapter three, I take an embodied approach to understanding the DIY practices of the neo-burlesque scene off stage, in the classes offered through the New York School of Burlesque. I trace my own participation in a series of act development, costume, and floorwork classes.

Chapter 1

Wildcards to Revivalists

A History of New York Neo-Burlesque

In the early 1990s a neo-burlesque scene did not yet exist in New York. The term “burlesque,” and the history of the art form, was not yet on artists’ cultural radar. There were groups of performance artists experimenting with nudity and incorporating it into their work; strip-club strippers experimenting with more theatrical modes of self-expression; and still others who were influenced by the tide of nostalgia sweeping the nation, and looking to the past for inspiration. By the end of the decade, these same artists, along with the journalists and audiences who were following them, started to call what they did burlesque. Based on in-depth interviews and media coverage of the scene, this chapter focuses on the work of four performers and their contributions to establishing the neo-burlesque scene in New York: their acts, inspirations and the aesthetics they employed.

Historically, the 1990s does not seem that long ago. Yet over a twenty year period has passed and neo-burlesque has grown and evolved. A variety of styles have emerged and there are now scenes throughout the country and internationally. In New York, one of birth places of neo-burlesque, veteran performers have witnessed these changes and have had time to reflect. Michelle Baldwin’s 2004 book, *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind*, provides an excellent overview of some of the individuals and cultural-historical factors that contributed to the emergence of the East Coast, West Coast, and

New Orleans scenes, which happened simultaneously and initially without knowledge of each other. As Baldwin points out, performers in New Orleans and Los Angeles were looking for new forms of eroticism with which to express themselves. They expressed a renewed fascination with pinup pictorials of the 40s and 50s; were transplants from the Rockabilly and swing scenes; and drew directly from older waves of burlesque. While New York performers were referring to what they were doing as “nude performance art.” New York performers did not fit neatly into established art worlds, and were primarily performing at late night parties in the East Village and on the Lower East Side. They were involved in fetish, drag, experimental theatre and performing in strip joints. Unlike the West Coast scenes, New York performers did not set out to revive burlesque, but eventually adopted the term based on the reactions of audiences and journalists; and came to find burlesque a viable mode of performance to express themselves creatively.

This chapter builds on Baldwin’s book by providing an in-depth discussion of the emergence of the New York scene. After conducting interviews with some of the primary players of the revival, my research reveals the scene to be a marriage of stripping and performance art propelled by an undercurrent of nostalgia. Many early New York neo-burlesque performers were performing theatrical striptease in strip clubs and/or were transplants from more mainstream strip clubs, who were incorporating fire, masks and fans. In their recollections, a continuum of theatricality within strip joints emerges, something often considered lost or long dead. By focusing on their labor, this chapter hopes to give visibility to the contributions of these performers to the scene.

Typically in histories of burlesque, there is an emphasis on how burlesque was regulated by vice squads, and its “death” is indicated as occurring around 1960. Despite the

importance of these studies and their emphasis, the artistry and outrageousness of burlesque acts are not fully examined and the continuity into later decades and into strip clubs of the 1970s, 80s and 90s are overlooked. In some of my informants responses, that continuum can be seen. This chapter therefore hopes to intervene into histories of burlesque.

This chapter also traces how the label of burlesque gets attached to the burgeoning scene, and the influence of the media and audiences. Performers adopted the term after writers and audience members began to refer to what they were doing as “burlesque.” Journalists also categorized the scene as feminist, and framed it in opposition to mainstream stripping. Neo-burlesque certainly was, and is, different from mainstream stripping, but such framing also worked to reinforce a binary between the two.

Furthermore, the development of the performance scene emerges that defies easy categorization. Much like the subculture of punk, neo-burlesque developed on the outskirts of mainstream art worlds, in the nightlife parties on the Lower East Side and the East Village. They were ragtag operations who constructed performances of self, which involved a specific aesthetics and the “shocking” performance of nudity. However, once they meet up with their West Coast counterparts and connect to the legends of burlesque the scene takes on characteristics of an artistic movement and revival. Through their retellings, a performance scene that contains elements of subculture, artistic movement and revival emerges.

The greater part of the chapter focuses on four female performer who contributed to the development of the New York neo-burlesque scene in the 1990s and the spaces in

which they performed: Bambi the Mermaid is considered the “Queen of Coney Island,” credited with bringing burlesque back to the Brooklyn wonderland; Bonnie Dunn performed and later took over producing duties at The Blue Angel, a venue that served as an artistic incubator for New York neo-burlesque artists; Angie Pontani was a chorus girl in Dutch Weismann’s Follies, the first revivalist show of the decade. She also formed the popular trio The Pontani Sisters and began producing The New York Burlesque Festival in 2002; And Jo Weldon founded The New York School of Burlesque in 2003, which helped to further develop the New York scene. Toward the end of the chapter I briefly discuss the opening of the Exotic World Museum and the first Tease-O-Rama festival, two events that occurred outside the city but had a profound influence on New York performers, helping to solidify a community, and turn a passing fad into a revival. In my summation of the chapter I reflect on some of the characteristics of the New York scene today, and how it has developed since the 1990s.

I. Bambi the Mermaid and Burlesque at the Beach

“I was doing really weird performance and I liked strip clubs,” Bambi tells me. Bambi the Mermaid is part of the old guard of New York neo-burlesque. She doesn’t perform as much as she used to, but still produces Burlesque at the Beach, a summer-long series of shows on Coney Island she began producing in the mid-1990s. You can also find her leading the annual Mermaid Parade along Surf Avenue, Coney’s main drag, in June, sporting a huge wig, pasties and a brightly colored sea-inspired ensemble. I interviewed her in the summer of 2017 in the backyard of her Brooklyn apartment.

Bambi moved to New York in 1991 from Florida and started performing at small

venues around the city, any opportunity “to wear costumes and be really weird.” She studied photography in school and was working as a hairdresser to pay the bills, but was drawn to exhibitionism. She had already produced a series of self-portraits which she showed me. In them she appears in various locales wearing a variety of masks and takes provocative poses. In one, she wears a school girl’s outfit and a hirsute dog mask: “I didn’t know what to do with them, so I turned them into cards.”



Figures 1.1 – 1.5

A series of self-portraits Bambi had made into playing cards, gift to the author

About her time in the 1990s, Bambi tells me she worked at strip clubs like Billie's Topless in Chelsea and performed at the fetish-oriented weekly party Jackie 60 in the Meatpacking District. Clubs she describes as featuring more performance-based nudity unlike mainstream strip joints: "I wore animal masks a lot, definitely not your standard fare." Bambi was also involved in the fetish scene and worked as a dominatrix—"I mean we all did. It was the 90s." This was yet another platform for provocative displays of sexuality and costume: "there were these huge balls where I would dress up."⁴⁷

In a series of acts she was performing at the time, Bambi experimented with infantilism, creating "Bambi's Baby Land Circus." In these acts, which included a rotating cast of characters, Bambi would dress up like a baby and get it on with one of the huge blowup animals she had collected, or enlist another performer to be "the elephant guy." These acts also became opportunities to incorporate the interesting masks and objects she had acquired from hole-in-the wall sex shops in the city or in her travels. Interestingly she "always played an animal of some sort, never a real woman." Bambi eventually started "laying eggs," dressing up like a chicken, stripping out her costume and producing a large egg.⁴⁸ She considers this to be her first burlesque act because it involved a glove peel, bra removal and was set to exotica music.

The other "weird" performance Bambi participated in was sideshow, eventually making her way down to Coney Island's infamous boardwalk and performing in a variety

⁴⁷The subculture of fetish or BDSM (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism) gains traction in the 1990s in nightclubs and balls. Fetish refers to a series of erotic experiences and aesthetics that involve the enactment of submissive and dominant roles in a consensual environment. Participants may utilize props such as whips, chains, ropes and gags; and evoke scenarios that draw pleasure from pain. A dominatrix is a female performer who enacts a dominant persona, usually dressed in leather or latex, a hat and high-heeled boots.

⁴⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGj7WRw5o2A>

show. Sideshow had been a featured form of entertainment on Coney Island since its inception at the turn of the century, and a few artists in the early 1990s were trying to revive it, but by featuring self-made freaks, rather than biological oddities.⁴⁹ The show Bambi performed in was run by The Great Fredini and Kiva. Fred did comedy and sword swallowing and Kiva was known as “the grinder girl,” who would “grind” a buzz saw against her metal chastity belt creating a shower of sparks. At first Bambi did snake- charming and had a bed-of nails act, but soon began to incorporate striptease: “I would dress up like a mermaid and then strip out of it.” And apparently the crowd loved it, “It was *sooo* much better than just walking around with a snake!” This is also how she acquired her name. She had chosen the name Bambi when she was working in strip clubs, and then when she began dressing as a mermaid, people started to refer to her as “Bambi the Mermaid.”

At first, Fred and Keva called their show “Tirza’s,” after the last burlesque house on Coney Island, Tirza’s Wine Bath. The original Tirza gained notoriety at the 1939 World’s Fair, but became a mainstay on Coney Island throughout the 1950s for her act in which she bathed in a large fountain of red wine. Fred and Kiva eventually had to change the name after they received a cease and desist letter from Tirza herself, who was still alive and living in Florida. To avoid a lawsuit, they called the show “Burlesque at the Beach.”

Around 1995, when Fred and Kiva divorced, Bambi took over producing duties and started to book more striptease acts. Bambi booked many of the artists she saw and

⁴⁹Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (Denver: Speck Press, 2004), 28.

met at the shows she was attending and performing at in the East Village. At Flamengo East, located on 2nd Ave. near 13th Street, Bambi met Julie Atlas Muz, Tigger!, and Dirty Martini, three performers who were doing equally “weird nude performance.” Julie Atlas Muz was a conceptual performer and choreographer. One of her early acts involved trying to free herself from a thick rope that wrapped around body to the tune of “You Don’t Own Me.” Tigger!, who would become the first neo-“boylesquer,” or man doing burlesque in the 1990s, was performing with experimental theatre artist Penny Arcade. Tigger!’s first burlesque act was more comedic. It involved feigning an awful sunburn, a painful strip out of his clothes and then some high-flying acrobatic dance moves. Dirty Martini’s acts were more classic, or reminiscent of the 1940s and 1950s burlesque aesthetic. She had already performed a fan dance for her final thesis project in the dance program at SUNY Purchase. When she moved to the city, she added a balloon act to her arsenal; dancing en pointe in a “dress” of red balloons and then popped each of them with a cigarette until the final reveal. Bambi says together these performers made up New York neo-burlesque’s first “core group.”

Unlike other neo-burlesque scenes on the West Coast and New Orleans, New York neo-burlesque did not intend to resurrect the past. But they inevitably saw parallels, made connections and embraced the women who had done what they came to represent. Bambi the Mermaid did not see herself as a revivalist then and still considers herself a performance artist today. But she has always felt a kinship with the women in the art form:

From the turn of the century onward, burlesque attracted these women who were wildcards! They weren’t going to be traditional: wives, or mothers. They were going to be theatrical, free-spirited, and show their bodies. They were going to be rebellious, confrontational, and tongue and cheek with their sexuality...In the

1980s, yeah, they had fake tans and wore neon bikinis and were doing lap dances, but they were the same breed. In the '90s that girl became a dominatrix, now she was wearing a zebra mask at the strip club.

In addition to the small clubs in the East Village, the sideshow stage on Coney Island became an important locale for these performers. With the Great Fredini, Bambi helped create a space where these artists could be “weird” and provocative, a tradition that continues today. Although the word burlesque and the history of the art form was not on Bambi’s radar, her artistic impulses, the use of nudity and sexual explicitness, of masks and other performative objects, finds a home in Coney Island, with its history of girl shows and sideshow performance. It is this marriage of nudity, performance art and an undercurrent of Coney’s unique Americana that becomes the ground for an unintentional revival.

II. The World Famous *BOB*

Another performance artist, The World Famous *BOB* soon become an important member of this core group. Like Bambi, *BOB* was working downtown and would later identify what she did as burlesque. Originally from California, *BOB* was involved in the drag communities in Los Angeles and San Francisco. And although she was a woman, BOB found herself identifying with the gay male drag performers she was hanging out with, renaming herself after The Cure’s Robert Smith, and eventually passing as a drag queen; once explaining her ample cleavage to an inquisitive queen as a careful positioning of “back fat.”⁵⁰

In *BOB*’s “One Man Show,” which I saw her perform at Joe’s Pub in 2009 and

⁵⁰The World Famous *BOB*, *One Man Show*, Joe’s Pub, 2010.

again at The Wild Project in 2011, *BOB* tells the story of her life from wayward girl to drag queen, to ultimately finding the burlesque community in New York. After setting up a kissing booth in San Francisco to fund her move to New York, *BOB* got a job at The Cock, a gay bar on 12th Street and Avenue A. As nightly host and emcee she always seemed to be taking her top off. Bambi remembers *BOB* doing topless aerobics; eating cheeseburgers while doing strenuous calisthenics sans bra. One night, *BOB* decided to “class it up,” by donning a Marilyn Monroe wig and mixing a martini in her cleavage. After the show, someone in the audience came up to her and said, “I love your burlesque!”⁵¹ *BOB* had heard the word before, but never associated it with what she was doing. The next day she went over to the Thompson Square Park branch of the New York Public Library and looked up burlesque. She remembers discovering pages of women who looked like her. In a memorable line from her show *BOB* exclaims, “I had to go to a gay bar on 12th Street to realize I was a girl, that I was a woman!”⁵²

BOB has referred to herself as a “*female* female impersonator,” a woman who does female drag, which makes sense, given her connection to the drag community and her makeup and hair aesthetics—false eyelashes, painted on brows and blonde wig. In the 1980s and 1990s, the drag scene in New York, particularly in the East Village and Lower East Side was thriving, exemplified by Wigstock, an annual festival held from 1984 to 2004 in Thompson Square Park, in which *BOB* participated. In Gary Beeber’s 2011 documentary *Dirty Martini and the New Burlesque* Dirty Martini also claims to have been influenced by the drag scene on the Lower East Side in ‘90s. She has referred to

⁵¹World Famous *BOB*, *One Man Show*.

⁵²Ibid.

herself, and the women of burlesque as “uber-women.”

III. Bonnie Dunn and The Blue Angel

Like Burlesque at the Beach, The Blue Angel was another space that would give rise to neo-burlesque performers and performance. Originally located in New York’s Tribeca neighborhood, The Blue Angel was a strip club that featured performance art on the weekends. Bonnie Dunn began performing there soon after it opened in 1993. At the time, Bonnie was making a living as a cabaret singer, performing along 42nd Street between 8th and 9th Avenues known as Theatre Row. She also toured internationally: “I would travel to Bangkok, Greece, and I was in, um, Denmark singing.” Originally from New Orleans, Bonnie maintains she always had a “burlesque sensibility.” She already had a big feather fan, but wasn’t sure how she was going to use it; and remembers seeing her first strip show when she was still in high school: “It was like female impression...but they did strip and tucked it under...” Bonnie also knew the word burlesque from her parents who grew up in the 40s and 50s and talked a little bit about it. Bonnie’s father was also in show business. He worked as a radio DJ, singer, and night club comedian. And her mother taught herself to play the piano: “She would play this real honkytonk style.”

When I interviewed Bonnie in 2017, she had just turned 60. Soft-spoken and dignified, we chatted over bowls of broccoli soup in the back of a sports bar in midtown, around the corner from her apartment at the time. Our interview lasted for over an hour and her responses were quite telling. They spoke to the impetus for the club, important changes in its development, and some of the other artists who performed there. For this

reason, I include a large portion of her responses. In the following excerpt from our interview Bonnie explained how her cabaret work informed her audition at The Blue

Angel:

So, I had a little bit of that element to my cabaret performance. I always wore—I mean have pictures of me and I’m like that was so burlesque because I have...the hat, and the lacy long gloves and dresses that were like the ballroom gowns. I think I had that sensibility. And when I found The Blue Angel it was just a very small ad that said they were looking for performance artists or acts or something for a kind of underground club. And I really wasn’t familiar with a lot of performance art. I hadn’t seen it. I wasn’t in that, but I loved it. I was really fascinated by it. Um, so I went to it [the audition] as a singer. And I did striptease because I had go-go danced. Well, it’s only two pasties. I had stripped in New York. I had done some parties. You know, when you jump out of a cake and all of that so it was a natural progression to combine the two. They just flowed naturally. So they said, “You’re hired!” (Laughs)...

When Bonnie casually revealed little gems like jumping out of a cake, I couldn’t resist but to inquire further. So, I asked her how else she was making a living in addition to her cabaret work:

BD: Well, I did that. And I did singing-telegrams, children’s shows and any performance art background I had was from stripper-grams.

EF: Stripper-grams!?! Those sound awesome.

BD: Yeah, I wish they came back. I had a costume as a business woman and I would come in and interview for a job and then I’d turn on the boombox because we had tapes then. Yeah, I had a bag lady routine. I would break up a party. I had all these different characters...You would pretend you were arresting someone...

The owner of the Blue Angel, Ute Hanna, was a former stripper and actress herself, and wanted to create a space that women would feel comfortable in—a space where strippers could express their sexuality on their own terms and where women felt comfortable attending as patrons. From the time Ute opened in 1993, to the time Bonnie took over in the early 2000s, The Blue Angel gained notoriety as a feminist strip club. In

the following exchange, I asked Bonnie about her time at The Blue Angel.

EF: So you answered the ad for The Blue Angel, was it in *The Village Voice*?

BD: I think so. There was a woman named Otter that was running it and now Ute is the woman who owed it.⁵³ And she had worked in strip clubs and she was also an actress. And she thought you know; I'd like to have a really cool place where women would feel comfortable and you don't feel pressured. And then Otter kind of, you know it's a little hazy for me, but from what I understand, Otter brought in, started bringing in performance artists. And Ute was very open minded, like she would have anyone come in. So, she kind of changed the tone of it and everything...

EF: Otter changed the tone?

BD: Yeah...So Monday through Thursday was just a straight off strip club. And it had like lap dancing and then um, during Thursday, Friday and Saturday were performances so we actually came in on that night. The magician, me, there was a few of us. A belly dancer who didn't strip. A comedian. An MC guy. I sang, I sang and stripped. That was unusual for that time. I was like the only fan dancer. But then there was Dirty Martini that I didn't know about. And she was doing a fan dance. I don't know when though. And that was '94 it started. I mean I should really look at some of the press to see, but I think she opened at the end of '93 and at first it was called Fallen Angels and then something happened and it had to be changed to The Blue Angel...And then when that got closed down she moved it to other, different locations.

EF: Where was it located?

BD: It was originally in Tribeca. So, there was no signage. There was a little blue light. And you descend[ed] down these stairs. And I was like what am I getting into? No exit door and we had fire acts! She had no cabaret license. I don't even know if she had a liquor license. She didn't have an apartment at the time...She was sleeping on the lap dance couch for a while because that was the only apartment she could get. Then she ended up living on this tug boat. So, she's a very interesting person too. Everyone said we were like sisters but we were very different. She was this tall, very bawdy...kinda person. But we must have had this connection. And then, um, she ended up giving me the show...

EF: Can you describe some of the acts you did at The Blue Angel?

⁵³In my interview with Bambi the Mermaid she also mentioned Otter, who was known for her "shocking nude performance," including taking polaroids of her vagina, which was tattooed with flames, and handing them out to the audience. (Interview with author, 2017, Brooklyn)

BD: Well, I was pretty tame (laughs) compared to them. Um, it was weird but I would come out in a gown and sometimes I would do like three or four songs and sometimes I'd be naked. We would be naked. I don't know what that meant. When I look back, what was I doing? I did that and I had one where I was pregnant and I had a baby and I sang 'I Should Have Danced All Night,'... 'Summertime' I would do...I would always have a male dancer and we would dance real sexy together...

EF: Do you remember some of the other acts and performers at The Blue Angel?

BD: Well, Velocity Chyalld. She was always a very creative person. She did a thing with lights under a blanket. I remember, (laughs) she took a whole bath on stage! (Laughs) And the stage was dry when she got off. Oh, I remember one that stood out for me. Her stage name was Malaria. And she was like a comic genius. She's the one person I feel pulled off performance art...She even had a CD and she would smoke a joint and listen to it. I can't even explain the acts but she would take you into her world with all these characters...And then Flambo. And um, the Bindlestiffs. And he [Flambo] would do an act, he was very good-looking and sexy, he would do an act, do you know what auto-eroticism is?

EF: I have an idea.

BD: I don't get it either. But people like they almost hang themselves and bring themselves to the brink, almost die and then have an orgasm. Well, he would do something like that and then make his penis go on fire with this penis-extension fire thing...I feel like The Box, when they first opened, really tried to model...It seems to me that that's the closest to what it was. Um, of course there was a magician. She was in her 60s at the time. She was hysterical...She would use live birds. One would die every night practically. (Laughs) One stripper, (still laughing) she came out with the bird dangling, and she goes, "Your bird's dead." People would just come to see what was gonna happen...⁵⁴

EF: What about the audience. Who was there?

BD: A lot of artists. You had the downtown, you know, business man that would just come in, and then you had women. And once Hollywood found out about it, 'cause Drew Barrymore would go there, and then she went on The Tonight Show and she stripped on his desk—Letterman. And then we had a lot of celebrities.

⁵⁴The Box is an upscale club on the Lower East Side that features a variety of live performance, including music, theatre, burlesque and erotica.

i. Press Coverage on The Blue Angel

Most of the press on The Blue Angel confirmed Bonnie's recollections. A short piece on the club appeared in *New York Magazine* in 1994. Entitled "Gypsy It Ain't," it quickly drew a distinction between the film and striptease of Gypsy Rose Lee and the performances at The Blue Angel, called Fallen Angels then. The writer, Nancy Jo Sales, described the vibe as a "theatre of erotica, combining Isherwood's Berlin, American burlesque and *fin de siècle* performance art." Otter was named as manager and feature stripper: "I was kicked out of every other strip joint I worked, because I was too weird and creative." Sales also noted the "rapt" audience, unlike the "slack-jawed" clientele at regular strip joints who "ogle homogamous blondes"; and wondered if Fallen Angels was the "logical development in our illogical passion for disrobing...or a great big joke for imaginative women who like to get naked?" A picture of the performer Felicia Blue accompanied the piece. In it, Blue is barefoot, wearing a dress made out of blue and purple metallic streamers and an abstract face mask.

In 1996, Melanie Bush wrote an exposé on the club for *The Village Voice*. Bush attended on four separate occasions after hearing "women feel comfortable as customers" and wondered if The Blue Angel was a feminist strip club. She described the space as low-tech, with a separate area for lap dancing and old *Teaserama* posters on the wall.⁵⁵ During her visits she catches a performer who dances with a live pig, another who performs a "traditional strip" and yet another who performs a more satirical act: dressed as a man she sits on small commode with a newspaper and cigar; the final reveal is the

⁵⁵*Teaserama* is a 1955 "sexploitation" film directed by Irving Klaw. It presents a series of burlesque performances and stars Tempest Storm and Bettie Page.

gay porn mag hidden underneath. Bush admits she feels more comfortable watching the stage performances rather than the lap dancing because the woman performing seems more present, and doesn't appear emotionally detached: "Lila does a traditional strip routine about which there's nothing regular at all because her seductiveness comes from her eyes, which mirror a mind fully present—not the Playboy-presented lust mask strippers often slap on their faces so their minds can wander." Bush interviews Ute, and a few performers and patrons about whether sex work is feminist. They all agreed that it was at The Blue Angel, given the fact it was run by a woman, performers had the choice to offer lap dances or not, and that they had the opportunity/freedom to experiment within the definition of striping, incorporating fire handling and satire. Their responses about lap dancing were mixed, and there were a few interesting exchanges about how holding back complete sexual fulfillment, connection and monetary exchange effected this. Bush is ultimately not convinced lap dancing is feminist, but she was impressed with the stage acts, which seemed to offer performers a broader set of opportunities for creative expression.

Then in 1998, an article on The Blue Angel appeared in *The New York Times*. The headline read: "Burlesque Is Back: a Step Ahead of the Law." It seems by 1998 the term "burlesque" was being used to describe the acts at The Blue Angel and there were enough shows happening in the city to consider it a revival. Like the other pieces, the writer, Angela Tribelli, made a point to distinguish The Blue Angel from mainstream strip clubs: "No surgically enhanced Barbie-clones...No businessmen with \$100 bills in their teeth."⁵⁶ And went on to describe some of the acts including a performer who stripped out

⁵⁶Angela Tribelli, "Burlesque Is Back: a Step Ahead of the Law" in *The New York Times*

of a Minnie Mouse costume, another who poured hot wax on herself, and Velocity Chyaldd's "Ameba Sack"—the act Bonnie mentioned in her interview—adding that under a transparent drop cloth, Velocity recites poetry as she shines flashlights on her naked body save for a pair of butterfly wings. Tribelli also noted that the club no longer featured "bottomless dancers and lap dancing" after Ute lost her lease at her previous location, and reopened on the Lower East Side. Tribelli linked this change to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's "crackdown on strip clubs and adult video stores." She concluded that the crackdown seemed to have helped the nascent burlesque revival. In short supply, burlesque was filling the erotic void in the city and simultaneously re-politicizing nudity.⁵⁷

When Ute walked away from The Blue Angel around 2001, Bonnie took over as producer and changed the name of the show to "Le Scandal." She admits she took the show in a more commercial direction—selling tickets beforehand, limiting some of the more outrageous acts—but tried to maintain the performance art element.

EF: When you took over producing duties, you changed the name to Le Scandal?

BD: Yeah, I had to. She (Ute) told me to...Some people left because they didn't like the artistic direction I was going in. It broke up into different groups. Velocity started her "BadAss" a little bit later...You're more everyone's pal when you're a performer.⁵⁸ And then when you're hiring people...But through the years it persisted...It's sixteen and half years. It just keeps going. (Laughs) I ran it with Ute for two years before I took over and kept the books because she didn't keep books...

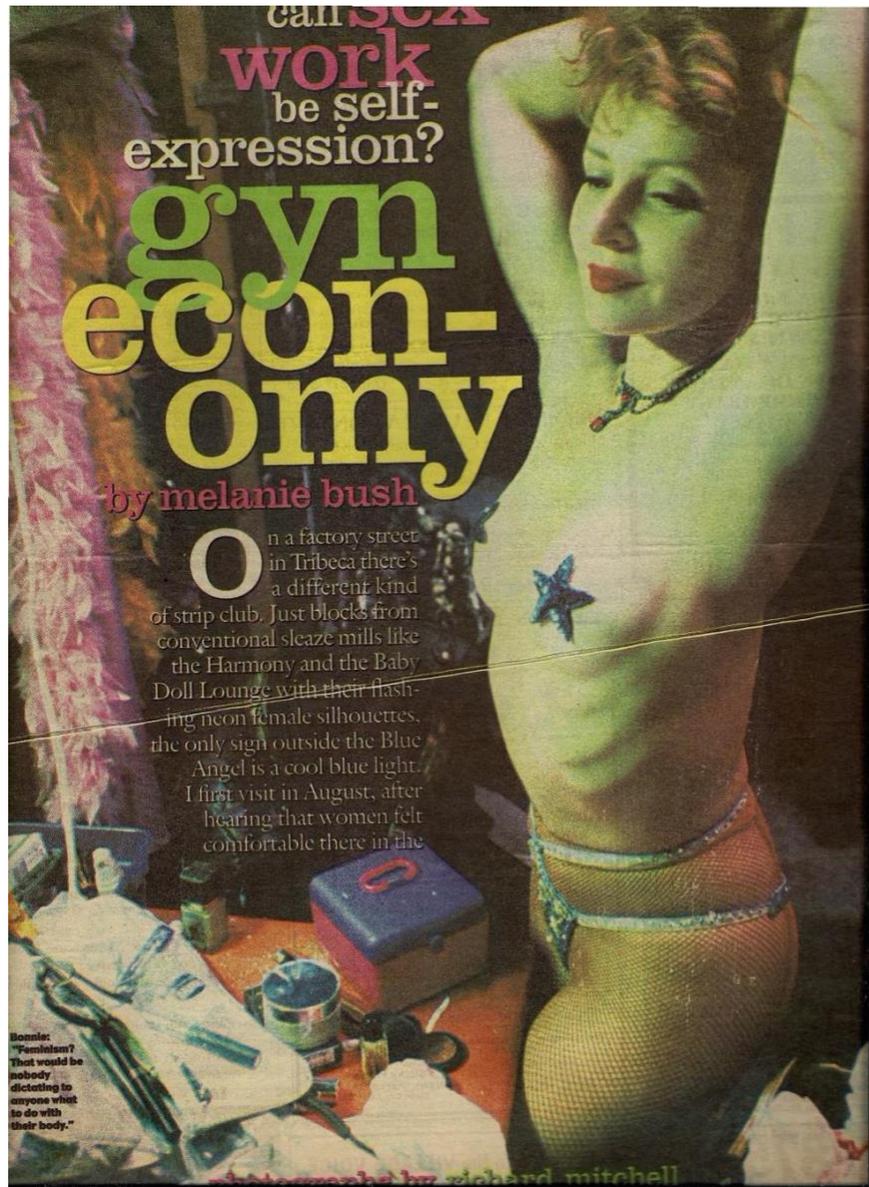
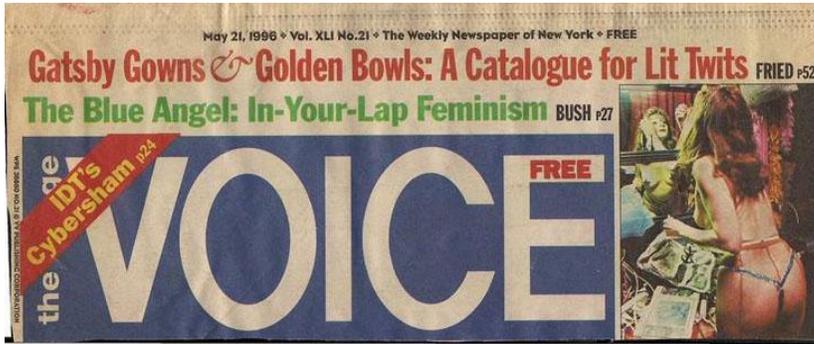
(October 4th 1998), ST4.

⁵⁷It is difficult to prove if Giuliani's "crackdown" on Times Square's adult theatres and sex shops helped to generate interest and audiences for neo-burlesque in the 1990s. It did radically change the look and feel of Times Square—transforming the area into a more sanitized Disneyland for tourists. See Samuel Delaney's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸"BadAss Burlesque" was a show run by the performer Velocity Chyaldd for over fifteen years.

Le Scandal continues its run every Saturday night at the Laurie Beechman Theatre, an intimate dinner theatre on 42nd Street on the lower level of the West Bank Café. Shows typically feature a comedic host who may sing or do magic, a solo striptease performer, and possibly a juggler and belly dancer.

The Blue Angel is important to the history of neo-burlesque because the solo striptease acts it came to feature (and that came to be called neo-burlesque) emerge out of a merging of stripping and performance art within a strip club/lap dance setting. At various times, the club was run by former strip club strippers who were looking to express themselves differently. Ute Hanna's background as a stripper and her intention for a space in which "women felt comfortable", as well as Otter's experience as being "too weird" for conventional strip joints, speaks to this. Bonnie's experience and contribution to The Blue Angel is interesting too; she brings to it a New Orleans-infused "burlesque sensibility" that included the accoutrements of classic burlesque: fans, long gowns, and gloves.



Figures 1.6 and 1.7: Bonnie Dunn on the cover of *The Village Voice*, 1996

IV. Angie Pontani, The Pontani Sisters, and Dutch Weismann's

Around 1995, while Bambi the Mermaid was stripping out of her mermaid costume on Coney Island and Bonnie Dunn was singing “Summertime” before taking it off at The Blue Angel, Angie Pontani, another would-be foremother of neo-burlesque, auditioned to be a chorus girl at an underground revivalist show in Chelsea. This underground show was called Dutch Weismann’s Follies. Today, Angie happens to be one of the biggest names in neo-burlesque. Known as the “Italian Stallionette,” she has a huge following on social media and recently began a residency in Vegas with her husband’s jazz band, The Brian New Newman Quintet, at which Lady Gaga is known to show up. In person, Angie is warm and down-to-earth; a fast talker with a thick New Jersey accent. I interviewed Angie in 2017 at a small cafe in her Brooklyn neighborhood.

A bit like Gaga, Angie said she spent about a minute at New York University’s Tisch School of Arts in the mid-90s before dropping out. She wanted to perform but hated school, so she got a job at a coffee shop and started to go on auditions: “I always wanted to be an actress or a dancer or something, but when I actually started to go to these auditions I was like, I just want to be myself. I’m only interested in playing Carmen Miranda! Like, I had a skewed vision of what that was, [but I knew] I only wanted to be fabulous, nothing else.”⁵⁹ A self-proclaimed ‘swing kid,’ Angie says she was “always dressing in a vintage way and affecting that look,” so when one of her fellow baristas (also a dancer) told her about a revivalist show that was holding auditions, Angie went.

⁵⁹This is an interesting comment. Angie, who would later find her calling as a burlesque performer, is essentially distinguishing burlesque from acting and dancing—although burlesque relies on both. For Angie, burlesque is a performance of one/self, or a version of one/self. And her identification with Carmen Miranda, the Portuguese/Brazilian performer who exploited both her ethnicity and sexuality into an over-the-top fabulousness is very burlesque.

According to Angie, Dutch Weismann's was a lavish underground show, a theatrical spectacle that aimed to recreate a bygone era. Run by producer Tony Mirando and choreographer Ami Goodhart, the show was first held in Mirando's apartment and featured chorus girls, striptease acts, comedy bits and song and dance numbers:

AP: He turned his apartment which was a railroad, into a speakeasy...It was an apartment. It was not a club. It was like, you walked up a flight of stairs. You went into his apartment. His bedroom was behind the stage and everything in front of his bedroom, like the kitchen and everything else; he literally built banquets in the side. Like, he had a wise guy at the door...And the show was amazing. It was dancing girls. It was striptease numbers. It was a guy who would play the flamenco guitar and two men would do a tango, or flamenco. It was beautiful. One of best shows I've ever seen. So I saw it and went completely insane.

Designer Norman Gosney, who helped produce the show, wrote in 2012:

They were going for the good old stuff: singing, dancing, mugging for laughs, smoke and mirrors, chorus line and burlesque. All in an intimate space done up as a Victorian knocking shop. Something from Kurt Weil.⁶⁰

The first location was indeed in Mirando's loft on 23rd Street, near The Chelsea Hotel. When Angie auditioned for the show in 1995, she got in as a chorus girl: "We would do shows Friday and Saturday nights I think for like \$50 each. And we had rehearsals so much, almost every day... And I was with that show for probably about three or four years. We moved locations. They tried to go legitimate and that didn't really work out. (Laughs) Still doesn't in burlesque..."

EF: What were the acts like, do you remember?

AP: When I started? Oh, for sure! I did a couple group dance numbers. We did a number to "St. James Infirmary" which was really beautiful. There was a sexy chair dance. We did a number to a song called "Victory Stride." It was real show(girl). I still remember the choreography! When I hear the songs, my body

⁶⁰Norman Gosney, <http://www.thiscabaret.com/dutch-weismanns-follies-and-the-rebirth-of-burlesque-in-new-york/>

goes into muscle memory and I'm—my hip pops out. And then, I started as a chorus girl and then advanced toward a soloist in the show. I actually sang in the show. I did a comedic song and dance number called "How could you believe me when I said I loved you, when you know I've been a liar all my life." Um, and so, song and dance, comedy. I did some solo striptease. The show was phenomenal. And we changed it about every four months. We did seasonal reviews. It was great.

In an old photo of Angie with a few other chorus girls, it looks like they might be rehearsing for the musical *Cabaret*; they wear black sequined tops, fishnet stockings, pearl necklaces and variations of the top hat. According to Gosney, the show also featured a lounge singer, a Spanish drag queen forced to perform as a man and an "80-year-old bump-and-grinder from the 40s heyday, who would bring down the house just by removing her gloves."⁶¹

EF: Who came up with the choreography and the numbers?

AP: ...The concepts were created by the director Tony Mirando...and the show was scripted as well. There were little, in true old school burlesque, there were all these comedic interludes and skits between the girls and the host and each other um, and Tony would write all of that. And the choreographer was a girl named Ami Goodheart...Just together they were magical. And there was a guy named Norman Gosney who designed the space and he actually designed The Slipper Room. So he's gone now, in Shanghai doing something crazy. He's always doing something crazy...Collectively a bunch of people coming together to create this show.

The show ultimately closed "amid a cloud of scandal" in 1998 or '99. In order to fill "the glamorous void" in her life after Dutch Weismann's, Angie went on to form the dancing trio The Pontani Sisters, one of New York's first neo-burlesque groups:

AP: A couple of people who had known me from Dutch Weismann's were reaching out to me and they were like, well, will you come and dress like Carmen Miranda; they called me the "Havana Banana Girl;" and like go to clubs like

⁶¹Ibid.

Coney Island High and just come up and do a little dance? This was the '90s. And the swing revival was huge and I was always making costumes. I grew up sewing with my grandmother and my aunts, so, I was like, yeah I can make a costume... So I started making appearances with bands and promoters I had met through Dutch Weismann's. Um, and then I just decided to put together a dance group with my sister and another girl and we called ourselves The Pontani Sisters.

Eventually a band called The Brooklyn Bums attached "World Famous" to their name.

Soon, Angie got a call from the restaurant Marion's Continental on the Bowery who asked if they could perform one night a week. Other offers poured in, including Otto's Broken Head and Windows of the World. In no time they were performing five nights a week: "So the Pontani Sisters were really this accidental...snowball." Eventually they met the surf band, Los Strait Jackets, who invited The Pontani Sisters to tour with them.

EF: I've seen you guys perform, but tell me about the earliest or most popular acts you guys did.

AP: I think the first act we did was "Mambo Italiano." And again, it was super inspired by MGM, Hollywood technicolor musicals. I was obsessed with Carmen Miranda, the Rat Pack, that whole jam. So when I went to put numbers together I just went for the most stereotypical things that you can think of... We had a jungle girl, Bettie Page style act set to exotica music. We had a tap dance to "Danny Boy" where we wore four leaf clovers on our head, you know. We had kind of a Las Vegas showgirl number where we wore headpieces with Frank Sinatra's face in them, Sammy Davis' face in one, Dean Martin in one. We do this super swanky Vegas number.

EF: And you were making the costumes and doing the choreography?

AP: Yes, yes. And the booking...

EF: Now that you describe the Pontani Sisters, they sound so '90s.

AP: Yeah, there were so many nights. There was a lot of '60s go-go nights and so many opportunities to work.

EF: So, before there was a burlesque "scene," or before there were shows dedicated to burlesque, it sounds like there were these individual nights at various venues, and burlesque might be part of it?

AP: Yeah, and I was definitely a swing kid. But...there was also a club named *Shine*...It was a different scene but they would also book us and we would stay there and do a couple of numbers during the night. And you had drag queens. There was a group called Nan and Her Boys and it was a bunch of guys and they were a gay act and they would do all these dance numbers. And I'll never forget it. It was so burlesque! A huge production number of them doing all these numbers. You know, this was in more of the club world. But you had the element of live entertainment in the 90s that was really everywhere. And it wasn't so clearly defined at that point, which maybe was better. It wasn't everyone trying to shove burlesque into these assorted compartments. Like you could go to a night club and see something like that or you could go to a swing night or Rockabilly club or go-go night. So that's what it was like before *Time Out* put the burlesque section in.

EF: I remember that.



Figure 1.8

The Pontani Sisters performing at Marion's Continental, *The Village Voice* 2003

Photo by Cary Conover

Angie Pontani also admits to having look up the word burlesque after a writer for

Showbusiness Weekly referred to The Pontani Sisters as a "burlesque act":

AP: [A writer] called us burlesque in one of the early articles on The Pontani Sisters, which I probably have at home somewhere. And I looked it up. And I was like, oh, what is that? I mean I had a rough idea. Like Bettie Page, you know, Tempest Storm. I only knew them through their still photos. I never really—*Show Business Weekly* I think it was, a writer for *Show Business Weekly*. So then I went on my dialup computer and looked up and found all the “Something Weird Videos” and ordered those.⁶² And then really became exposed to like, Dixie Evans and Blaze Starr and all the other ladies and what burlesque really was beyond a picture of Bettie Page...

But citywide I feel like the difference really came when Tricia wrote that article. Um, it kind of blew the top off the scene in New York and connected a lot of the groups that were doing it at the time which was like us, and Dirty and Tigger! and Julie and Bonnie Dunn, you know, Murry—the old timers. (Laughs) And when we first started and when we would be booking shows and I would cold call clubs, and be like we’re The Pontani Sisters and we’re burlesque and they would think that instantly we were strippers. There was no differentiation at that point in time at all. Now most people know what burlesque is and they know the distinctions between the two...

Angie is referring to a 2003 article Tricia Romano wrote for *The Village Voice*. In her piece, Romano linked these new burlesque artists to the New York arrival of Lydia Thompson and Her British Blondes in the late 19th century, the Minsky theatres on the Bowery that prospered in the early 20th century and how this new group of burlesque performers were “twisting” the old burlesque and infusing it with performance art and a feminist sensibility.⁶³

The Pontani Sisters worked consistently from about 1999 until 2010. During their decade-run they toured the country, made an appearance on The Conon O’Brian Show and put out a series of go-go-robics DVDs. When they eventually disbanded, after Angie’s sister gave birth to twins and it became too difficult to train replacements, Angie

⁶²Something Weird Videos is an online collection of old and rare videos with a nudie bent that are available for purchase.

⁶³Tricia Romano, “Bombshells Away!” in *The Village Voice*. March 4, 2003.

went solo. It was something she had wanted to do for a while but found it difficult given the group's popularity, "everyone wanted the Pontani Sisters and people *still* want the Pontani Sisters!" Her transition into a solo performer was fairly seamless, however, so much so that even before The Pontani Sisters disbanded, Angie won Miss Exotic World in 2008.

EF: What was your first solo act?

AP: It was a number called "Gold Digger" and it's actually the number I won Exotic World with...It's a very traditional, um boa striptease number to Al Hibbler's "After the Light Go Down Low," and Bobby Bland's "36 22 36." I put two songs together. Super traditional, but it's a really fun number. I actually still do it. I just got the costume remade! (Laughs)

Angie's other solo numbers include a ballet to "Le Vie en Rose," in which she dances en pointe with only a large piece of fabric. Her favorite act is her "bongo number, my Blaze Starr tribute."

In 2002 Angie had a desire to put together a larger show, perhaps at The Supper Club, a large event space in midtown. She wasn't familiar with producing shows on that scale, so she enlisted the help of Jen Gapay, a New York City producer who suggested they put on a festival instead:

AP: Well, there was only one real festival called Teas-o-Rama that was happening in San Francisco, well actually it was in New Orleans, the first one. Um, and then there was the Hall of Fame which was a little bit different, actually a lot different than it is, then it was at that time...I had gone to those. My sisters and I were traveling. I wanted to do a bigger show. I wanted to do something with a band, like The Supper Club, like something big and fabulous like that, like a big big event. And I knew how to do small club events but didn't know how to do that and I knew Jen Gapay who is another producer. She hired us for some event so I called her and I was like, 'Let's do like a really big show.' And she was like, if you want to do a big show, let's do a festival...And the first year was two nights and it was relatively small, um, every year it snowballed and got bigger and

bigger until where we are now...I remember calling them on the phone cause I knew most of them from our travels and [saying] hey, we're doing this festival do you think you want to come? Just trying to get as many people as we could those first years. And now we get over 350 applications from people *all* over the world and the competition is fierce! It's like just so crazy...and it's so difficult for us to choose because it's intense.

The first of its kind, The New York Burlesque Festival set the tone for the neo-burlesque festival circuit today. In subsequent years, burlesque performers in cities across the United States began to host their own versions. Since 2002, the New York festival has been expanded into four-day event, including four nights of shows held at various locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn, morning and afternoon classes, a Q&A with a burlesque legend, and a vendors' bazaar.

Angie's trajectory from underground chorus girl, to traveling showgirl, to neo-burlesque producer, differs from Bambi the Mermaid and Bonnie Dunn's. Angie was not part of the performance art scene. Rather, her experiences seem to reflect the nostalgic undercurrent coursing through the 1990s. From Angie's recollections and Norman Gosney's descriptions, Dutch Weismann's sounds like it was drawing on a number of performance forms, including vaudeville, burlesque and musical theatre, and pulling from a number of time periods. Given Angie's identification with Carmen Miranda and her inspiration for The Pontani Sisters, she was clearly inspired by the 1950s and 1960s. They were all, however, part of the 1990s New York nightlife scene.

V. Jo “Boobs” Weldon and The New York School of Burlesque

By the late 1990s, as neo-burlesque artists were carving out a niche for themselves in New York, Jo Weldon made her final move to the city. A strip joint stripper throughout the 1980s and a feature dancer in the 1990s, Jo was no stranger to provocative nude performance. Once aware of the nascent scene, she was immediately enamored and soon began performing on the same stages as Bambi the Mermaid, Tigger! and Julie Atlas Muz. In her effort to document the scene, Jo became a kind of institution of knowledge who performers and would-be performers turned to for more information about burlesque. This prompted her to found the New York School of Burlesque in 2003.

Originally from Denver, Colorado, Jo left home right after high school and immediately started working in strip joints.⁶⁴ In my interview with her, I asked her about her time as a strip joint stripper and some of her feature acts. Her responses revealed parallels and insight into neo-burlesque performance, specifically that more burlesque-type acts were being performed in strip joints in the 80s and 90s than are typically recognized.

EF: How was burlesque similar or different from working in strip joints?

JW: Nighty percent of the time for me, and it varies among people involved in strip joints...was mostly mingling and dancing on stage. This is pre pole dance so they didn't have the crazy pole dancing people raining money on you. That really wasn't happening. And then I got involved in feature dancing through meeting other feature dancers.

As a “feature dancer,” Jo had a home club and then would travel to clubs in different

⁶⁴Jo Weldon, *The Burlesque Handbook* (New York: It Books, 2010), 2-3.

cities.⁶⁵ Her home club for several years was The Cheetah Club in Atlanta. Based on Jo's responses, feature dancers were allotted more stage time and theatrical license, and had set acts.

EF: Can you describe one of your feature acts?

JW: I had a lot. Um, we had kinda standard...Most of us had a teacher and a bride. In my teacher act I did fire and I did "Hot for Teacher." Some of us were more inventive than others. So we would have some acts that were just standard because they weren't looking for something unique...So, in "Hot for Teacher" I had a flaming book. Sometimes I would pay one of the dancers to perform with me and they would be a school girl. They'd be reading the flaming book.

EF: How did you get the book to flame?

JW: It was a magic trick. Actually, I went into this magic store and I said I need a book that burst into flames and they were like oh, that doesn't exist. And I'm like, you're kidding me! They were very condescending to me because I was a stripper and not a magician. So I rigged my own book. I just cut out the inside and rigged a flint, or had someone do it for me. I don't even remember. I mean we're going back twenty, twenty-five years. My memory is a little sketchy. I didn't think this would be of historical interest. Yeah, so I learned to handle fire on my own. And the way that I did it is not the way most professional fire handlers do it now. Because it was very unusual to handle fire at the time. Nobody tried to regulate me because they didn't know any better. And I was working in fetish clubs as well, so I did these very, I guess what you would call Goth, but we're talking late 80s early 90s so we didn't call it that. Um, but it was. And I was studying modern primitives, so I had numbers based on that...

EF: Do you remember any of those?

JW: No...There were elements of S/M. I did a number that was based on the number in the movie *Stripper* where she had fake blood in her whip and she whipped herself and got all bloody...At that time there were very few of us exploring those themes in regular strip joints...every strip joint had at least one person who was. But it was much less common.

EF: You also did a number with flashlights, right?

JW: I might have been an angel...If you tipped me a certain amount you got a little flashlight. Then the lights would go out and I would walk naked around the

⁶⁵Weldon, *Burlesque Handbook*, 5. Jo notes there was a "feature circuit," and that one of her agents was the son of a former burlesque performer from the 1950s.

stage and they would shine the lights on me. And I did things where I held flashlights on myself. Uh (sighs), we were very inventive. I remember a performer who did a Dorothy number with a mechanical dog and there was a woman named Janie Jones (sp?) who had a white tiger—like a live white tiger—like a tiger—a tiger. I was petrified of that tiger.

EF: Where did she keep the tiger?

JW: Her family had been involved in circus I believe. I can't speak to Janie Jones's history, but she did have a circus truck. And she did have a tiger and a monkey...

At this point in our interview I ask Jo about a performer named Madison, who Jo honored at The Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender I attended in 2015. Jo shares that she knew Madison when they worked together at The Gold Club in Atlanta, and how before her time she was: "She was one of the first to wear latex, do porn before there was porn chic..." Then Jo mentioned her own work as a centerfold and commented:

JW: It's interesting to me that some people will say something's 'genius' when they see it in burlesque. And I'm like, I saw that in mainstream porn and feature dancing. I do think it's super clever, but *genius*? That's a bit too much of a pat on the back."

EF: You said that your email too. What are some of things feature dancers were—

JW: There was a lot of what we would now call nerdlesque, or cosplay. And there always has been in adult entertainment. There's always been people dressing up like the popular people, or entertainment of the day...And so it's weird when someone says that person's a pioneer in that...I saw someone doing that ten or twenty years before and I'm sure it was happening before then. It's like, 'I'm going to be really radical and dance to Led Zeppelin'...So I want to congratulate those people on their efforts but without being some grandiose...that they are the first or that they have an imagination superior to that of sex workers.

Once Jo was living in New York on a permanent basis, around 1997, she was

introduced to Bambi the Mermaid, who invited Jo to come see her perform.⁶⁶ Jo cannot recall exactly where. It was either “The Va Va Voom, The Blue Angel, or Coney Island.” Jo immediately saw connections to what Bambi was doing and what she had been doing as a feature dancer and in other performance contexts for years. When I ask Jo to characterize the acts she saw in the late 1990s she hesitates, “I hate to generalize.” For example, she tells me that shows varied in terms of aesthetics: “The Va Va Voom specifically requested that people used pre-1970s music...The Blue Angel allowed a lot of nudity and performance art which didn’t always play at other places.” So, I shift focus back to her.

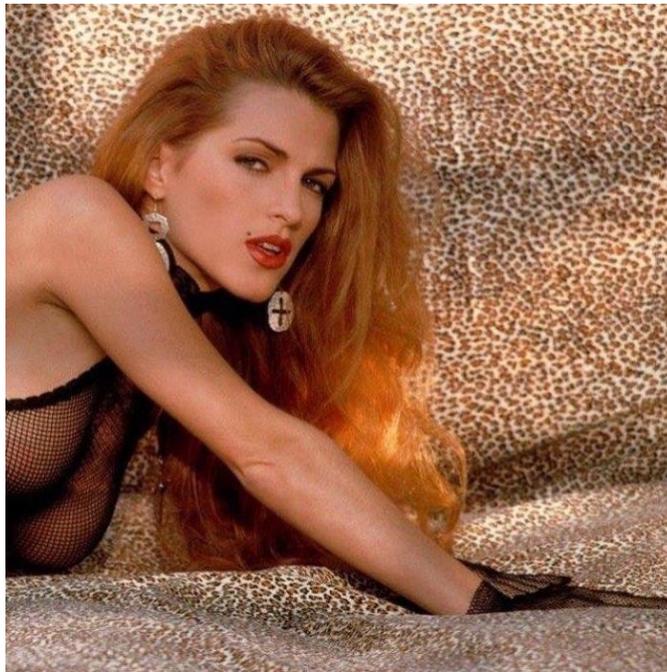


Figure 1.9
Jo Weldon in her centerfold days, 1991 or 1992. Photo by J. Stephen Hicks

⁶⁶In *The Burlesque Handbook* Jo also mentions she had a bartending job at FlashDancers, a strip club in midtown; performed at fetish parties; was a dominatrix; and was a regular at Don Hill’s “Squeezebox” where she continued to take her clothes off.

EF: Do you remember your first burlesque act?

JW: I think my first performance in this scene, where I was booked and got paid, was at “Daddy’s Chicken” at The Slipper Room...I think Bradford Scobie was running it and it was a farm-themed show...I did an act I don’t do. I did the ‘Sugar Plum Fairy’ and I was completely nude and I plastered myself with glitter in a way that you very rarely see. I mean I was plastered with glitter. It wasn’t a sprinkling. It was jars of glitter set with lotion...And then I came out...and did very bad ballet and pulled candy out of my various orifices and threw it at the audience. Tigger! came up and ate my candy cane...It was almost more ambient than structured, but it was very thought out. Like, I knew what I was going to do...a Christmas show. It was a Christmas show.

Two acts Jo’s known for are her “International Lover” and “Godzilla” acts. In her “International Lover” act, Jo dons a flight attendant’s skirt and hat, proceeds to take out various props, including a dildo and other sex toys. Then strips and ties herself up Shibari style along to Prince’s “International Lover” tune:

JW: It’s actually a tribute to sex worker art. So it’s actually a tribute to Midori, Annie Sprinkle and Carol Queen. As well as a tribute to the stewardesses that I admired when I was a kid because they seemed to have so much agency...and also to Prince which I associate with strip joints because it was the one kind of music everybody could agree on...Like truckers loved it, businessmen loved it. The dancers loved it. We could all be united in our love for Prince...

In Jo’s “Godzilla Act,” she wears a Godzilla-looking head and tail, long gloves and knee-high boots that indicate lizard hands and feet, then strips out of a pale green corset and bra to the 70s rock tune “Godzilla” by Blue Oyster Cult. Once Jo removes her bra, the audience is presented with a tassel-twirling lizard babe.

EF: How did the Godzilla act come together?

JW: It was the 50th anniversary of Godzilla. And Godzilla is like a morality tale. And I was, what was called a hard body in the 80s. I was very athletic and very groomed in a certain way, which I’m not now...I had makeup on every day. But to combine that aesthetic with comedy to say, costuming, that’s not saying I’m

being sexy for you. But of course, people find it sexy...something that probably wouldn't have ended up in an adult magazine. But sometimes it does...An enormous amount of work went into that costume, enormous. I also made Bambi's lobster costume...

One of Bambi the Mermaid's signature acts is her "Lobster Act," in which she comes out dressed as a lobster and as she strips, disembowels herself, then splashes herself with yellow glitter "butter" to Billie's Holiday's "All of Me."

EF: Bambi told me that story. Did you teach yourself how to make that lobster costume?

JW: So, I'm 55. My generation of women for the most part were taught to sew and cook in school. They didn't teach us to handle credit cards, which would have been nice. And the boys took shop and sports...So I learned to sew and I learned to make stuffed animals which has a lot to do with costuming. Um, you know, I started working in strip joints and I got bored with the costumes and I started making my own, um, and I sold costumes, but I wasn't good enough. Like I wasn't good at producing, although I did some nice stuff. And I costumed a few feature dancers which is how I ended up—like you have to do these elaborate costumes that break away. I actually made a wedding dress that I could grab the bodice [of] and yank it off, um, wings with gloves on them. I had to fireproof my own costume. So I had that knowledge. But at the beginning (of neo-burlesque) we were almost all making our own costumes...Even if we weren't making them, we were *assembling* them...Like a lot of Tigger!'s costumes are assembled, rather than specifically created. And it's a very specific way of thinking about clothing and the way that it builds up and breaks down. The fact that every time you take off a piece you are presenting a different picture. And is that, does that picture stand alone? What's the reveal? Can the audience see it? Can you take it off in a way that's either extremely easy and fluid or fun in some way?...I remember the first time I showed up in a costume with beaded fringe and everyone was like 'Holy Moly!' I'm like, really, you know? 'Cause it wasn't that big of deal to me. But then it became extremely common with or without my influence. Like, The Velvet Hammer was already doing it. In New York, we weren't doing it.

During this time Jo was also photographing performers and keeping a blog, "G-Strings Forever" where she would post her photos, short interviews with performers, links to more information on burlesque and a bibliography. Other performers began to

consider Jo the community's sage. In 2003 Jo decided to open The New York School of Burlesque, a clear indication that by that time, a burlesque scene had developed in New York. At first Jo held classes at the Bowery Poetry Club, and then in a studio space in the back of The Slipper Room, before using the studios at Playwright Horizons at 440 Lafayette, across the street from the Public Theatre.

EF: Let's talk about the school. Why did you decide to establish the school?

JW: Um, people asked me to because I had a website called "G-Strings Forever" and I gave the impression that I was educated about burlesque. And um, I was passionate about strip joint strippers and their entrepreneurship that was coming up in the internet like whatever terrible things social media have done they gave sex workers a voice they wouldn't have had anywhere else. And I loved neo-burlesque...

EF: Who was asking you?

JW: Audience members. And people were saying, people who were experienced but didn't want to teach were like, oh you should meet Jo. And then it turned into a thing really fast. I was doing one class every two months and then once a month...

EF: How did you come up with the format of the classes? The 'Essentials' class, for example.

In the "Essentials Class," a four-week course held on Sunday afternoons each month, Jo covers a chair dance, stocking removal, boa and glove manipulation, tassel twirling, stripping techniques, and in the last class, feather fan work.

JW: There are certain movements that people associate with burlesque, with classic burlesque, that either get tributed, or vamped, or burlesqued. Um, and it gives people a base knowledge of what classic burlesque is and looks like. I would never describe it as a neo-burlesque class except in the sense that the choreography and time frame of each number we learn is geared toward the way modern burlesque audiences expect to see burlesque. And then the "Act Development' class is for people who don't want to do classic.

Although the school started out small and remains so—Jo still rents out space from Playwright’s Horizons in order to conduct classes, and runs all operations herself—its establishment was quite significant in terms of the New York neo-burlesque scene. As Jo began to share her knowledge with would-be performers she helped to create a community and contributed to the growth of the scene. In classes performers connect, make friends, go to shows together and continue to support each other after the classes end. Though the act development classes in particular, which culminate in a showcase, students are given an opportunity to put together their own acts and a platform to perform. This is not to say everyone who has taken an act development goes on to become a performer, but most burlesque performers I know, who became interested in burlesque after 2005, were anointed into the scene through the school. The school is also highly regarded outside of New York, and has helped set a precedent for how burlesque could and would be taught.

VI. Neo-Burlesque Outside of New York

New York was not the only place in the 1990s where burlesque was experiencing a renaissance in its later defined “neo-burlesque” form. Groups on the West Coast and in New Orleans were putting together burlesque acts at the same time performers on the East Coast were experimenting with striptease. The West Coast and New Orleans scenes are discussed by Michelle Baldwin in her 2004 book, *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind*. According to Baldwin, these scenes developed differently. The New Orleans based group The Shim Shamettes, for example, were doing recreations of old burlesque numbers, and Los Angeles’ Velvet Hammer troupe was taking inspiration from 1950s

and 1960s exotica music. Baldwin attributes this to a number of factors but notes the re-release of a number of “burlesque media materials” in the early 1990s, including the 1950s Irving Klaw films, *Striperama*, *Teaserama* and *Variatease*, compilations of the music of 50s and 60s strip-clubs house bands, and vintage girlie magazines.

Although the West Coast and New Orleans neo-burlesque scenes are outside the range of this study, there are two events that occurred outside of New York in the 1990s and the early 2000s that ended up having a significant impact on New York performers. One was the opening of the Exotic World Home of the Movers & Shakers’ Burlesque Museum and Striptease Hall of Fame in Helendale, California; the other was Teas-o-Rama, considered to be the first neo-burlesque festival, held in New Orleans in 2001.

i. The Burlesque Hall of Fame

In 1992, Dixie Evans, a burlesque headliner from the 1950s, known as “The Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque” opened The Exotic World Museum and Burlesque Hall of Fame of Movers and Shakers in Helendale, California. Dixie had inherited a trove of memorabilia, including signed pictures and costume pieces, from her friend and former ‘50s burlesquer Jenny Lee. Jenny Lee had originally set up her collection on her ranch in Helendale that she shared with her husband. When Jenny died from breast cancer in 1990, she left her collection to Dixie. Dixie later opened Lee’s collection to the public and for the next couple of years led tours to anyone who stopped by for a small fee. Museum goers entered through a large iron gate and arch with the words “Exotic World” spelled within it. According to a 1998 New York Times article that promoted it, lucky museum-goers might even get to see Dixie bat her lashes and do her old Marylyn Monroe

impression.

In order to drum up publicity for the museum, Dixie started the “Miss Exotic World Pageant” in 1992, and held it right on the goat ranch around the pool. She invited some of the living legends of the art form, the infamous Tempest Storm among them, and other strip club feature dancers. Once the new crop of “retro strippers” got word, they too made the trek to the desert and began competing. In the early Miss Exotic World competitions, performers came out and strut their stuff around the pool as the audience sat in lounge chairs. At these annual competitions, new burlesque performers met dancers from the 40s, 50s and 60s, formed relationships and learned from them. Through their connection with Dixie Evans and the museum, neo-burlesque performers also started to see themselves as part of a larger, historical legacy.

In 2006, the museum moved to downtown Las Vegas and changed its name to The Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum. Then in 2016, they moved to a much larger space in Las Vegas’ arts district. The Museum still exists and now features an expanded collection, a learning space for classes, and an archive for researchers.

ii. Tease-O-Rama

The other important influence on New York performers was an event called Tease-o-Rama. First held in New Orleans in 2001, Tease-o-Rama attracted new burlesque performers from across the country and a few from the United Kingdom and Canada. Many of the neo-burlesque performers I have talked to mention the Yahoo Group “Burlesque” as a source from which they found out about it. Organized by Baby Doe and Alison Fenderstock, the festival consisted of a big show that featured Dita von Teese and

Catherine L'Dish as headliners, as well as classes and workshops.

New York performers Dirty Martini, Julie Atlas Muz, Tigger!, The World

Famous *BOB* and Miss Astrid drove to the festival together. In a 2012 article posted on the website “21st Century Burlesque,” Dirty Martini recalls her amazement at the breath of burlesque happening beyond New York City:

I had never seen performers outside of my New York bubble and there were so many different flavors of performance. So many different eras were present and accounted for. Miss Astrid, myself, Julie Atlas Muz, World Famous *BOB* and Tigger! drove from NYC in matching jumpsuits and all weekend made an impressive girl gang. My job on the twenty-seven hour drive down to New Orleans was to make sure *BOB* could get in and out of her tie-back velvet jumpsuit with silver glitter flames up the leg during the many pee stops on our long journey. When we arrived at the first event at check-in wearing one of our four matching looks, I was so confused when someone asked me to describe my act. I thought I was the only classic burlesque performer there, so I responded emphatically, ‘classic burlesque!’ The man gave me the look of a confused terrier and responded, ‘you and everyone else here!’ I thought ‘really?’ and then I saw the show. From then on, I knew that I wasn’t alone, and more than that, I knew that burlesque was more than a fluke; it was a true revolution and we were the generals of this new army...”⁶⁷

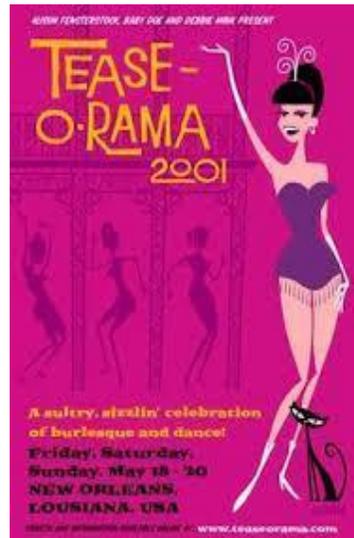


Figure 1.10
Flyer for Tease-O-Rama, 2001

⁶⁷<https://21stcenturyburlesque.com/the-return-of-tease-o-rama/>

Jo Weldon credits Tease-o-Rama as the first place she became aware of international burlesque performers and the legends at Miss Exotic World. It was also the first time she saw Dixie Evans perform. Several more Tease-o-Rama festivals were held after the initial one in New Orleans. But the 2001 festival marked a turning point. Not only did the festival connect performers from across the country (and the world) to each other, Tease-O-Rama changed how performers thought about burlesque. As Dirty Martini indicates, performers realized they weren't just participating in a fad, they were part of a new, or newly revived art form. They also began to refer to themselves as a "community." And in fact, this was the beginning of a national network of artists who were now imagining themselves in a collective (albeit loosely connected) way, as alternative artists, as unique but also connected in their weirdness and the work that they did to be a part of a history they were yet to learn more about. For once the term burlesque was in use, these artists embraced it and did their research.



Figures 1.11-1.13
 The Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum in Las Vegas in 2015. At the time of my visit the museum included a timeline of the history of burlesque, signed promotional photos of performers, and a section on neo-burlesque. The museum displayed a few costume pieces, including one of Tempest Storm's g-strings and Gypsy Rose Lee's travelling trunk. The museum has since moved to a larger space. Photos by Elisabeth Fallica

VII. A Scene is (Re)Born

By the late 1990s and early 2000s a new, or “neo-” burlesque scene had taken shape in New York. Artists referred to themselves as “burlesque” performers, shows were billed as “burlesque” and there were specific venues where they performed. Along with Burlesque at the Beach and The Blue Angel, there was Red Vixen Burlesque at Flamingo East, and the Va Va Voom Room at the Fez nightclub underneath the Time Café, both in the East Village section of Manhattan. These were still all one night, once a week shows. However, in 1999 The Slipper Room opened on Orchard Street down on the Lower East Side. Owned and operated by James and Camille Habacker, the Slipper Room opened specifically in response to the new wave of burlesque and variety happening in the city. And it became neo-burlesque’s new home, featuring shows every night of week. Of course, each year or so, new shows would pop-up. “Kitty Nights” ran for many years at Meow Mix, as did “This is Burlesque” at a venue called Corio.

As I have described above, there were specific spaces and producers who were interested in fostering this type of performance and creating a space for artists to experiment including Dick Zugin, the owner of Coney Island USA where Burlesque at the Beach was held, the producers of Dutch Weismann’s Follies, and even Ute Hanna, the owner of The Blue Angel. These producers were all looking to revive and reinvent older forms of entertainment for a new audience in the 1990s. In addition to these producers, the audiences and the journalists covering such artists played a part in naming, and thus, defining this new scene. As Bambi the Mermaid explained to me, it was members of the Coney Island audience who started to call what she was doing burlesque: “It wasn’t sideshow, it wasn’t variety, so burlesque worked.” And by the late nineties, she

said, “everything else fell away and stripping became the focus.” The irony is, of course, that as they attempted to book shows for the next few years, performers had to explain to the vast majority of audiences what burlesque was. But audiences loved it, “no one had seen nude performance outside a strip club, no one had seen pasties...”⁶⁸

In addition to the audiences and cultural critics who saw parallels to past iterations of burlesque, it is clear from key performer recollections that the New York scene emerged out of a real marriage of stripping and performance art. Strip club strippers were experimenting with more theatrical or avant-garde modes of undress and performance artists were using strip clubs and stripping to reinvent their work.

In this chapter I have attempted to illustrate how the neo-burlesque scene emerged in New York in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. I focused on four artists important to the scene’s development and the spaces that fostered their transition into neo-burlesque performers. By the end of the 1990s self-described wildcards, who did not fit neatly into established art worlds or mainstream adult entertainment industries, were nostalgically swept up into the history of American art form of burlesque, transformed into unintended revivalists.

§

Since the late 90s and early 2000s, the New York scene has changed significantly. The World Famous *BOB* often says in the early days you could fit all of New York City’s burlesque performers into two yellow taxi cabs. Today, Darlinda Just Darlinda

⁶⁸Interview with author, Brooklyn, 2017.

estimates the number of performers at over five hundred. There are also many more shows and places to perform. In addition to The Slipper Room, other venues dedicated to showcasing burlesque have opened; and burlesque is a regular feature at many bars, restaurants and performance venues around the city. However, the scene is not just bigger; it has developed sub-categories, including nerdlesque, draglesque and clearer divisions between classic and neo-burlesque. In the next chapter I zoom in on the contemporary neo-burlesque stage and describe and analyze labor *in performance*.

Chapter 2

Material Moves

Costume and Choreography in Neo-Burlesque Performance

At Duane Park, an upscale dinner theatre on the Bowery, I sit at a small table near the bar and watch as Medianoche descends a spiral staircase outfitted in a purple corset and a “train” of matching boas attached in the back. After sauntering over to the stage, Media skillfully removes each garment and then moves to the floor. I stand so I can see her slide into a full split, then a backbend, and finally, a sensuous twirl of her tassels. At the Slipper Room, a more intimate cabaret space on the Lower East Side, I lean against the side wall as Stormy Leather does an act to Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” Stormy sits on a chair wearing a black beret, and removes large white placards of the lyrics perched on her lap until the final reveal, her nude body. At The House of YES, a cool performance venue in Bushwick, Brooklyn, I stand in the back and catch Fem Appeal’s “Lincoln” number. Dressed as the former president, Fem, who is African American, waves red streamers as she hops from foot to foot to Fall Out Boy’s song “Centuries,” then strips down to striped leggings and her top hat, which she holds in front of her crotch, all while flapping her legs in a kind of frenetic Charleston.

Despite the range of aesthetics I have encountered in neo-burlesque, or maybe because of it, I have been drawn to the one constant: the interplay of tactile objects and fleshy bodies, of costume and choreography. This chapter zooms in on the contemporary

neo-burlesque stage and describes and analyzes the labor of performers and the work of costume pieces and props.

When costume is afforded scholarly attention, it is usually analyzed semiotically. Meaning and representation is foregrounded. Less attention has been given to the ways costumes impact performers. Given that neo-burlesque is grounded in striptease, burlesque costumes offer a unique opportunity to look at costume phenomenologically. In performance, burlesque costumes cue performers' choreographic choices, demonstrating their agency. My analysis therefore hopes to move beyond semiotic analyses of clothing, and contribute to and expand recent costume studies that emphasize the critical role costume plays in *shaping* performance, as well as studies in new materialism that demonstrate the vibrancy of non-sentient objects.

In my analysis of exertion and emotionality in neo-burlesque choreography, I link these characteristics to predominant modes of work under late capitalism, specifically Post-Fordist production. My framing of burlesque choreography in relation to work is not an attempt to prove burlesquers labor any more or less than other workers, but to ponder how close the physicality and gestures they employ are to the accelerated flexibility of the new economy. This kind of analysis builds on studies of art and labor, namely of dance and contemporary aesthetics, and seeks to move beyond objectification studies that limit the analysis of erotic dance to barometers of gender norms and/or commodities.

In the first half of the chapter I discuss the ways burlesque costume pieces are showcased and cue choreography. While in the second half of the chapter, I analyze how performers' bodies appear as metonyms of labor through overworked physicality and

emotionality. In my discussion, I elucidate how such costume work and choreographic play blurs the boundaries of subject and object, person and thing.

I. Neo-Burlesque Costume—On Display and in Action

As in other performance genres, costume plays a number of important roles in neo-burlesque. They contribute to the *mise en scene* and help to establish character. Costumes are the first thing a burlesque audience encounters, and thus immediately establish the aesthetic of an act, offering clues to a performer's concept. Classic costume pieces may evoke a nostalgic past, while "neo" costumes may convey a political message or humorous reference. As a predominantly solo art form, costumes in burlesque work even harder; they not only contribute to the setting, they *are* the set. Neo-burlesque costumes also help spectacularize the performer's body—extending it, transforming it, making it appear larger than life—and offer clues to the character or persona a performer might be portraying. And like costumes in other genres, neo-burlesque costumes are incredibly affective, they fill the stage with color and texture, and evoke particular feelings within the spectator.

However, what is unique about burlesque costumes is that they are removed, and acts revolve around their removal. The peeling away of costume pieces (or fanatic shedding, depending on the energy of the act) is the method burlesquers employ, and often the content of an act. This has important implications for costume creation. Burlesque costumes must be constructed to be deconstructed, and performers and costumers must keep this in mind when making or assembling them. Jo Weldon alluded to this when she recalled her experience making costumes for feature dancers in the

1990s. She noted that each costume removal reveals a different sartorial picture and costumers need to think about how each removal relates to the next or previous picture; as well as some nitty-gritty aspects, such as zippers, ties, snaps, and clasps.

The removal of costume pieces on stage also has important implications for the body. For one, a performer's body feels quite different once a costume piece has been taken off. Touching one's bare arm after having it covered by a glove is a quite sensuous experience, allowing the performer to re-experience the tactility of her flesh. Audiences also get to experience the arms, legs and breasts of different bodies that were previously hidden to them. Both are made possible by the removal of the costume. Performers also get to re-invent and re-present their bodies in each act through costume. They can become different characters, or explore versions of themselves. Neo-burlesque costumes assist performers in challenging stereotypes, asserting political statements, and making them feel glamorous. Merely walking out on stage naked does not necessarily have the same effect. Costumes help frame and re-present the body to performers and audiences.

Some of this costume work has been discussed by others scholars. What has been overlooked, or at least not given as much attention, is the clever way neo-burlesque performers manipulate and showcase their costumes, and the lively nature costume pieces take on in performance. Although the idea for an act may initially come from a piece of music, an experience, or a vintage dress, burlesque acts gets worked out via the interaction a performer has with her costume. And it is this interaction that gets translated and experienced on stage in performance. Therefore, I want to explore costume's phenomenological role in neo-burlesque performance. In order to do this, I will look at a few examples of costume work in classic and neo acts. I argue that in addition to being

supportive partners to otherwise solo performers, costumes in burlesque performance are “actants,” guiding performers’ choreographic choices; sometimes taking on a life of their own. I borrow the term actant from Bruno Latour who understands “physical materials not as inert human possessions,” but as objects “with particular frequencies, energies, and potentials to affect human and nonhuman worlds.”⁶⁹

i. **Classic Costume at Work**

As I have mentioned, classic, or neo-classic burlesque performance draws from the aesthetics of 1940s and 1950s burlesque. And classic burlesquers are experts at costume manipulation; but as I will argue, their choreography is often prompted by the costumes pieces themselves. Peekaboo Pointe is a well-known classic performer in New York, a veteran in the scene with over fifteen years of experience. She even performed a bit with The Pontani Sisters in the late 2000s. The following is a description from my fieldnotes of her “Red Va Va Voom” act, an act Peekaboo regularly performs around the city, in which she displays some lusty moves and spirited costume manipulation, an exemplar for how classic performers work their costume pieces, and how costume prompts that work:

Peekaboo glides onto the stage in a red sequined corset and matching floor-length skirt that looks like liquid. She wears long red opera gloves, her white blonde hair coiffed into soft curls. When she reaches center stage she pauses, slides one of her gloved hands down the side of her face and décolletage, then continues across the stage allowing the train of the garment to follow. When she returns, Peekaboo runs her fingers through her hair and rolls her hips seductively to the music—a mambo version of “St. James Infirmary.” She then reaches her arms out toward the audience, bends down and slowly draws them up the length

⁶⁹Referenced and paraphrased in Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy’s *Performing Objects & Theatrical Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

of one of her legs. Then flips her hair back, traces the outline of her torso with her hands, and squeezes the side of each of her breasts, punctuating the succession of beats in the musical phrase—boom, boom, boom. Peekaboo then heads upstage, places her right hand on the back wall and slowly extends her left leg in the air, making a perfect diagonal line from the tip of her toe to the pool of her skirt. As she struts back downstage, she tugs at the fingers of one of her gloves with her teeth and stretches the satiny fabric down her chest letting it linger between her breasts. She holds the glove tautly out to the side of her face, twirls it playfully toward the audience and smiles. Then tosses the glove aside and swiftly rips the other one off. With her side to the audience, Peekaboo methodically unzips her skirt, then hoists it high into the air as she spins. Next, she unzips her corset and flings it to the side. These two costume removals reveal a silky red paneled skirt, beaded fringe around her hips and a red-sequined bra. Along to the syncopated rhythm of the music Peekaboo performs a series of rapid hip bumps that produce rippling waves in the skirt panels. Peekaboo swooshes and fans the skirt, eventually dropping to her knees, tears off the front panel and whips it forcefully as she thrusts her pelvis forward. In a skillful transition, Peekaboo turns and places her left foot down, rests her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, and pops her left butt cheek a few times—a signature move of hers—then heads back upstage. With her back to the audience, Peekaboo begins a rhythmic butt shake and removes the back skirt panel. Turning toward the audience, she tears the fringe from around her hips, revealing a red diamond G-string. Then struts downstage while undoing the hook of her bra. With a few circular swings, Peekaboo flings the bra to the floor revealing a pair of red rhinestoned pasties and white tassels. She smiles delightedly, and pauses to smooth out her tassels. Then launches in to a fiery tassel twirl—dropping to the floor, arching her back and standing again for more twirling. When the music stops Peekaboo extends her arms overhead, slaps her ass, and exits the stage.

In this act Peekaboo presents a sexy, playful self-portrait; an empowered seductress in charge of her own imagining. And Peekaboo is working hard to achieve this: wielding fabric, twirling tassels, bending and extending her body—all in really high gold heels. But her costume is doing a lot of work too. The fabric that makes up her skirt and corset greets the audience with a dazzling array of liquidy red glamour; like a disco ball, the sequins on the fabric reflect glittery rays of light. And Peekaboo knows this; hence she walks the stage, turns and pauses, presenting her costume. After performing some lusty undulations, she runs her hands over her body and her costume and begins to

remove some of the pieces. Like most classic performers Peekaboo begins with her glove. She tugs at it with her teeth, allowing it to slide down in between her breasts, holds it tautly out to the side, and then playfully twirls it towards the audience. The glove gives Peekaboo something to do, initiating the strip, and serves as the first “theatrical event” in her narrative.⁷⁰ Once removed, the glove becomes a prop Peekaboo can wield in interesting ways. However, the way Peekaboo removes the glove and how she manipulates it, is significantly influenced by the garment itself.

In her essay “Dances with Things,” Robin Bernstein discusses how inanimate objects have the ability to cue or prompt human behavior. Her focus is a series of racist images from the 1930s, an alphabet book, wooden cutouts, a doll, etc. Drawing on thing theory and performance theory she refers to these objects as “scriptive things”: objects that “like a play script, broadly structure a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable.”⁷¹ Bernstein reminds readers that although humans invest meaning into objects, things literally shape human behavior. An object’s function, its materiality, and implied use invite us to engage in particular ways. A chair invites us to sit, and in Western circles, a book invites us to turn the pages from left to right. She likens scriptive things to Austin’s performatives and our response to them, to Schechter’s “kinesthetic imagination.” Scriptive things have the power to make something happen, draw out a familiar set of responses, but can vary based on who is hailed and the competence of the

⁷⁰Jo Weldon refers to removals or reveals in burlesque as theatrical events, rather than choreography, because they change based on a performer’s costume, and exist as marks or turning points in an act. In *The Burlesque Handbook* and in conversation with author.

⁷¹Robin Bernstein, “Dances With Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race,” in *Social Text 101* (Winter 2009), 69.

performer. Bernstein argues that when these encounters with material objects are “swept on to the dance floor,” or put in relief in performance contexts, such objects appear animate. And when humans respond, when we conform to an object’s wishes, humans become more object-like, we become more like things.

This is certainly the case with Peekaboo’s glove. The satiny material of the glove offered Peekaboo the opportunity to slide it off her arm; its elasticity allowed her to stretch it; its shape and weight, long and light, allowed her to twirl it easily. The way the glove fits, covers and attaches to the fingers also necessitates some maneuvering before it can be fully removed; the use of teeth, another hand, etc. Of course, because gloves are artifacts of previous incarnations of burlesque, they also come to this most recent crop of performers with a choreographic repertoire, which Peekaboo is aware of even if she hasn’t studied old videos of Blaze Starr or Tempest Storm. Satin gloves are also associated with glamour, sophistication and seduction (in an art form in which sexual innuendo is the norm) thus more often than not they cue a slow and provocative removal. In my first class at the New York School of Burlesque, Jo Weldon taught us to bend down, tuck one finger of our glove under our shoe then straighten our leg, allowing the glove to slide off as we drew our arm up the length of our calf and thigh. Yet I have seen other classic performers work their gloves very differently. At a show at Duane Park in February of 2018, I watched The Maine Attraction, another classic neo-burlesque performer whip her wrist until she had loosed one of her gloves, allowed it to slide down her arm and then spun the glove in the air like a propeller, pointing to it with her other hand. She then whipped the glove on either side of her hips, lodged it between her legs and stroked it. The outcome was very different, but still heeded to the materiality of

glove, the context of the performance and the history of the art form. Furthermore, Peekaboo and Maine are competent, or knowing performers, who see the possibilities inherent in the glove, who relate to it as something on its own terms. As Bernstein explains, “a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing.”⁷²



Figure 2.1
Peekaboo Pointe performing her “Red Va Va Voom” act at the Burlesque Hall of Fame
Weekender, Las Vegas, 2015
Photo by Photolena

Like gloves, corsets draw out a similar set of movement sequences and patterns. Peekaboo turns the side of her bustier to the audience and pauses when her fingers reach

⁷²Bernstein, “Dances With Things,” 69-70.

the top, smiles and “oohs” seductively, lowering the zipper. The shape of the bustier, a tight-fitting garment (with or without piping) meant to draw in the waist and showcase the breasts, prompts this kind of seductive removal. If wearing a corset that ties, a performer might begin by loosening up the laces one by one, then pause, shake their finger at the crowd prolonging the tease; or she might loosen a few laces slowly, then furiously untie the rest. Another classic performer, Sydni Deveraux, does an act during which she unties her corset as she spins creating a dynamic flurry of laces.

Bernstein points out that embedded within each scriptive thing is a “proper” and “improper” script. In burlesque, we call it fulfilling expectations or confounding them.⁷³ Thus, contained within the glamour and seduction of the corset is its opposite—the unsexy, often humorous, and ironic. For example, when Dirty Martini removes her corset in her “Patriot Act,” she takes a deep breath, sucks in her gut, and laboriously unzips the garment, letting out a huge sigh of relief at its removal. Peekaboo and Sydni conform to the proper script, while Dirty chooses the improper one. The corset scripts both.

However, the epitome of object play in Peekaboo’s act is when she removes her outer skirt and the silk panels underneath. Peekaboo chose to showcase what her skirt could do—hence she hurled it up into the air as she spun allowing the skirt to make a bold fanning gesture. Attune to the possibilities of her underlying silk panels, Peekaboo bumped her hips allowing the fabric to produce water-like ripples. Peekaboo then used one of the panels as a whip as she executed a series of pelvic thrusts. A less seasoned performer might have dropped them. In the hands (and hips) of Peekaboo, these objects take on a life of their own, and she becomes a co-creator, and at moments a supporting

⁷³Bernstein, 70.

character to her garments in the act.⁷⁴



Figure 2.2
Peekaboo Pointe performing her “Red Va Va Voom” act at the Burlesque Hall of Fame
Weekender
Las Vegas, 2015 Photo by Harmonia

This is also apparent in many of Medianoche’s acts. Medianoche is another classic performer in the city. She has been performing for about ten years and has acquired multiple accolades including the title of Miss Exotic World in 2017. Her tagline is “Sin in an Hourglass” which alludes to her dimensions, but also her style of burlesque, which is *sultry*. Media also makes all of her costumes herself and is known to be pretty tight-lipped about them; she doesn’t share any tips or tricks. At the same Duane Park show where I saw The Maine Attraction perform in 2018, Medianoche performed two acts in which feather boas featured prominently. In an act performed to “I Put a Spell on

⁷⁴Peekaboo is also drawing on a repertoire of skirt dancing that has become a convention in classic burlesque, based on the “oriental dances” of the late 19th and early 20th century. Thus, Peekaboo’s skirt panels and their maneuvering is haunted by the ghosts of performers such as Little Egypt and Lois Fuller.

You,” Media was wearing her deep purple corset and matching train of boas I described briefly at the very beginning of this chapter. After removing the boas, she used them as a prop that structured the rest of her performance. Media turned a few times allowing the plummy tentacles to extend out and catch the air; then waved them up and down like fans on either side of her body, before finally flinging them over her shoulders like a cape. In this dance, a duet of sorts, between a human actor and a feathery thing, the boas swirled overhead, taking up space, and appeared animate. In the other act she performed that evening, to the tune “Dangerous Woman,” Media shared a dance with a single white boa. After stroking it as it hung around her neck, it quickly came to life, falling down her back, wrapping itself around her waist and then back to resting on her shoulder. Although Media and her body were the subject of the act—it was the slinkiness, length and softness of the boa that framed and initiated their interaction.

Classic burlesquers’ attunement to the materiality of their costume pieces, allowing such garments to perform, reminds me of the work magicians do—cleverly manipulating objects for the entertainment of a crowd. Yet, burlesquers don’t necessarily hide their gimmick. At a show to commemorate Jo Weldon’s latest book endeavor about leopard print, Media performed her “Pink Panther” number in which she donned leopard print leggings that tied up the sides—a sartorial amalgam of corset ties and breakaway pants. In a true sleight of hand, she bent down, grabbed the ends of the strings at her ankles, and by the time she stood back up, her pants had completely unraveled. Although quite magical, performers like Media turn their zippers toward the audience, they show you the laces of their corset and then allow the laces to dance. Often a costume piece’s power can be seen when it doesn’t do what the performer expects it to—when it fails, or

resists. Zippers get caught, pasties fall off, balloons pop. In classic neo-burlesque performance, the possibilities and agency of non-sentient material objects are put in full relief. Classic acts are exemplars of the way subjects literally and figuratively dance with objects.

ii. **Neo Costumes at Work**

As I have indicated, “neo” or more avant-garde burlesque acts look different from classic acts. Neo acts rely on a different set of aesthetics, references and concepts. They can be funny, disturbing and/or vamp the conventions of burlesque. Costumes in neo acts therefore also play different semiotic roles. However, the primary goal and expectation of disrobing still exists, and thus the removal of costume pieces in neo acts offer more instances in which to observe object play and how costume pieces cue performers’ choreographic choices.

Tiger Bay is one of the more well-known neo performers in the city. She started doing burlesque about five years ago, just as I was beginning my fieldwork, but has quickly made a name for herself in the New York scene, including winning the Miss Coney Island Pageant in 2017. Tiger’s acts are wacky and off-kilter. For example, she does an act to Engelbert Humperdinck’s song “Lesbian Seagull” in which she transforms from a fishman into a seagull. However, my favorite act of hers is her “Cheeseburger Head” act. I saw her perform it once at a “Fuck You Revue” show at Bizarre, a bar in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Tiger originally created it for a Fourth of July show, but she performs it throughout the year. In it, Tiger wears a flowered sundress which covers a protruding baby bump, and has a large, fairly imposing rubber cheeseburger over her

head. As the theme song to *A Space Odyssey* plays, Tiger flexes her biceps and caresses her belly. She makes a series of dramatic gestures with her arms that morph from the McDonald's golden arches to a cutesy-pie face to cupping her breasts and belly. But as the music progresses, and those infamous drums rumble, so does her belly and Tiger pauses, heaving dramatically, feigning contractions. Tiger then reaches under her dress and pulls out a tiny cheeseburger and brings the little one to her breast. Another one then appears. And then another, and another. Tiger kisses one, plays coo-coo with another, before gently tossing each of the newborns into the wings. When Tiger eventually removes her dress, a red, white and blue sequined bra and American flag-patterned booty shorts are revealed. Tiger then removes her bra to reveal a pair of American flag-patterned rhinestoned pasties. She ends the piece by giving birth to a final cheeseburger, which she holds up to the heavens before manically devouring.

Tiger's costume definitely works to establish character. The bulbous belly, mask and mini cheeseburgers help to create an absurdist Mama Cheeseburger, or Cheeseburger Mama. And the American flag shorts and sequin pasties clearly reference the United States. Together, her costume pieces help to present an odd embodiment of American consumption. Interestingly, Tiger links this to women's reproduction and the labor of giving birth. Given that Tiger originally created the act for a Fourth of July themed show, the act might be demonstrating how American patriotism is reproduced via consumption. However, putting aside the various meanings I might read into the act, every time I see it, I continue to marvel at that cheeseburger head. Like other types of masks, it obscures Tiger's face; forcing her to use her body to express emotion. Without a face, Tiger's arms must gesticulate strength, compassion, and stress. Her bodily gestures help to animate the

plastic head, but the head also causes Tiger to react with attentive limbs, morphing her human form into something more monstrous and a little less human. In performance, the non-sentient costume piece cues Tiger to act in more reactionary, object-like ways, stilted her gestures, conforming to it will. While audience members, like myself, experience the uncanniness of observing an object we know to be plastic but that also appears anthropomorphic.

Similarly, the draglesque performer Lee Valone has an act in which one of his costume pieces appears to take on a life of its own. As I mentioned, draglesque is a form of neo-burlesque that combines drag and burlesque; striptease acts in which performers present and experiment with genders different from what they were assigned at birth. Lee works a lot with large wigs, evident in his “It’s All Coming Back to Me” act which he performs to the Celine Dion tune of the same title. It is also the act that won him first place at the Mr. Coney Island Pageant in 2018. In the act, Lee wears a long black overcoat and floppy felt hat. As the song plays, Lee mouths the words and mimes the emotion of Dion’s tune. But as he starts to disrobe, we get glimpses of blonde hair peeking out from under the hat. And as he removes more articles of clothing, we realize there is much more to the wig, until finally it unravels all the way down to the stage floor. Lee then strokes the long mane and spins, presumably remembering an earlier time. In the final reveal, Lee removes the wig, exposing his real, shortly cropped dyed blonde hair.



Figure 2.3
Lee Valone performing at Legion, Brooklyn, 2017
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

Lee's act is quite poignant, a coming out or coming to terms with his gender identity. The title of the song (and the fact that it is sung by Celine Dion who is beloved in the gay community), the long-haired wig and the removal of it at the end of the act, suggests the remembrance of a former self and a personal transformation. Lee is a drag king who identifies as a trans man. And in a recent post on his Instagram account, he also announced he has begun reconstructive surgery. But the wig does more than signify. It peeks out from under his hat early on in the act. Its wisps slowly reveal themselves as Lee strips, and then make a dramatic appearance. Its complete reveal or showing, falling from the top of Lee's head down to the floor, is a sight that is both freaky and luxurious. I immediately thought of Cousin It, the hirsute character on the Addams Family television series whose entire body was covered with hair, and who also wore a black, wide brimmed black hat and dark glasses. During the interlude in which Lee dances in and with the wig, stroking it and spinning around with it, I found myself relating to the wig as much as I was to Lee. Maybe it was the size, the same height as Lee, or the way the

strands of hair swayed as it sashayed across the stage. Along with Lee, it was not only a supportive follower, but an active lead cuing Lee's movement. Thus, as much as Lee's act is *about* Lee's personal journey, in performance, it was also a dance between a human actor and a highly charged animate object.

iii. **Costume Care, Affect and Materiality**

Not only are burlesquers in tune with what their costume pieces can do and thus manipulate and showcase them appropriately, they handle them with a particular kind of care that highlights their sensuousness. I do not mean that performers always play nice with their costumes. Burlesquers love to tear, whip, and fling their garments around the stage as they remove them. Rather, burlesque performers' attention to and treatment of their costume pieces often highlight the affective quality of the piece itself, which I read as an act of care. Medianoche's handling of her boas, particularly when she hands them to the stage kitten off-stage is certainly an act of care. She does this because she doesn't want them to be damaged, yet the way she holds them in her arms, she allows them to drape like one would a sacred relic, a national flag or a child.

The neo-burlesque performer Calamity Change treats her fans with the same care. At a show I attended at The House of YES one night, I watched her project her fans toward the audience and then run her fingers across the width of the feathers. At another moment in her act she drew the champagne-colored plumes across her chest as she arched her back, exposing her breasts, which were adorned with silvery-rhinestoned pasties. The eroticism of her reveal was created not just by the exposure of her breasts or the arch of her back, but the texture and movement of the fans. Composed of long ostrich feathers

attached to clear staves, Calamity's fans appeared soft and fragile. And as the lights of the venue shown down, I was able to see individual wisps of feathers move in the air. Calamity certainly made use of the prop, and allowed it to shine, but also treated it with an attention that revealed the object's affect quality.

Although relying on a very different set of aesthetics, the neo-burlesque performer Stormy Leather does an act in which she manipulates a prop that is in its own way an act of care. In "Mrs. Robinson" act, which I have seen her perform at The Slipper Room many times, Stormy strips out of a 1950's housewife ensemble and then performs an act of self-bondage along to Simon and Garfunkel's song "Mrs. Robinson." Stormy meticulously ties a long rope around her torso, through her legs and around her breasts. Drawing on the methods and eroticism of BDSM the course rope wound against the softness of Stormy's bare skin was not only an artful demonstration of rope play and a clever contrast to the wholesomeness (or true desires?) of a 50s housewife, but discloses the sensual possibility of otherwise non-sexy inanimate object. As much as the rope made Stormy's body appear soft yet powerful, a bit like a corset acts like a piece of armor, her handling of the rope, the meticulous tying of it around her body imbued the rope with value and particular reverence, as much as the rope was serving Stormy.

§

In both classic and neo acts, costumes prompt and encourage certain choreographic responses. Embedded within these garments and their removal is a cultural memory that connects performances across time and space to older waves of the art form,

but also allows for variety. Performers are so in tune with this prompting, so competent, that they often become supportive characters to their costumes, showcasing what such objects can do. In some cases, costume pieces appear to take on a life of their own—dancing, flying and rippling. Performers manipulation also demonstrates a politics of care, as burlesquers’ attunement to an object’s materiality also reveals its affective quality.



Figure 2.4
Calamity Chang and her fans at The House of YES, Brooklyn
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

II. Choreography, Work, and the Performance of Exertion

Neo-burlesque choreography resists easy categorization given the variety of styles that circulate in the scene, the fact that many of the moves performers execute are based on the music they select, the concept of their acts, and their own physical abilities. There is a repertoire of classic moves performers employ, such as bumping and grinding, tassel twirling and floorwork (sexy moves performed on the stage floor). But depending on the act, you may just as easily encounter hopping, rolling around, or feigned sluggishness.

However, in most acts, I have observed performers display heightened effort, or exertion, coupled with strong emotions. In classic acts this is usually done for erotic or dramatic effect, as in Peekaboo Pointe's "Red Va Va Voom" act described at the beginning of the chapter, in which she thrusts her pelvis and makes her butt quake, then pauses dramatically to smooth out her tassels, right before launching into a fiery tassel twirl. While in neo acts, it is done for laughs, as in Tiger Bay's "Cheeseburger Head" act; although Tiger doesn't employ virtuosic movement or speed, the emotional intensity of her arm gestures and her mimesis of labor pains are just as effortful. Peekaboo and Tiger are both employing exaggeration, making big and highly theatrical gestures. These displays of exertion, laced with extreme emotionality, also call attention to the *actual labor* it takes to execute their performance. Audiences often marvel at the dexterity and endurance on display. Similarly, spectators enthusiastically respond to the emotional cues delivered by the performer. Therefore in this half of the chapter I trace displays of exertion in select neo-burlesque performance. And in my analysis, I apply the ideas of scholars who have addressed the correlation between artistic expression and the characteristics of work embedded within post-industrial economic formation.

All neo-burlesque acts, typically around four minutes long, have a loose beginning, middle, and end, and build to a climax, or the “final reveal.” The momentum or flow of individual acts depends on a number of factors. Music plays an important role; burlesquers take choreographic cues such as energy level and individual movements from the sound, tempo and prominent motifs of the song they have selected. Whether dancing to the blues or heavy metal, performers feed off the energy of the track, responding to it like a jazz vocalist might, possibly mimicking the horns with a bump of the hips, or toss their hair around to a guitar riff. Classic performers might begin by undulating their hips, gain momentum via a series of turns and costume removals, then end by dropping to floor into a split; each reveal, a turn in events, and a subsequent build in energy.⁷⁵ This escalation has clear sexual connotations, as do many of the specific moves classic burlesquers perform: bumping and grinding and splits are meant to be sexually provocative and/or mimic sex.⁷⁶ Often these highly charged movements are precipitated by slow seduction or stillness, in which performers “hold space,” adding to the drama of the feverish movements to come. In neo acts, flow is also informed by the music and the concept of a given act; contain moments of high and low energy, as well as moments of holding space or dramatic stillness. Some of the more comedic performers rely on breaks of flow, or a rapid increase of speed for comedic effect. The performance of exertion in

⁷⁵Jo Weldon once likened a burlesque act to a poem, which makes sense—a short (often playful) piece of writing with a distinct rhythm and evocative of strong emotions.

⁷⁶Some of these moves are lifted from older waves of the art form and specific burlesque legends, others were developed in strip clubs.

neo-burlesque is therefore linked to certain conventions inherent to striptease and comedy.

However, such pronounced displays of exertion seem to be about more than just sex or humor. Such heated, overworked moves look a lot like references to labor itself. For example, when Angie Pontani bends her knees up and down in a wide, outturned stance while exuding a lustful breath and heavy eye-lids, it is difficult to distinguish the reference to sex and the work it is taking her to execute the move. Notably, mobility and the reliance on one's affective skills, and an almost indistinguishable relationship between work and play are also characteristics of the nature of work in a post-industrial economy. As performance theorist Bojana Kunst explains:

Work is no longer organized in an instrumental and rationalized manner, behind the factory door, but becomes part of the production of sociality and the relationships between people. Creative, spontaneous, expressive and inventive movement, which used to be excluded from the denaturalized movement of the Fordist machine, is now at the core of production. The essence of contemporary production calls for creative and potential individuals, with their constant movement and dynamism promising economic value.⁷⁷

Kunst is of course referring to the differences between an older industrial mode of production and a more recent (optimized in the 1990s) post-industrial, late capitalist model. The former is a form of capitalist production developed in the early 20th century that encouraged a clear demarcation between work life and home life and a subsequent suppression of worker creativity; while the latter, a form of late capitalist production that developed in reaction to the “artistic critique” of the late 60s, which encouraged flexibility in the workplace, in production and in worker skills, also discouraged a sharp

⁷⁷Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: The Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 111.

demarcation between work and play. Today's post-Fordist worker must take on any job at any given moment, and rely more and more on his/her subjectivity to do it.⁷⁸ On stage, neo-burlesquers evoke some of these characteristics in their exertion-filled choreography and emotive delivery.

It might seem odd to draw parallels between neo-burlesque, a sub-cultural art form made up of quirky performance artists who strip out of fanciful costumes, and post-Fordist production modes. But like other art forms, neo-burlesque and neo-burlesque performers do not exist outside of culture. Neo-burlesque makes its (re)appearance in the late 1990s, the same historical moment this radical shift in capitalism is realized. And given that dance centers on bodies moving through space and time, choreography is in fact a quite apt locus for studies of labor and production. Not to mention that artists were used as models for worker/managerial productivity in developing this “new spirit” of capitalism.

⁷⁸In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2018), Boltanski and Chiapello explain that in reaction to the “artistic critique” of the late 1960s toward modes of production that alienated the laborer from his or her work, a “new spirit of capitalism” began to emerge. Companies/firms were reorganized: hierarchies were eliminated, replaced by networks and project-based work. This reorganization encouraged workers to be more flexible and independent, to be their own managers. Instead of holding the same position for several years and climbing their way up the chain of command, wage-earners now contributed to a “project” within a team of people, gaining “employability” by moving from one project to another—utilizing their skills as creative beings. In order to do so, workers needed to rely on their communicative and affective skills. This led to the breakdown of a clear division between a private home life and a public work life, upheld in previous decades: “authors rebelled against this separation, which is deemed deleterious inasmuch as it separates dimensions of life that are insoluble, inhumane because it leaves no room for affectivity” preventing workers from utilizing the skills necessary for functioning in a network. While the move toward flexibility increased the autonomy of wage-earners, it also resulted in financial and economic insecurity for the majority of the work force. This was due in part to an increase in subcontracted labor, temporary and part-time work: “casual” workers only hired in times of increased productivity and who lack the securities of full-time employment such as health insurance, paid leave, and union protections. Although some white and blue-collar workers were able to maintain, or obtain full time, permanent positions, and fortunate to have certain securities, they were now being given more tasks and responsibilities for the same wage.

According to Kunst, these changes actual have significant consequences for dance and movement. She argues that changes in capitalism have fundamentally altered our sense of time and the way we move with the world:

Today's subjectivities are flexible because its bodies are reorganized by means of constant protocols of the acceleration and organization of everyday and common movement. This kind of distribution enables experimentation with temporality, whereby change is accelerated and spectral. There is no time for hesitation when you move with the world.⁷⁹

Given that accelerated flexibility and affective expressiveness are now the economic and cultural norm, and that dance concerns movement, energy flow and virtuosity, it is in a unique position to play with the temporality of this new form of capitalism, and even develop techniques to resist it. In the following sections I explore the role of exertion (strenuous physicality and emotion work) in three types of burlesque performance, and consider it in relation to the new temporality of capitalism Kunst describes.

i. Classic Showgirls: Hot, Affective, Flexibility

The top classic neo-burlesque performers in the city all have their own individual stage personas and style, yet exhibit similarities in their choreographic execution. All begin by parading, or strutting across the stage, presenting themselves and their costume. Medianoche is a true seductress; her walk is languid and sultry. She glides across the stage. The Maine Attraction is a firecracker. At a performance at Duane Park, she ran from one end of the venue to the other before she even made it to the stage. Classic performers will then perform a few sinuous moves. Peekaboo Pointe usually begins with a "slow grind," undulating her hips around in a circle. The Maine Attraction likes to sway

⁷⁹Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 115.

her hips side to side as she kicks out her heels, or twist her hips to one side and place one foot over the other. Medianoche does a series of turns, touching her body and reaching her arms out to the audience.

These performers then begin to remove pieces of their costume. They start with a glove or work their boas in some clever way. These removals are set apart by more parading, turns and spins. Classic performers might choose to engage an audience member: tossing their boa or glove to a spectator and then playfully pulling it back. I have seen Maine squat in front of an unsuspecting spectator at the edge of the stage, open her knees, and make an outward gesture with her hands emanating from her crotch before removing another piece of her costume.

Once most of their costume pieces are removed save for pasties and g-string, classic burlesquers usually move to the stage floor—performing a series of erotic moves on their hands and knees or on their backs. I have seen Medianoche drop her hands to the floor while simultaneously bending one knee and extending her other leg out, then look up at the audience with a lustful expression. She then bent her other knee and turned her side to the audience, bouncing on her heels—lifting her pelvis and thrusting it forward; then extended one leg forward and the other leg back into a full split and moved up out of the split and back into it. Then arched her back, moved her shoulders side to side making the tassels on her breasts twirl. Sometimes, if Media is feeling “lazy,” she simply holds one of her breasts with her hand and moves it around to make the tassel twirl. Instead of floorwork, The Maine Attraction likes to find an audience member and do a headstand in their lap, gesticulating her legs high in the air.

Despite their individual styles, classic performers keep a steady flow and never

stop moving. They all perform fluid movement sequences that build to moments of intensity, or feverish play. In their choreography, they not only exhibit physical dexterity but negotiate several tasks at once, all while attending to (sometimes individual) members of the audience. And each movement, whether a glove toss or backbend, is delivered with a particular affective expression. Peekaboo widens her eyes and smiles with delight. The Maine Attraction evokes expressions of disbelief, cocking her head, and smirking, if to ask, “Can you believe this?” Medianoche always maintains a knowing low key faciality, a sly smile and suggestive eyes. When Medianoche slides in and out of her split, it is once erotic *and* reminder of the difficulty/strain of such a movement. And when The Maine Attraction places her head in the lap of a spectator, holds on to the seat with her arms and propels her legs upward and undulates them in the air, she dazzles the crowd with the eroticism *and* virtuosity of the act. These choreographic gestures, which allude to sexual acts and are also a lot of physical work, are often accompanied with emotive faciality. In Medianoche’s case, a direct and aggressive stare, possibly open mouth; and in Maine’s case a knowing, almost admonishing nod of her head, and then a sweet smile and pat on the spectator’s head after she dismounts. Such heated moments are executed with a particular alacrity. Classic burlesquers move deftly from parade and presentation, to the juggling of costume pieces to floorwork and/or audience interaction.

The steady flow and constant movement of classic performers, along with short outbursts of frenzied play, is a convention of burlesque striptease, but as Kunst reminds us, it is also emblematic of the accelerated flexibility expected of all workers in a Post-Fordist economic framework. Furthermore, part of the essence of classic burlesque performance is the foregrounding and display of a highly affective individual or subject.

Although it appears that classic burlesquers are flowing right along with the pace and temporalities of neo-capitalism, their dramatic pauses are interesting to consider.

Many classic burlesquers infuse moments of stillness or “holding space” within their acts. And no performer does this more brilliantly than Perle Noire. Perle is a veteran performer in the scene, one of top performers in the country, and is known for her spirited and highly emotive performances. She takes her name of course of Josephine Baker, who was referred to as the “Black Pearl,” and who Perle regularly channels in her performances. She considers her acts be more “experiences” and defines her style of burlesque as “seductive.” I would group Perle’s “experiences” within the realm of classic; however, they are more movement based and contain less costume play than other classic acts, save for fans or large pieces of fabric. The following is a description from my fieldnotes during a “Perlesque” experience I observed at The House of YES in January of 2019:

Outfitted in a shiny red halter dress embellished with fringe and two thigh-high slits, Perle took the stage. As the music began, a bluesy tune from the 20s, she did a fast shimmy mimicking the blare of the horns and then slowly drew her arms in toward her torso, her fingers dramatically outstretched. She then strutted back and forth across the stage, an exaggeratedly languorous walk, her shoulders and hips moving up and down as she placed one foot in front of the other; a walk of extreme self-awareness. Perle was marking her territory and drawing the crowd into her world. Perle then moved upstage, turned and slowly bent both knees sitting back on her heels, paused and looked at the crowd. Without taking her eyes off them, she extended one leg and slid down into a split. Then with her hands on the floor, she lifted her hips a few inches off the stage and moved them up and down for several seconds. At the end of the tune, Perle did an elegant spin before another more upbeat track by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band cut in. Perle clapped her hands a few times to the rhythm, then walked to the end of the narrow platform that projected out into the audience. When she reached the end, she dropped and did four swift back bends, her head nearly reaching her heels, then slide off the end of the stage turned around and began a fast-paced twerk. Perle changed tempo once more, sauntering back to the main stage, relying on a few audience members in aisle seats for assistance. Once back on stage, she executed

a fast samba, then dropped into a split from a standing position, then laid on her back and extended her legs in the air and executed four reverse splits, each time tapping the stage with the sides of her heels. Anticipating the end of the song, Perle walked over to a spectator at the foot of the stage, showed her the knot at the back of her neck. After the woman untied it, Perle walked back, turned toward the audience and just as the music stopped, dropped the top of her dress, revealing her pastie-covered breasts.

Perle's performance that evening, like many of her performances, was a virtuosic display of flexibility and heightened emotionality. Not only did Perle execute full splits and back bends with ease, she knew her music so well she maneuvered her way around the venue, engaged members of the audience, and delivered her final reveal on cue. Perle was so in control, she didn't even disrobe until the end of the act. Part of what makes Perle's performances so thrilling, is the way she alternates between high energy moves and slow seduction. Perle is also a performer who you never doubt is giving it her all, and all of herself. She manages to deliver each move with palpable emotionality. It is difficult to describe because it comes from within, but certainly has outward expression in her strut across the stage and when she "holds space," standing still, holding her body upright, staring into the audience, garnering energy and asserting her presence.

At a solo show of hers at DROM, a performance lounge in the East Village, Perle again exhibited her unique blend of limber moves and holding space. After some pretty energetic dancing, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" began to play. Perle slowly picked up her fans, turned toward the audience and stood on the balls of her feet, holding the dark purple plumes above her head, gently running her fingers through the feathers for what seemed like several minutes. It was an incredibly moving visual. Given the context of the song, Perle's fans eerily, yet beautifully evoked the sycamore tree Holiday describes while Perle's brown body was a reminder of her personal survivals and of black

resilience. At another point in the evening, Perle hovered over a wooden bench. With her back to the audience and knees bent, she slowly swiveled her hips about two inches above the bench, *nearly* sitting, for what seemed an eternity. Uber sexy to say the least. But also, an interlude of duration; it drew me in, got me thinking about how tired her legs must be, and the strength of her back.

Within many of these exertion-filled performances are moments of slowness and stillness which help to anticipate the more frenzied moments, but can also be quite poignant and allow for reflection. Given the importance of accelerated flexibility to contemporary capitalism, Kunst sees duration and stillness in dance as an opportunity for resistance. Stillness, Kunst suggests, might reveal the internalized speed of our own subjectivity, drawing attention to how subjectivity is manipulated externally. She goes on to say that in order for dance to be truly resistant, there must be a dispossession of subjectivity.⁸⁰

Perle's emotive moments of holding space and slow seduction are opportunities in which she and her body can be seen in relation to her more fast-paced, exertion-filled moves, but I do not see, nor do I think Perle is interested in any surrender or dispossession of subjectivity. As a black woman in burlesque and in the world, every one of her performances is an assertion of her right to there and a mode through which she heals historic wounds—both external and internal. Although her performances reference universal themes of self-love, emotional injury, and desire, every performance is always about Perle. Because it has to be.

⁸⁰Kunst, 130.



Figure 2.5
Perle Noire emoting at DROM, East Village
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

ii. Stilted Showgirls: Starts, Stops, and Feigned Fatigue

There are many acts in which interruptions in, or the *lack of exertion*, becomes the concept of the act itself. In these acts, which are often comedic, performers consciously do not perform well, are graceless, or simply move really really slowly. For example, the neo-burlesque performer Fancy Feast does an act in which a glitch in the music prevents her from continuing. I saw her perform the act on Coney Island and then again at The House of YES in 2018. Dressed in a red sequined dress and black hat, Fancy begins by parading around the stage as Regina Spector’s song “My Man” plays. But soon after she begins, the music takes a dip and starts playing in slow motion, causing Fancy to look up

at the sound guy from under her hat. When the music returns to a normal speed Fancy continues; but it happens again, with the music slowing even more dramatically, forcing Fancy to morph the pace of her removals to the reduced speed. Then the song stops completely, prompting Fancy to admit to the audience that it is her fault, “I sent an MP4” (as opposed to an MP3). Thankfully the music is restored and Fancy is able to remove her glove. Except that the music then speeds up, making the singer sound like a chipmunk. This too forces Fancy to switch course; yank her dress down, and wildly kick out her legs. The song then stops two more times! And Fancy tries to negotiate with the DJ, “Just play anything...just something so I take my bra off and then I’ll be done.” But the DJ’s suggestions (Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” etc.) aren’t good. Finally, he plays a hip-hop tune that Fancy gets into, allowing her to cheerily twirl her tassels and take a bow.

The starts and stops in Fancy’s act are quite funny, and I found myself laughing aloud along with the other members of the audience. Fancy has good comedic timing, and never loses sight of the tease—each stop in the music is delayed gratification. Not to mention that the *repetition* of interruptions is classic comedy. The French philosopher Henri Bergson has noted that what we find funny has a lot to do with interruptions of agile flow, the equivalent of falling and slipping on a banana peel.⁸¹ But the first time I saw Fancy’s act, I really did think something was wrong with the music and I looked up in the direction of the sound booth. I was nervous for her and I remember feeling a sense of relief when the music began to play again. The disconnect between Fancy’s gestures

⁸¹Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008).

and the music calls attention to the way in which performers (and all of us) succumb to an externally imposed momentum. And her struggle to keep her act going, and adjust her body to the skips and slowdowns of the music similarly draws attention to ways in which we must continually train our movements to conform to externally imposed rhythms.

Peekaboo Pointe has a similar type of act in which she purposefully does not perform well. In her aptly titled act, “The Lazy Stripper,” which Peekaboo has been performing for almost a decade, she comes out onto the stage yawning, wearing only a pair of black pasties with tassels, g-string, and black heels. She idles as Louis Prima’s “Night Train” plays, shrugging her shoulders and looking dejected. Feigning exhaustion she leans on the back wall then turns her back to the audience to stretch. As her arms descend, Peekaboo points to her rear as she pops each of her glutes to the beat of the music. She then turns back toward the audience and holds one of her breasts in her hand and manually circles it until the attached tassel twirls. Peekaboo then reluctantly uses her back muscles to twirl both, but soon gives up. Next, she clumsily moves down to the stage floor and attempts a split, donning a pained expression and mouthing the words “Ouch” as she descends. Proving too painful, Peekaboo gets up and ambles a bit more before pulsating her legs in and out allowing the flesh of her butt to shake before waving the audience goodbye.

Peekaboo’s act is quite clever. She presents a stark, comic, alternative to the mobility, flexibility and availability (i.e. emotional labor) of strippers and burlesquers. She also literally isolates her muscles/body parts and reveals their work. Peekaboo’s performance of stunted flow and deliberate fatigue point directly to the labor it takes to “perform”—constantly moving, being “on,” making others feel good, and knowing full

well how this is connected to gender. Although Peekaboo's fatigue and disgruntled attitude about performing is funny, is it also a real act of defiance, laziness being anathema in a culture that encourages constant work on a project and on oneself. Not so surprisingly, despite appreciating Peekaboo's concept, it is a hard act to get through. I much rather see her dance.

iii. Zany Showgirls: Hyper, Strained, and Precarious

On the extreme end of the exertion spectrum, there are a few high-energy performers whose acts border on the frantic. Their acts are also comedic; but contain rapid, hurried gestures and strained emotionality. Gigi Bon Bon's "Cyclone Act," an act she created for the Miss Coney Island Pageant in 2017 typifies this "zany" or wacky style of neo-burlesque. In the act, Gigi appears as a passenger on the infamous Cyclone, strapped in what looks like a cardboard mockup of one of the coaster's cars. The contraption hangs on her shoulders via two thick straps so she has free use of her arms and legs. Although the box obscures Gigi's real legs, stuffed puppet appendages have been attached which she controls via strings. As the music starts, Lenny Kravitz's "Are You Gonna Go My Way," Gigi's body begins to pulsate—and the ride begins. Along to the music Gigi thrusts her body forward and back, side to side—her hair coming undone in the process. Having seemingly survived the worst of it, she becomes giddy and takes out a hotdog from her bag, coats it with ketchup and then whips out her cell phone to take a selfie. This reprieve doesn't last long, however, as the ride (and song) speeds up again causing Gigi to drop the hotdog and phone as she flails her arms. Feigning nausea, Gigi lifts her skirt over her mouth, revealing a pantiless and hairy puppet crotch. But when she

releases the skirt, her top has now come undone and her puppet legs swing wildly. As the ride comes to an end, Gigi removes the contraption and collapses to the floor hooking one of her (real) legs around her head. The host comes out and asks if she's ok—checking for consciousness by asking Gigi who the president is. Gigi proceeds to list *all* of the former presidents starting with Washington, but finally hurls at the recollection and shock of the 45th.

Gigi's performance is extremely funny, a bit like Lucile Ball struggling to keep up with a relentless conveyer belt. And it doesn't hurt that Gigi has bright red hair. Of course, as much as the act is funny, it is also quite frantic. For most of the "ride," Gigi is scared, then momentarily exhilarated and then back to being terrified on a ride she can't control. And her physicality reflects this. In an effort to mimic the rumble of the coaster, Gigi's body pulsates throughout. Her facial expressions vacillate between extreme horror and extreme delight. And her enthusiastic exuberance feels more like strained exertion. And of course, it is. Her body is doing a lot of physical and affective work. Even her finale, an over-the-head split held in repose, has to be the most labor-intensive way of ending an act—let alone lying on the floor.

The funny but frenzied quality of Gigi's act echoes what Sianne Ngai has ascribed to zaniness, an aesthetic category that although seemingly about play is really about work:

The aesthetic of nonstop acting or doing that is zaniness is hot: hot under the collar, hot and bothered, hot to trot. Highlighting the affect, libido, and physicality of an unusually beset agent, these idioms underscore zaniness's uniqueness as the only aesthetic category in our repertoire about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work.⁸²

⁸²Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

Like the other comedic actors, or zanies that Ngai discusses (Lucille Ball, Richard Pryor, Jim Carey) Gigi's performance appears playful and lighthearted, yet her character is highly stressed and struggling to maintain her cool. Central to Ngai's argument is not only that zany subjects embody differentiated and affective labor, "able to take on virtually any job at any moment, in an incessant flow or stream of activity," but that the zany character continually finds him or herself in precarious situations, tittering on the brink, often failing at their job or task.⁸³ The zany character therefore thwarts any easy identification. Spectators may enjoy the performance, but we are more than happy to keep a safe distance, just in case our situations happen to reverse. In fact, the first time I saw Gigi perform the act, I couldn't stop laughing. But my laughter wasn't light-hearted, it was a giddy, tearful laughter that seemed out of my control.

The mention of our current President toward the end of the act might signal that Gigi meant to represent those of us who feel like we've been trapped on a runaway coaster these past four years. For me, the act signals Gigi's own labor as a performer: making costumes, creating choreography, running from gig to gig "doing what she loves." Of course, Gigi's kinetic body also reads as a metonym for all over-wrought workers within a post-industrial economy that promotes the benefits of flexible schedules and self-reliance, but has actually created a cultural environment (supported and rooted in the American dream) that applauds people who work harder, longer with less security.

⁸³Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 8.



Figure 2.6
Gigi Bonbon performing her “Cyclone” act at The Miss Coney Island Pageant. Brooklyn, 2017
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

Boo Boo Darlin’ is another New York neo-burlesque performer who I would describe as “zany.” Every act of hers contains comedic themes, but there is a manic quality to her gestures and emotionality. In her “Heavy Petting” act, which I saw her perform at the New York Burlesque Festival in 2018, Boo Boo has a maniacal interaction with a cat. She begins petting the stuffed animal a little too forcefully and it turns on her. A dramatic change in music accompanies this, and Ted Nugent’s hard rock tune “Cat Scratch Fever” cuts in. The stuffed cat now seems possessed and the two battle it out, tussling on the floor with the cat succeeding in biting off Boo Boo’s robe. Boo Boo wags her finger at the animal and scowls her face in anger. There is then a racy interlude on a

chair in which the cat crawls up and down Boo Boo's body as she disrobes. At the end of the act, Boo Boo ends up on the stage floor seemingly defeated, as the cat hovers over her.

Despite Boo Boo's clever use of a gimmick and nod to the half and half numbers of the 40s and 50s (in which burlesquers covered half of their bodies in a gorilla suit or other type of costume), this act is disturbing to watch. The piece is violent, and alludes to rape. Not to mention it is performed to a Ted Nugent song who is known for his affinity for guns and racism. Like Gigi's "Cyclone" act, Boo Boo's physicality is frantic and stressed even as she attempts to assert authority and regain control. Although cloaked in comedy, her gestures are desperate, and her body vulnerably positioned.

In her analysis of zaniness, Ngai points out that it would be too easy to suggest that the aesthetic merely reflects a "perform or else" mentality. In fact, given zaniness's destructive quality, Ngai writes, "one might even describe it as the dramatization of an archaic refusal to be productive."⁸⁴ The same can be said of Gigi and Boo Boo's acts. As much as burlesquers' exertion-filled performances appear to resemble the characteristics of post-Fordist production modes, such performances could also be viewed as issuing a warning, in which performers' self-objectification points to the cultural implications and effects of accelerated flexibility and their inability to keep up.

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⁸⁴Ngai, 12.

In this chapter I have described a series of neo-burlesque acts in which costume and choreography are dynamically at work and in play. In performance, neo-burlesque costumes are not only wielded by performers, but are actants, cuing performers' choreographic choices, turning performers into supporting partners and causing them to react in object-like ways. In addition to presenting a self-portrait—sembled to represent a character or symbolize a vision or concept—neo-burlesque costumes are landscapes burlesquers perform within, are shaped by and must negotiate. This understanding of costume hopes to contribute to the field by offering an alternative to semiotic analyses. In terms of construction, it hopes to broaden how costumes are conceived—not just as living pictures, or attentive to performers' bodies—but as actors in their own right, creating spectacle and presenting opportunities for performance.

In neo-burlesque's emotive and exertion filled choreography, performers display the labor it takes to perform. This closeness of art and work dovetails with the accelerated flexibility and affectivity that has come to define post-Fordist production. In moments of stillness, or “holding space,” performers call attention to this imposition, asserting their subjectivity, pointing to the ways we must keep up with external momentums.

In the next chapter I go behind the scenes, into the classes offered at the New York School of Burlesque, and trace my own labor as ethnographer, student and unintentional performer.

Chapter 3

Act Development, Costuming, Floorwork

Learning to Make It at the New York School of Burlesque

The New York School of Burlesque plays a vital role in the burlesque community in the city. It offers classes on how to develop an act and opportunities to perform, presenting a platform for prospective burlesquers to enter the scene. Performers also meet each other and form relationships in class which then extend beyond the school. For established performers, the school provides occasions to teach and share skills.⁸⁵ The New York School of Burlesque is also highly regarded outside of New York, in larger burlesque circles, due to the 2010 publication of *The Burlesque Handbook*, a manual for would-be burlesquers written by the school's headmistress, Jo Weldon. Of course the existence of a "school" of burlesque, and the manual, signal that there is something about the art form that might be learned and skills to impart.

I began taking classes at the school in July of 2015, at the start of my fieldwork. These classes served as my ethnographic entry into the scene. The first class I enrolled in and every class I participated in thereafter connected me to and solidified relationships with other performers and my instructors. In class I was also introduced to the conventions of the art form like tassel twirling and floorwork; learned the language and

⁸⁵ Although most classes cater to prospective performers, some students do take classes just for fun. For example, Jo Weldon regularly hosts workshops for bachelorette parties, in which she might teach the bride-to-be and her bridesmaids a sexy glove peel or chair routine.

its unique vocabulary; and developed a few acts and performed in student showcases. My participation thus not only allowed me access to the community, but allowed me to engage in the artistic practices of burlesque and be recognized as a social member. In addition to my artistic labor, I observed the labor of my instructors and classmates. The focus of this chapter is therefore my own labor as artist and ethnographer as well as the pedagogical labor of my instructors, labor typically obscured from staged performance and not always gleaned in interviews with artists.

Methodologically this chapter departs from the approach I have taken in chapters one and two, from that of contemporary historian and observer of performance, to an embodied one. After the first class I participated in my role as ethnographer shifted. Even though my instructors and classmates knew I was writing about the scene, I was treated as a performer. My name changed too. By my second class, I became Lita Electra. Like other ethnographers who have immersed themselves in the field and participated in the practices of the community they are studying, I entered the murky, yet revealing and often thrilling position of artist-researcher, or artist-scholar. This chapter is therefore in line with and hopes to add to ethnographic studies of performance that recognize that there are things we learn through doing and through our bodies that are different from what we learn through observation alone.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ There are numerous examples of studies in which ethnographers have learned and are initiated into a performance practice. A few notable selections include: Julie Taylor's 1998 *Paper Tangos*; Barbra Browning's 1995 *Samba: Resistance in Motion*; Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*; Loic Wacquant's 2004 *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*; Greg Downey's 2005 *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning From an Afro-Brazilian Art*; and Katherine Hagedorn's 2001 *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santeria*.

Burlesque performers find inspiration for their acts in a variety of ways, but the process they employ to create them is best described as “DIY,” or do-it-yourself. Burlesque is primarily a solo art form; performers work independently and assume sole creative control and production over their acts. Although not necessary in this order, performers establish a concept for an act, select their music, make or assemble their own costumes, choreograph their reveals and get themselves booked via various self-promotion techniques. The DIY nature of the process does not necessarily mean all performers are amateurs. Performers come from a variety of artistic backgrounds, and may have training in acting, dance or visual art. Some of my classmates were trained modern dancers, others graphic designers and still others had no art, dance or performance background at all. Part of becoming a burlesque performer involves determining what you have to bring to the table artistically. There are certainly conventions performers employ. However, the extent to which burlesquers employ them again depends on the individual. Burlesque classes and burlesque practice/process thus becomes an interesting site for observing art making and performance creation.

Studies of DIY have been taken up by scholars in a number of fields, including art, music and technology. As David Gauntlet has pointed out in his book *Making is Connecting*, DIY practice is not new. People have been making things for millions of years. Yet a commitment to such practices in art, specifically the handmade, can be traced to the Arts and Craft Movement of the 19th century. A strong DIY ethos has also been associated with the Punk scenes of the 70s and 80s. Outsiders to the mainstream music industry, Punks assumed the means of production, non-musicians took up instruments, fashioned their own clothes out of found or recycled materials and espoused

an “anyone can do it” attitude. In the 1990s, there was another upsurge in DIY practices, marked by a renaissance in knitting. The DIY practices I took part in at The New York School of Burlesque, builds on the conventions of the art form and draws on the DIY sensibilities identified in Punk and in craft communities.

It is important to note that scholars of erotic performance, including strip club stripping, pole and lap dance, have pointed out that most erotic dancers are self-taught; they learn on the job and/or seek out skills they think will help them advance or make them more employable on their own. Although some of the instructors who teach at The New York School of Burlesque have training in acting or dance technique, for the most part, they too have perfected their performance of burlesque by teaching themselves. This chapter thus intervenes into the discourses of DIY and erotic labor by focusing on the DIY practices employed at a school for erotic performance.

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The establishment of The New York School of Burlesque in 2003 marked the presence of a viable neo-burlesque scene in New York. It also began to produce more performers and thus helped build the scene in the city. Every burlesquer I know of, with the exception of the old-garde (those who began in the 1990s), got their start by taking a class through the school. Yet despite its significant contribution to the scene, the school remains relatively small. Jo rents out studio space from Playwrights Horizons at 440 Lafayette Street, across the street from the Public Theatre, in downtown Manhattan. She teaches a few classes herself, then invites (or accepts petitions to teach) from established

performers, who offer classes specific to their expertise. The “Burlesque Essentials Series” in which students are introduced to the conventions of classic burlesque is offered every month as is “Act Development” in which students get the opportunity to develop an act and perform in a student showcase. Other “subject areas” included floorwork, in which students learn a floor routine or moves they might incorporate into a future act; prop-based workshops, such as learning to handle veil or feather fans; and industry related classes, like “stage kittening” or producing.⁸⁷ Of the classes I participated in, some were four to five-week series that meant a few hours once a week, others were two or four-hour individual workshops. Classes ranged in cost from \$15 to \$300, and class sizes were generally capped at ten students.

The other students in my classes were predominately cis-gendered women in their 20s-40s who varied in race and ethnicity. A few had enrolled out of curiosity, or the longing to play with femininity. However, the majority were. or wanted to become burlesque performers. Most were amateurs, still collecting tools for their burlesque toolbox, others were more established. This depended on the class offered and who was teaching it. Classes taught by “legends,” performers who danced professionally in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, or who had been instrumental in the early days of neo-burlesque; and classes taught by highly regarded instructors visiting from other cities would attract more established performers. Unique offerings (like the “Bubble” class) was also attended by more seasoned performers.

In the following sections I trace my trajectory as a student at the school and

⁸⁷ Stage kittening is the act of picking up performers discarded costume pieces and props between acts at a show.

describe the artistic process I engaged in as well as the labor of my classmates and instructors. I begin with the “Burlesque Essentials Series,” taught by Jo Weldon. I then describe my experience in a series of “Act Development” classes. Next I relay learning to make pasties and headpieces in two costuming classes. And finally, I describe a floorwork class I took with Perle Noire in which I rehearsed a series of seductive floor moves.

I. The Burlesque Essentials Series with Jo “Boobs” Weldon

On the first day of the “Essentials Series,” I sat in a circle on the floor of studio 4C, with Jo Weldon, and the other eight or nine other women who had signed up for the class.⁸⁸ We began by introducing ourselves, why we were there, and sharing any performance experience we had. Jo went first. She told us about her work in strip joints and meeting the legends of burlesque at the Miss Exotic World competition Dixie Evans had started in the early ‘90s. She also mentioned that many of the women who worked back stage at the strip clubs she worked in were former burlesquers, who apparently had a lot to say about Jo’s costumes and how dancers spent their money.

At least half of my classmates seemed to have some kind of performance background, either in dance, or in theatre. All appeared to be in their 20s or early thirties and most were eager to talk to fellow classmates and Jo about their motivations for registering. One woman, Nadia, had been to a burlesque show and thought to herself, “I

⁸⁸The Essential Series is only open to cis-gendered women due to the fact that in the session on tassel twirling, students take their tops off and expose their breasts. Jo mentioned to me once that when she opened the class to men, some of the women felt uncomfortable, so she changed the policy.

can do that.” The only thing stopping her, she said, were some reservations about body image. Another woman, Kate, a dancer, heard burlesque was an art form you could actually make money doing. Jo had a quick retort to this: “No one goes into burlesque to make money.” They then had a fairly lengthy exchange about some of the performers in the burlesque world, specifically Julie Atlas Muz, who is a career artist. Jo pointed out to Kate and the rest of the class that Julie did not make her money from burlesque, or at least not from burlesque alone.

When my turn came to introduce myself, I announced that I was curious about neo-burlesque and that I planned to write my dissertation on the topic. I thought I would just put it out there. My classmates seemed impressed and nodded in support. One said, “Cool.” Jo said nothing. It seemed she had encountered my type before—the eager PhD student.⁸⁹ It would take me a while to gain Jo’s respect and I remember trying hard to impress her that first class. When Jo offered the group a brief history of burlesque, I found myself nodding and smiling a little too readily at the familiarity of the material, and so I made a conscious note to reel in my enthusiasm. I also could not take my eyes off of Jo. Maybe it was her bright red hair; or maybe it was because she had just told us she was a strip joint stripper; or maybe it was because of the following statement she made, which I jotted down in my notebook: “The most dangerous thing a woman can do is be seen.”

Before we met that first day, Jo had emailed us and suggested we wear shorts or a

⁸⁹In a class with the boylesque performer Tigger!, he too made an offhand comment about “the PhD student in the back row writing her dissertation on burlesque.” When I admitted to him after class that I was that audience member, he said simply, “Well, this is burlesque, so you have to make fun of yourself!” And as I would find out, though not surprisingly, burlesque performers are regularly approached by documentary film makers, journalists and academics.

leotard, and to bring a pair of shoes with a heel. She also asked us to bring in a pair of stockings:

Preferably ones designed to wear with a garter belt that are NOT stay-ups/thigh-highs, and don't get fishnets. In a pinch, cutoff tights or pantyhose will work, too. All the reasons for shoe and stocking recommendations will be described in the class.

We were going to learn a chair dance and a few techniques for working with stockings. In her email, Jo also suggested where we might purchase a pair—a store on St. Mark's Street not too far from the studio. The store was closed the day I went so I ended up cutting off the top of a pair I had at home.

In class, we began by grabbing a few of the folding chairs off the wall and arranging them in the front of the mirror. Jo then demonstrated a few moves on her chair and we followed: walking around it, placing one foot on the seat, a graceful way of sitting and then a few ways of positioning ourselves on the seat. Jo moved quickly through the moves and we tried it with and without music. En Vogue's "Giving Him Something He Can Feel" was the track we were dancing to that day. After a short break, we re-grouped and sat back on the floor so Jo could talk to us about stockings. She began by recalling a time in high school when she had been called into the principal's office for wearing a pair with garters under her skirt: "That's when I knew how powerful a piece of clothing could be." Jo was also proud of her mom for asking the principal how he knew she was wearing them in the first place.

After we put our stockings on, we practiced taking off our shoes in clever ways—one sexy way, another humorous. Jo held her heel up to her ear like she was on the phone. We then went through our chair choreography with stockings. Applying some of ideas Jo had shared during her tutorial, we drew our hands up our legs, drawing attention

to the stocking, slid our fingers underneath the top edge and slowly slipped one off, turned on our chairs and manipulated the other with equal stealth. At the end of the routine, Jo asked the group, “Wasn’t that easy?” We responded in various affirmatives. “You could go out tonight and put together a chair dance and perform.” For the rest of the series Jo said she wanted to be our “enabler.”

The second time the class met I arrived late. When I walked into the studio everyone was in the middle of conversation about Beyoncé’s performance at President Obama’s inaugural a few years prior, in which the singer was discovered to have lip synced. I overheard Jo say something like “people always think that if something is simple it’s not good, or can’t be entertaining.” It would be one of the many interesting and strongly expressed thoughts I would overhear Jo say. But it buoyed a theme of the ease and simplicity of art I was picking up on. Jo then explained we would be learning some moves that day she had learned from “her friends,” the burlesque legends she had met at Miss Exotic World.⁹⁰ So we put on the white feather boas and long pink opera gloves laid out in the back of the room. This was a surprisingly fun class. I do not typically gravitate toward the frilly, an aesthetic I associated with boas and gloves, but after a few moves, it was a quite thrilling experience. With just two simple costume pieces, the boa and gloves put me into instant performance mode, my energy was lifted and my body felt spectacularized. It was instant theatre. And as I would soon find out I could create an entire routine with this feathery thing and still manage to make it my own.

⁹⁰The term “legend” is used to refer to burlesque performers from decades past—anyone from Gypsy Rose Lee who was a star in the 1930s, to Camille 2000 who performed in the 1970s; and the term “living legend” simply refers to the legends who are still alive.

We began with the boas around our necks, simply stroked the plumes and then slowly pulled one end down the front of our bodies. Allowing it to fall, we held it with our other and pulled it up again, finally tossing it to the side. Jo then showed us a few ways to remove our gloves: loosening a few of fingertips with our teeth; leaning down and carefully placing it under one of our shoes and then slowly pulling our hand up, allowing the glove to slip off; then holding one arm upright and slowly placing the first and middle finger of our free hand suggestive up the opening of the glove. Once one of gloves was removed, Jo asked us to feel the skin on arm, “Doesn’t it feel different?” It did.

The following week we got to work with fans, another prop associated with classic burlesque. For the class, Jo brought in two large ostrich feather fans from her personal collection, one red, the other hot pink, each measuring about 40-50 inches in width. The first thing we learned about fans were how expensive they were. Jo couldn’t afford to purchase such large fans for the whole class. Fans were an investment piece. We then sat on the floor around Jo and listened as she explained how they were constructed, the stave foundation and how the feathers were attached; the different types of feathers (ostrich, marabou, pheasant) used and where to purchase them. We also received some advice on how to store them and a few tips for how to apply rhinestones. Jo also shared a story about performing a fan dance as a feature dance when she worked in strip clubs, and how tough it was to find information about them back then.

Jo then demonstrated a few moves with her fans, and we mimicked her with a set of smaller hand fans we had selected which had been laid out in front of the mirror. The first challenge was learning how to hold them properly—extending our pinky and thumb

fingers for optimum control. My classmates and I then got to take turns holding and manipulating Jo's larger set of fans. Each of us got up and was taught a different option for manipulating them. I went first. Jo told me to just play a little bit with them and see how they felt. They were heavy and felt huge compared to the smaller hand fans I had just been holding. She then showed me the "heartbeat." First, I cradled both fans in my arms like a baby. Then I held on to the outer stave of one fan with my right hand and allowed it to open. I did the same with the other. As I held them in my hands and allowed them to overlap. Jo then instructed me to drop my wrists so they resembled a heart. I asked Jo whether or not you could close the fans once you opened them, or should they remain open: "There are no rules. When I'm coaching students, I'm looking for whether they are covering their face, or if they're getting to the reveal too soon." So, there were at least some rules, as well as an aesthetic repertoire from which we could emulate or depart.



Figure 3.1
Jo Weldon dispensing information about feather fans in the Essentials class.
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

For the final class of the series, we were asked to bring in a button-down shirt and a bra with straps that hooked in the back so that we could learn a few striptease techniques and how to tassel twirl. Outfitted in our button downs and heels, Jo began by showing us how to stand, specifically how to hold our feet. We all bent one knee and drew the toes of that leg close to the arch of our straight leg—in a showgirl stance. It elongated the frame of the body. Jo then guided us through a few “walks” and one turn. We were then instructed to touch our shoulder, and to linger there, before moving to the strap of our bra, so as to draw in the audience’s attention to the garment and to what we were doing. Self-touch invited the audience’s attention and the strap offered us a few choreographic options of how to proceed. As I looked at myself in the mirror I was negotiating how I looked and how I felt. Did I like how my body looked, and if I did, was that okay to feel? I remembered Jo’s comment the first day of class about the danger of being seen. I certainly didn’t feel like I was in danger, but I did a bit like I was doing something wrong that also made me feel good. I felt exposed but also sexy. When I glanced around the room my classmates all seemed to be getting into it, making it their own.

During our break, Jo had laid out several pairs of silver pasties with black tassels, double sided tape on a table in the back of the room. Pasties are decorative coverings for performers’ nipples, originally created out of necessity to uphold nudity clauses, which burlesquers have made into an art. My classmates and I all crowded around the table looking for two that matched. I selected a pair and brought them and a few strips of double-sided tape back to my spot on the floor. There was some left-over tape on the back of my pair so I pulled it off and applied two to three pieces to the back of the silver

discs. As we were doing this, Jo announced, “You are about to learn the third purpose for breasts. The first is nurture, is anyone here a mother?” No one was. “So sometimes breasts are used to nurture. The second is sexual arousal. Right? And the third, is entertainment—mostly your own.” Jo then then showed us how to put them on. She took her bra off and placed one of the pasties over her left nipple, the other over the right. Then we unhooked our bras and stuck the pasties onto our own breasts. Jo looked around and smiled, “This is always my favorite part of class.” We then stood and faced the mirror, forced to confront our breasts and each other’s. I took a quick glance around the room, not wanting to stare. Some were small, others full. Some brown, others white. A few were uneven. But like many of the other exercises Jo guided us through, I remember having to look at myself and go through that familiar, albeit brief, assessment of my own body and what it looked like performing the movements and gestures Jo was asking us to try.

Jo then showed us the simplest way to twirl, standing on one’s toes with arms raised and jumping. So, we stood up straight, glued our legs together and jumped in place on the balls of our feet with our arms raised above our heads. And then like magic, we were all twirling our tassels. Smiles and laughter ensued. I was happy I could do it. We then tried an isolation: lifting one arm and jumping, attempting to make just one of our tassels twirl, which was harder than I expected. But it soon came—a combination of physics, muscle control and available flesh. A more intermediate technique involved shaking our torsos side to side with our arms out to the side of bodies. I liked this technique best because it looked the most “professional” and I remembered seeing one of my favorite burlesquers, Gal Friday, do it on stage. I was also pretty good at it because I

knew to use my back to control the tassels. We then attempted a more advanced way to twirl—lying down on the floor, with one ankle crossed over the other and our backs arched. As Jo laid down on the floor to demonstrate, she remarked that this move was probably easier for her because she had implants, which allowed her to project her tassels upward a bit more. She was right, her tassels twirled right away. We all then took a stab at it, but most of us failed. One woman in my class could do it so we all watched her. Tassel twirling is an interesting combination of subject/object relations. You have to use your muscles to initiate the twirl, but the tassels also prompt the body to come up with unique ways of twirling them. Performers also objectify their breasts in service of the tasseled pastie, which in performance, creates a whirlwind of flesh *and* tassel.

The Essentials class was my first foray into embodied fieldwork. It began by learning about the conventions by taking up and practicing with some of the classic costume pieces and props of the art form. I was also learning that I was being presented with template of performance I could work within and that neo-burlesque provided a fairly immediate vehicle for performing.

II. Act Development Classes

i. Act Development with Jo Weldon

On the heels of the Essentials Series, I enrolled in the “Act Development,” class, also taught by Jo. The class was meant to be a follow up to the Essentials Series in which participants would get to develop their own act and perform in a student showcase at The Slipper Room. On the first day, I noticed four of the women who were in my Essentials class signed up, as well as a few new people. After introductions, Jo had us fill out a

worksheet, sketching out an idea for an act. The categories included: stage name, music, theme/character, costume, beginning/ending, significant elements, props, and set up needs. I did not have a stage name yet so went down to the costume section and sketched something billowy. If we did not have a concept yet, Jo encouraged us to draw a picture of the first thing we wanted the audience to see. When we went around the room to share, some of my classmates had very clear ideas of what they wanted to do, others like me, had a visual or feeling they wanted to portray.

That day, Jo also gave us some tips on selecting our music and about fulfilling or confounding the audience's expectations. She played "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns and Roses." And then asked us to think about the audience's expectations. She played the song, "Turn Around" by Bonnie Tyler and "The Stripper" by David Rose, among others. Jo advised that we listen to the lyrics, even writing them out, and watch any videos associated with the song. Inevitably, she warned, the audience will know it, or at least we needed to assume they would. Our first assignment was to bring in a few potential songs, around three to four minutes long, and to start thinking about a stage name. On the subway, I jotted down a few possibilities. Jo and some of my classmates encouraged me to incorporate a reference to my academic pursuits or curiosity, but I opted against it, since I wanted something in a different vane. I ultimately landed on Lita Electra. A supervisor of mine once referred to me as electric and I liked it, so I added Lita to it because I liked the sound of the letters. But also because it alluded to light, and it reminded me of 80s guitarist Lita Ford who I remember being a badass.

When we met the following week, we played our music for each other and discussed what we envisioned as we listened to it and whether or not it was "appropriate"

for the act. As part of our assignments each week, we were also required to read chapters of *The Burlesque Handbook*, a manual for prospective burlesque performers that Jo had written and published in 2010.⁹¹ A woman named Trixie, who I met in the Essentials class, picked a song by Beyoncé, which she ended up using, but many of us in the class, worried that she was setting herself up to be compared to the singer. I, myself, made the mistake of picking a “classic,” or overused burlesque performance song—a remix of Nina Simone’s “I’m Feelin’ Good.” Jo’s immediate response was, “Well, there’s a reason it’s classic.” Not only are the lyrics perfect for a striptease act, the buildup in the music—slow with a big finish—is also perfect for the necessary arc of burlesque performance. In the handbook and in class, Jo cautioned that producers will probably already have someone booked who would be using that song or have heard it used a million times. But, she conceded, if I planned to do corporate gigs, I could go for it. This was one of the many moments I was treated like a performer, a position that was completely new to me. Did Jo actually think I was going to do corporate gigs? In this environment, she had every right to make that assumption. I figured that the possibility of me performing at The Slipper Room was much greater than me landing a high paying corporate gig so I eventually selected a song by an off-the-radar artist named AKUA. Everyone seemed to like it and Jo approved.

In week two we discussed costuming, so Jo asked us to bring in pieces of clothing we thought might serve for our future acts. Some people were making their own. Logan, one of my classmates, was doing a boudoir act that involved a robe and a two-piece bra and bloomer set she was sewing. Trixie decided she would be the limo driver in

⁹¹Jo Weldon, *The Burlesque Handbook* (New York: It Books, 2010).

her song, "Partition," and so she was deconstructing a pair of black pants she would turn into breakaways. I did not know how to sew, so I took Jo's advice and scoured several Halloween stores and vintage shops in the East Village looking for pieces. I walked into a Gothic costume store that stocked festival attire. I tried on some fancy feather shoulder-harnesses but they were too expensive. I stopped in Patricia Fields, a store that no longer exists but once catered to flamboyant fashion pieces and wigs, but left empty handed because nothing seemed dramatic enough. I finally found a tulle skirt at Halloween Adventure hanging from the ceiling, probably meant for a witch or ballerina's costume. On another trip into the city. I went down to some of the adult shops on West 4th Street to look for a corset and g-string. I went into *Tic Tac Toe*, a store I have probably passed a million times in my city travels, but had never gone in to look around. In addition to sex toys, they had a decent selection of packaged ensembles: mesh bodysuits, stockings and garters and corsets and G-strings. I picked out a shiny black bustier and matching g-string I thought I could wear along with the skirt. I glanced at their pastie selection, which was subpar: cheap looking materials and no tassels. However, I discovered a treasure trove on Esty, the online site that sells vintage and handmade items. Along with pasties, I discovered a vintage Armani sequined bra. Cobbled together, the ensemble felt part Madonna, part Marilyn. This was the first step in understanding the DIY nature of burlesque, the finding of particular props and fabrics, the ways burlesquers move around the city in preparation for the stage, types of business where they need to go to acquire needed materials, and how they patched things together.

On the final day of class, we ran through our acts. I was nervous. I was in uncharted territory, even as I prepared to perform in front of a trusted, private, and

supportive group of people. In our small studio space, I began to run through the moves I had practiced at home. I sat sideways on a folding chair in the room, like I did my dining room chair at home, in a pool of black tulle, making small circles with my left leg, eventually coming to standing and slowly scrunching up the skirt and pressing it to floor as I carefully stepped one heel out and then the other, and then picking up the garment to dance around with it before I stealthily unzipped my bustier. This is as far as I had gotten and Jo's feedback was helpful: "I like what you do with your leg in the beginning but you need to make it bigger. And I know everyone wants to scrunch tulle, but I don't think you have to do that. Jo then asked if she could put on the skirt. She turned her back to us and slowly slid the garment down under her rear and paused, and turned her head back around to the audience. It was simple, sexy and fantastic.

I did not end up performing in the showcase at the end of the course. I didn't think my act was ready. However, I attended an informal rehearsal to support a few of my other classmates. They had rented out a studio on the 3rd floor of 440 Lafayette, a floor below where our class was held. After I told them I would not be performing, one of my classmates said to me, "Don't tell me you're the type of person that has to have everything perfect before you do it?" I sheepishly replied, "Maybe." Trixie, who had become my friend, offered her help, "Listen if you need pasties I can do it. No problem." I admired my classmates; they had picked an idea, had not spent too much time second guessing themselves, and got to work. Part of being a burlesquer was embracing a lack of perfection, but it was more about trying things out and taking risks.

They each did a run through of their acts and my fellow classmates and I offered suggestions for what we liked and what we thought needed improvement. One woman

had made a huge mock-up of a cell phone for her act, in which she planned to do a chair dance with, pointing to our obsession with our phones. It was a cute idea, but challenging because she had her back turned to the audience for parts of it, and my classmates pointed that out to her. They suggested ways to walk around to the back of the chair so she could still face the audience. I suggested she eventually pick up the prop and do some “floorwork” with it: hold it in a loving embrace, reach it up and down like a dance partner.

We were all learning the craft of neo-burlesque—making and assembling costumes, negotiating our relationship to the audience, etc. There were unspoken aesthetic rules that we were picking up, even as we developed our own acts. And the school certainly fostered this, giving us tools, whether or not we ever performed on a stage.

ii. Intermediate Act Development with Dirty Martini

I eventually did perform at the culmination of another act development class I took with Dirty Martini. Dirty is a celebrity in the burlesque world. She was part of the 1990s New York burlesque revival and today, she tours regularly with Dita Von Teese. Her full-figured frame has also made her an iconic presence on neo-burlesque stages for its welcome defiance of cultural norms. So when an act development class with Dirty was offered, I took it.

Like the act development class I took with Jo, Dirty’s class ran for four weeks and culminated in a student showcase at The Slipper Room. However, it was designated as intermediate, and thus it was assumed that we knew some of the basics. Dirty ran the

class like a workshop. Each week someone would run through their act and she would give detailed feedback, while the rest of the class could chime into the conversation. Given this format and the fact that there was only five students in the class allowed for detailed feedback and discussion of acts.

The first time we meet we shared ideas for the acts we wanted to create or improve. One woman had a classic fan dance she wanted to put on its feet, another had picked a song and costume and was ready to work out her reveals. My friend Trixie, who also signed up for the class, wanted to do a riff on the song “Milkshake” by Kelis, coming out as a cow and spraying the audience with “milk.” Dirty cautioned that there were a few acts already out there with a similar concept—performers who had donned multiple breasts/nipples—so Trixie would have to make it unique in some way. It is a major faux pas in burlesque to steal or replicate someone else’s idea.

My initial idea was to do some kind of role reversal using either Robert Palmer’s “Simply Irresistible” or Rod Stewart’s “Do You Think I’m Sexy?” performing as Palmer or Stewart. But my plans changed when I went looking for a costume. On my way home from class one night a storefront on Broadway caught my eye. The manikins in the window were wearing huge blonde afro wigs, so I decided to take a peek. Most of the clothes in the store were black and appeared to be clubwear: bodysuits with deep cutouts and/or fringe; mesh; silver and gold leggings, etc. The selection seemed promising for a burlesque find—the prices were cheap, the styles outrageous and a little bit slutty. I ended up finding a long skirt with a corset-like waist. I tried it on in the dressing room and noticed how the fabric moved as I walked to the mirror. I thought it would look good on stage and be fun to play with, and maybe after I removed it, I could throw it over my

shoulder and pretend to be a matador. I bought it and it ended up being the foundation for my act.

When I put the skirt on at home it looked quite regal, and suggested a more classic act and so I put my Rod Stewart idea on hold. For the rest of my costume, I used the black sequined bra I had planned to use for Jo's class, and then fashioned a top out of a long piece of black silk, wrapping it around my chest and neck like a halter. I searched my music collection for a funky, high energy song that met the haughtiness of the ensemble. Dirty had mentioned in class that she tended to avoid music with lyrics so that they do not dictate her choreography. I thought one of the tracks on the album *FunkIsh* by the producer Loopmafia might work, specifically a groovy track entitled "Tha Thang." I tried manipulating the skirt in front of the mirror, but could not see what the fabric was doing, so I ended up renting a studio at 440 Lafayette one day for \$40 to practice with the skirt in front of full mirrors. It is the full image (and fabric) that is crucial in burlesque, and it needs to be experimented with, and rehearsed.

When it was my turn to workshop the act in class, I was nervous, but I felt prepared. Dirty and my classmates gave me some great feedback. In fact, before I even began, Dirty came to the back of the room where I was standing and asked me how I was feeling, not so much to calm my nerves, but rather as a reminder to be present. She turned to the rest of the class: "Before every performance I want you to acknowledge how you're feeling in that moment and go from there." After my run-through, Dirty said she loved the opening, "You come out like gangbusters, which is great, but don't feel like you have to do that the whole time. In fact, I'd like you to—at some point—to just stand completely still," So, we found a moment, right before I dropped to the floor, to pause,

catch my breath and scan the crowd. Dirty also approved of my floorwork (“Good use of levels.”). But still urged me to slow down, reassuring me I didn’t have to choreograph every moment. My classmates all commented that the skirt moved beautifully and they liked how my top floated when I threw it up in the air. But Dirty again chimed in, “Yes, the skirt is beautiful, and you’re doing what you’re supposed to do which is use it. But if I were you, I would just walk for a bit and let the fabric speak.”

The most helpful piece of advice Dirty gave me concerned the end of the act, when I started to twirl my tassels. Dirty suggested I start upstage and move forward as I twirled; it was more impactful. So, I ended up removing my bra upstage, tossing it away and then walking forward to the front corners of the stage. Finally, Dirty admitted that she did not like what I was doing with my face, particularly my mouth. For some reason I was pursing my lips which was making me appear stern. This was certainly not the look I wanted to project, so I made a conscious effort to fix my face, and try to smile.

Dirty’s feedback to my classmates was equally as helpful and revealing. In response to Striker Posie’s act, who had chosen a fast past tune about the sun or rain, Dirty noted that her costumes and movements were simply standing in for words in the song and was essentially too derivative; encouraging Striker to think about why she picked the tune in the first place and to look at some Turkish dance online for inspiration. To Lillian Bustle, another classmate of mine who was trying her hand at a classic act, after having done mostly comedic acts, Dirty helped her with different poses and angles, alternative ways to position her arms and legs.

Unlike my first attempt at act development, in Dirty’s class I allowed my costume to determine my act and my persona. I also gave myself permission to embrace the

conventions of classic burlesque. And I found out I liked them—I enjoyed wielding fabric and creating movements and that would highlight it. I was also learning about creating a full stage picture—moving around the entire stage, taking up space, and the importance of holding space.

iii. Performance Art Burlesque with Darlinda Just Darlinda

After having put together a classic act in Dirty’s class, I tried my hand at “neo” by signing up for “Performance Art Burlesque” with Darlinda Just Darlinda. On the first day, Darlinda walked into the studio in head-to-toe orange. While I, and the other three women who had signed up for the class, sat in a circle awaiting her arrival, wearing our signature New York City black. This led to a bevy of laughs and a lively conversation about color. Darlinda is a well-known performer in the New York neo-burlesque scene. She has been performing since 2004 and has developed a colorful, off-kilter burlesque style. Her tagline, given to her by a writer for *The Village Voice*, is the “Mastermind of Bizarre Extravaganza.” I had seen Darlinda perform several times before I actually met her that day. Years earlier, at the 2013 New York Burlesque Festival, I caught her blacklight number, in which she wore a neon bikini covered in glow-in-the-dark paint. After stripping, she called for the lights to go out and then twirled her tassels for the rest of the four-minute song.

In our initial conversation about color, Darlinda told us about her “Year in Color” project. Always fascinated with rainbows, Darlinda decided to don a different color of the rainbow each month for a year, which seemed like an apt opening to a performance art burlesque class. We began by brainstorming definitions of classic, neo and performance

art burlesque. In our discussion, we acknowledged that the majority of burlesque performed in the city was now classic. We also noted the tropes that circulate in neo, nerdlesque, and other more avant-garde performances. Pulling stuff out of your vagina is cool and subversive, but not necessarily original.⁹² We concluded that performance art burlesque had a political, or socio-cultural message. And what made it burlesque was the stripping. For the purposes of our class, Darlinda challenged us to recognize how easy it was to fall into a classic burlesque mode of performing, or (simply) removing one's garments in an artful way.

We then shared ideas we had for our upcoming acts, the message we wanted to convey, and how we thought we could achieve it aesthetically. Trixie was frustrated at her corporate job and wanted to do an act in which she broke free, possibly emerging out of a straightjacket. Darlinda gave it the okay because she had a clear vision, and had an idea of how she would execute it. Another one of my classmates, Regal Mortis, wanted to do something on body image that was gruesome. Like her stage name, it was her schtick. As for me, I had recently watched a video of a fashion show in which the designer created pieces of furniture that transformed into couture dresses and I was inspired. I expressed that I wanted to create a costume that transformed it into something else on stage. I suggested using pieces of my costume to create a table or table setting. Darlinda was intrigued. She had not seen it done before, and noted that The Slipper Room, where we would be performing, was probably the only place that had the stage space for it. But Darlinda pushed me to think about the message. She suggested that after I took off my

⁹²I was thinking of Carolee Schneemann. See Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).

dress/tablecloth, along with the props from my headpiece, I lay down on the table.

“Maybe this could be about consumption—the consumption of women’s bodies, though media or just on the street.” I responded, “Hmm. Maybe.” I don’t know why, but I resisted Darlinda’s idea. I thought it was too obvious and not a nuanced concept. Hadn’t that point been made a million times before? Of course, thinking retrospectively about the act, Darlinda’s suggestion was exactly what I should have done—it was both erotic and political and therefore very burlesque. Darlinda was the performer, and knew that in a short, four-minute performance you have to simplify; the message has to be clear and understood by the audience. I was thinking about it as an academic.

Each week of this “Performance Art Burlesque” class, in addition to working on our individual acts, we were given an additional assignment. One week we were asked to attend “The Fuck You Review,” a show known for its “neo” (more “performance art” acts). Darlinda would also be performing. The show was held in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn in a bar and restaurant called Bizarre. It was pleasantly odd. One performer’s act began with some hula hooping, then the removal of a seemingly never-ending supply of underwear, and finally the dislodging of a tampon which she also twirled. It was funny and gross, harkening back to the performance art of the 1970s, and it got lots of cheers from the womenfolk in the audience. Another performer drank his own urine, and yet another delivered a PowerPoint presentation about all the ways her dad had wronged her. Darlinda performed an act I’d never seen before, something that involved a Nettie pot and an audience member. She admitted later it did not go as planned. She was disappointed but had already moved on without worrying too much about it. Something I have found that burlesquers do really well is not to let a bad performance get them down.

In our discussion of the show, we all agreed that we did not like the dad shaming act, and even though the performer's dad might have been a real jerk, the act seemed like therapy and was not necessarily entertaining to the audience as a whole. As students, we were developing our eye and ear for what a "good" neo-burlesque performance would be. We understood the work that went into the creation of the final product and were learning to recognize what led up to a potentially effective (and affective) act.

In class I started to put my act on its feet with Darlinda's help. I had chosen an electronic tune entitled "See Me" by the artist Tei Shi. So, I suggested that maybe the act was simply about being seen. Darlinda did not love it, but she agreed. After I set the table, Darlinda suggested inviting someone up from the audience to sit in front of it. So I tried it out in the studio, bringing up one of my classmates to sit at the table I had prepared. After I did this, I had the urge to run off and leave the stage, so I did, and that's how I ultimately ended the act.

On the night of the showcase, Trixie stripped out of her expertly sewn straightjacket she had fashioned out of a tailored business suit. Inspired by Dali's "Exquisite Corpse" Regal Mortis emerged out of a black garbage bag and revealed a series of displaced "body parts" she had constructed out of felt. While another one of my classmates covered herself in baby oil and struggled to stand upright as she stripped. I decided to cover myself in white body paint so as to appear statue-like and "came to life" as the music played, batting my eyes along to the beats of the music. I then used my dress and headpiece as the makings of a table setting. I invited a man seated in the first row up on stage and had him sit in front of the table. After setting him up in front of the table I pulled more the table setting out of my head piece, used my bra as a napkin, my earring

as a napkin holder, then quickly disappeared. A few people in the audience came up to me later in the night to comment on the act. The performer Aurora Boobrealis, who I have admired for some time was there and said my act felt like theatre. I told her about my difficulty in finding a clear message. Her and her companion said, “You kinda leave it up to the audience, but it’s about gender, for sure.”

The most challenging part of putting that act together was not only grappling with what I wanted the message of the act to be, but constructing the costume. Again, I do not know how to sew, so I experimented with affixing the table settings I would use in the act around my body and in my hair. For example, I glued a plastic plate to a piece of trim and then attached snap-tape to the ends so I could wrap it around my waist. And I fashioned a large table cloth around my body so that it appeared to be a dress. Although I liked how the act turned out, if I ever perform it again, I will seek the assistance of one of my fellow burlesquers.



Figures 3.2 and 3.3

Performing in the Performance Art Showcase at The Slipper Room, East Village, 2017 Photos by Striker Posie

III. Costuming Classes

i. Making Pasties with Cheeky Cheetah

In addition to the act development classes, I enrolled in others that focused specifically on costuming. One of them was a pastie-making class I took in February 2016 with Cheeky Cheetah. Pasties are affixed to the breast with double-sided tape or spirit gum; and along with G-strings, are often the final piece of costuming in a burlesque act. In the last few years, Cheeky had made a name for herself in the burlesque world and in other performance circles for making incredibly ornate rhinestoned pasties. In fact, the rapper Cardi B recently commissioned Cheeky to make her a silvery, crystal encrusted pair for her appearance in the film *Hustlers*.



Figure 3.4
Cardi B wearing Cheeky's pasties for the film *Hustlers*
Facebook post, 2020

In addition to the \$30 fee I paid online for the class, I purchased a \$15 supply kit from Cheeky the day of the class. I picked up my kit and sat next to Cheeky at the table along with ten other women (all performers) who had signed up. Cheeky began by introducing herself, sharing that she had actually discovered her love of pastie-making

after taking a class with Jo through the New York School of Burlesque. Due to time constraints, Cheeky had created the bases for the pasties beforehand. She refused to disclose the “light but sturdy” material she used, but she did explain how she constructed them. Like other pastie tutorials, she cuts out a circle with a small slit in it, then connects the edges into a cone shape. The size of the circle and the depth of the cone depends on the performer she is making them for, but Cheeky says her standard pastie size is two inches. The base then needs to dry overnight. Since our bases were made ahead of time, we were able to start applying our crystals right away. My supply kit came with a handful of Preciosa and Chinese-made purple-hued stones, and a chopstick with a piece of putty at the end to help pick up the stones and apply them to the base. There were also a few metal instruments on the table to help us arrange the rhinestones once we placed them on the base.



Figures 3.5 and 3.6
Making pasties with Cheeky Cheetah
Photos by Elisabeth Fallica

Cheeky then offered a few tips on how to arrange the rhinestones. She suggested we start with the larger stones on the outside rim. She liked to let the edges of the larger stones hang off the edge of the base, a style Cheeky uses in her own creations. Following her instructions, I started to apply my stones, leaving space in between so I could apply some smaller ones later. I affixed them with Gemtac, a non-toxic glue that looks white when applied, but dries clear. Gluing rhinestones to fabric or other material is a slow, precise, and tedious job. It takes patience, a steady hand, focus, and can take hours to complete, depending on how many rhinestones are applied.

As I began gluing, Cheeky suggested I use some of the AB stones in between the larger more solid color stones to create dimension. Crystal AB have an added coating of Aurora Borealis that creates a rainbow effect. Considering it was the first time I had made a pair of pasties; I think I did a decent job. As I walked around, I noticed some of my classmates left spaces between their stones, which I liked too. And others chose not to add crystal AB. It was clear the arrangement and type of stone used creates very different visual effects. I carried them home on the subway in a brown paper bag so they could dry on the way.

After the workshop, I contacted Cheeky for an interview. I wanted to chat with her more about her work and how she came to make pasties for a living. We ended up meeting for a drink one night at a bar in Union Square in early July. During our chat, Cheeky confirmed that she discovered her love of pasties through the school. In 2012, Cheeky had taken one of Jo's Coney Island Master classes in which Jo guides students through the process of making a pair of pasties. Cheeky was inspired:

[T]hat was the time when we first took our t-shirts and bras off and put on the pasties which was absolutely mind-blowing experience with all these women you

didn't even know. And um, I put on my pasties and I was like, holy shit, this is so much freedom I can't even...And everyone got really excited about the showcase we had at the end [...] And that was the time when I made my first pair of pasties. Um, they were making them in the class. And I of course had to...go home and make them. And I didn't have the right materials, so I improvised with whatever I had.

Apparently, the material Cheeky had at home was the material she continues to use today.

In awe of their beauty, Cheeky's classmates began to ask her to make them pairs. And word spread. She soon found herself going to the garment district after work and buying rhinestones. At the time, Cheeky was working as a dental ceramicist, making porcelain laminates, "like a little tooth sculpture, caps, crowns, bridges." I made a remark about the detail required of both processes, "Yes, I'm diligent and very focused. [And] people say I'm so detailed, but you don't know what detail is!" As Cheeky reminded me, a pastie is huge compared to a tooth. Cheeky was also a competitive ballroom dancer for some time and wore dresses covered in rhinestones: "My costume designer lives on making costumes...I thought how cool would it be if I could rhinestone [for a living]?" So Cheeky made ten pairs of pasties, "I got this little trunk, put on my polka dot dress and I went from show to show and kept showing [them] to people." And in 2012, with only \$1500 in the bank, Cheeky left her job and launched her Etsy shop, "Glorious Pasties."

Cheeky began with pasties, which remain her most popular item, but after launching her shop she branched out. She began to embellish bras, gowns and panties. "I found a seamstress. And we started making these (high-waisted) panties," which Cheeky now makes herself. She took a few classes at FIT to build up her skills. But for the most part, Cheeky has been self-taught. Her most labor-intensive creations are her tear-away bra sets, in which she takes two bras, deconstructs them, reinforces the wings before reconstructing and embellishing. Due to the concentrated sewing and gluing they require,

a tear-away set typically takes eight hours to make and costs between \$250 and \$1200. Some customers will order one of the sets she has listed on her Etsy shop, while others contact her for a custom set:

EF: Where do you get bases from?

CC: HM, Victoria Secret.

EF: And your rhinestones?

CC: I go to BQ. [A store in the garment district.] I also take a gamble and order from China. They've been getting better and better.

EF: What's the ideal stone?

CC: I love crystal AB. Jonquil.

EF: How do you make something different?

CC: This piece has beads hanging from it...applique... Then it comes to the details. Consulting the person. What color of gown she has and sometimes they send me the gown and I make it better. I make it more stage ready. It's actually really cool when people send me dresses. I really like to do that. I love to change the whole thing. Pinch here. Pinch there. Applique. You know, different zipper maybe. Adding a halter. It changes the whole look. It's amazing what you can do...I was jazzing up a costume for Calamity. Sewing applique and rhinestoning over it. You can actually fake tailoring in a dress with applique.

Cheeky Cheetah is not the only one who makes pasties and other costume pieces for the community. Minnie Tonka crafts custom pasties which she sells on her website, and the performer Delilah sells pasties, body harnesses and fringed pieces through her Esty shop, "Burluxe." Pastie making has also become an extra source of income for burlesque performers around the country.⁹³

⁹³A list of pastie makers from around the country can be found in Rosey La Rouge's book, *The Pastie Project* (2017).



Figures 3.7-3.3.10
Images from Cheeky Cheetah's Facebook and Instagram posts. Photos by Glorious Pasties

ii. **Dollar Store Showgirl with Nasty Canasta**

While Cheeky Cheetah prides herself on deco-inspired glamour, the neo-burlesque performer and producer Nasty Canasta offered a class in April of 2016 on the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, entitled “Dollar Store Showgirl.” Nasty is highly regarded in the scene, with about sixteen years of experience. She is known for her clever neo acts that take aim at various burlesque conventions: a fan dance to a blaring car alarm; mixing a martini with her butt cheeks, and her signature “Unknown Stripper” act in which she dons Groucho Marx inspired black-rimmed glasses and a large fake nose, a miniature set which serve as pasties and still another that serves as merkin; all pieces she purchased at a dollar store.

“Dollar Store Showgirl” was the one class I took that was not offered through the New York School of Burlesque. It is not on the main school circuit, where new performers would normally look for formal instruction, but thankfully, I heard about it from one of classmates in “Performance Art Burlesque” and signed up. The class met in a studio at The Brooklyn Arts Exchange, a cool artist-run space in Park Slope, Brooklyn, not too far from where Nasty lives. For class that day, we were asked to bring a pair of craft scissors, a glue gun and a manikin head.

When we were all there, my friend Trixie who had also signed up for the class and I took a seat on some risers that were set up and the other four women who had signed up for the class followed suit. Nasty sat on the floor in front and began by sharing some of her reasons for shopping at dollar stores for her costumes. For one, she didn’t grow up with a lot of money and so her family frequented their local dollar store. Secondly, she believes there is a subtle classism circulating in the burlesque

“community,” a word she hates: “Like if you put a bunch of rhinestones on...it is somehow better. Just the idea that something has to be expensive in order to be beautiful. I love it when I can make this fancy dress and no one knows it’s made entirely out of shower curtain liners.” Not to mention, she said, all the different creations you can make that don’t look like everyone else’s.

We received a handout listing what we might look for at our local dollar stores, including plastic buckets and visors which make great bases for headpieces, and faux flowers and party favors for helping to create volume and decoration when needed. And then were guided through a slideshow of some of the costumes Nasty had made with dollar store finds including a fantastic headpiece made out of Christmas tree ornaments.

In the second half of the class we moved to the floor. We needed to be close to the outlets so we could plug in our glue guns. Nasty passed out a few supplies she had bought at her local dollar store: headbands, small fruit baskets, hair clips, sponges, faux flowers and lace table runners. She then gave us some pointers on how to position the baskets on the headband—turned up and on an angle—and encouraged us to glue a sponge inside it so it would be easier to attach some of the other accoutrements. Everyone in class featured a different dollar store find in their head piece. I attached the table runner making mine look a little “bridal.” Another woman in my class featured a folding fan, which made hers look like something fit for a flamenco dancer.

When I interviewed Nasty later, I asked her how she got so crafty. She explained that she has always made things: (Author’s paraphrase) “You know, I didn’t have a lot. Like, I remember not being able to afford a doll house so me and my grandmother made one. And I used to watch “Dr. Who” shows, I think that influenced me.” Nasty also

revealed that she worked in a bridal shop for some time where she learned how to alter wedding gowns. She also did set design in college which she credits with influencing her thinking about structure, material and cheap alternatives.



Figure 3.11
Constructing the base of a headpiece in Nasty's Dollar Store Showgirl class
Photo by Elisabeth Fallica

iii. **Coney Island Mermaid Parade**

A month after I took Nasty's class, I got to put the inspiration and a few of the skills I gained to use. In June 2016, along with about ten other burlesque performers I met through the NYSB, I participated in Coney Island's Mermaid Parade. The parade is an annual gathering of the city's artists, who dress up as mermaids and other sea creatures and walk down Surf Avenue to usher in the summer. It is not a burlesque event per se, but many burlesquers have participated and have since the late 1990s because of *Burlesque at the Beach*. Bambi the Mermaid, Dirty Martini and Tigger! along with the reigning Miss Coney Island lead off the parade each year.

Attempting to avoid being yet another mermaid, I decided to go as coral. First, I scoured the internet for images of sea-inspired fashion. But then remembered a store window I had seen once that used coffee filters to create the look of coral, so I headed over to a dollar store on Queens Boulevard near my train stop and bought a package of white coffee filters. I also picked up a package of plastic straws and sponges that I planned to cut into strips and cluster, in order to recreate the dimension and texture of coral. I also took a trip to Michael's art supply store to browse, and found some cupcake liners in different sizes and colors. Like the coffee filters, their edges reminded me of the wavy patterns of coral. For a base, I went into the city and searched the sales racks at a few retail stores for a bodysuit I could attach my supplies to. I eventually found a white one-piece bathing suit with netting near the neckline for \$20. Then I went home and laid out all my supplies and started to arrange the coffee filters, cupcake liners and other materials I planned to incorporate on the suit and heated up my glue gun.

It was such a fun and satisfying experience to create and then immediately get to show the costume at a highly attended event, that I ended up participating in the parade the next four years. Each year I've tried to create a different look. In 2018 I constructed an elaborate headpiece made of shells and last year I fashioned one out of a black garbage to resemble a shark's fin.



Figures 3.12-3.15
Coral costume in progress, burlesquers on parade, and author in full costume
Coney Island Mermaid Parade, 2016

The labor that goes into making costumes and props really epitomizes the DIY sensibility of the neo-burlesque scene. Like other makers or crafters, burlesque costumers have their favorite shops and stores they frequent in the garment district, spend hours embellishing corsets, pasties and gowns, and like to create distinct and one of kind creations. However, many of the costumes in burlesque are handmade because they have to be. A straight-jacket, for example is challenging to find, and not easy to get out of. Hence my friend Trixie had to create her own. And even as I *assembled* my costumes—gathered the pieces and put together a look—I too wanted it to be unique as well as serve the performance.

The craft impulse that undergirds much of the costume making process in burlesque also weaves a compelling narrative of gendered work. There is something radical to Cheeky Cheetah's rhinestoned creations, in which she lifts embellishment to an art. Fashion historian Llewellyn Negrin has noted that ornamentation has been devalued due to its association with femininity, but notes the subversive possibilities of reclaiming it, "Detail appears as a luxurious extra that participates in an 'economy of excess'."⁹⁴ Nasty's dollar store constructions are doubly radical, utilizing cheap, minor materials and glamorizing them; not so dissimilar from artists like Eva Hesse or Claire Zeisler who made magnificent sculptures out of thread.⁹⁵ Although there is a clear price difference to the two artists' work, both utilize materials that have been dismissed as merely decorative and associated with women.

⁹⁴Llewellyn Negrin, "Ornament and the Feminine" in *Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 131.

⁹⁵See Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

IV. Floorwork Classes

Another good chunk of the classes I took through the school were floorwork classes. As I discussed in chapter two, floorwork refers to the dynamic, often lustful moves burlesquers perform on the stage floor toward the end of their acts. I have seen floorwork performed in both classic and neo acts, but it is utilized most in classic. At some point in a classic act, performers will drop to the floor to perform some combination of a backbend, stripper legs (opening and closing one's legs in the air while laying on your back) and/or splits to wow the audience. Floorwork classes were some of my favorite classes to take because I got to move. It was like taking a dance class, which is familiar territory for me. I took a few great floorwork classes from visiting teachers. Sweetpea, for example, a well-known Minneapolis-based performer covered unique ways of getting down (and back up) from the floor, as well as a fun backward slide: sitting on the floor with legs spread, and pushing the floor forward as we slid back. However, I took the most floorwork classes with Perle Noire, who as I described in chapter two, is a phenomenal mover with palpable stage presence. Perle also prides herself as a teacher and healer, "I have a gift." In fact she teaches a workshop on "self-love through seduction," and incorporates some of those techniques into her fan dance and floorwork classes.

i. Floorwork Seduction with Perle Noire

The last floorwork class I took with Perle was "Floorwork Seduction" in August 2019. Tuition was \$200; more expensive than other classes I had taken because Perle's class met for five weeks and ended in a student showcase. On the first day, after warming

up individually, Perle put on a song and asked me and the other eight or nine other women in the class to move to it so she could see what she was “working with.” We all did our best to slither and writhe and descend down to the floor. Perle concluded we were all at a similar level, but I did not quite believe her. I had just witnessed one of my classmates do a headstand, and stretch her leg over her head during the warmup—two moves my body will probably never achieve. Burlesque movement classes are different from regular dance classes in that way; although we may be learning the same move, we all come to it with different training (or no training at all) and moves are modified or different moves selected based on the individual levels and abilities in the class. And finding one’s individual style is encouraged. So although I know I could not do a split, I did not feel like I was in the wrong place. Burlesque class is not a typical dance class in which everyone is trying to achieve the same move to a measured and institutionally assessed degree (how high your leg kicks, how well you can leap, how flexible your back is during a dip, etc.). Burlesque is, as I have described, about execution, but the goal is not to mimic the same execution as anyone else. Burlesque classes encourage students to dance in the way one’s own shape allows, and the ultimate goal is to be expressive in different ways—not necessarily “naturally” different, but also not standardized or judgable.

After our warm up, Perle demonstrated an opening sequence, and we mirrored her. The song she chose was a popular R&B tune. We began by standing in various versions of a showgirl pose, then at a particular moment in the music, extended our right arm out to the side and drew it out to the audience. It was not clear if Perle had a particular set of moves in mind for us that day or if she was improvising. I have seen her

come up with original choreography on the spot, so it is entirely probable that she was doing just that. The move was simple but very “Perle,” since she often liked to reach out to the audience and make an immediate connection via an outward gesture. We did not end up using much of the choreography we did that day, including the song, but I remember one move in particular: Sitting on the floor, with our backs to the mirror/audience and knees bent, we slowly opened our legs and dropped our heads back and swayed our shoulders and hips. I remember it because Perle asked me to repeat it three times: “Can you do that slower?” She also wanted me to take my hair down, and let it hang to the floor. “I want you to imagine someone is kissing you on your neck.” Perle feels strongly about seductive movement and truly believes it can be healing. However, doing so requires vulnerability and drawing on feelings deep within.

The new choreography Perle gave us the next week the class met began with a similar opening sequence. For the first eight or so counts of the song we remained still. Then moved our arms up our torsos, some of us extending them above our heads. We extended our right arm out to side and stepped forward with our left foot. Next we swiftly lifted our right knee to our chest (a few extended their legs over their heads), then dropped our arms to the floor and made a pyramid shape. At a particular musical cue, we shook our butts and legs, then slowly slid our feet together, lowering our pelvis, and holding ourselves upright with our arms. Next, we turned right, sat down and kicked up our left leg, or both, toward the ceiling and then slowly lowered them. I did not execute the choreography perfectly every time. Perle, as performer and teacher, does not count out beats. Rather, she relies on particular moments in the music—a prominent downbeat or flourish—to cue her next move, but she always knows when they are coming. This

mode of choreography and counting is challenging for those who had trained in dance step memorization by measure and predictable phrasing. Sometimes I would miss the transitions to new moves or simply could not hear or recognize them. I had to focus and concentrate in new ways during every run-through. I eventually got it, but many of my classmates did not.

The next sequence of moves involved a bit of leg work. Seated sideways to the audience with legs extended, we bent our knees and swiftly turned and extended them in the opposite direction. We then bent our bottom knee and drew our hand up our thigh, opened our top knee, tapped the inside of our thigh, and slowly closed it. We ended the routine by spinning toward the back of the room, our backs to the audience and coming onto all fours and holding. Some of us (those who had the necessary “prop”) did a bit of hairography, a quick hair toss or thrashing, before extending our arms forward on the floor and slowly sliding back sitting on our heels.

For our performance, Perle divided us up into three groups. The stage at DROM, where we were going to perform, was simply too small for the nine of us. Perle put me in the first group, which she claimed she was doing based on style, but it was clear the groups were based on ability. Happy to be in the first group, I was nonetheless stuck with the high-kickers and flexibility queens. In our last run through, Perle announced: “I want you to dance like... someone is watching,” We all laughed. But Perle continued, “Like someone needs this and you are giving it to them.”

The showcase was on a Sunday night and we were set to perform in the second act. I had done my makeup at home, accented by purple shadow and lashes, and I had curled my hair. Perle thought it easiest if we all wore black, so I wore fishnets, black

heels and long-sleeve high-cut leotard. I looked and felt very Fosse-esque. Perle was also going to a solo number later that night, so I was able to eat and have a glass of champagne with her during the first half of the show. The routine went smoothly. After each group completed the routine, we all got to improvise as we exited the stage before the next group came on. One woman in my group rolled over her shoulder, the other did a split. I did a few hip and leg swivels on my way up to standing and then strode downstage, executing a few fierce struts before I walked off.

By participating in classes at The New York School of Burlesque I was able to engage in the artistic practices of neo-burlesque at the ground level. I learned the conventions of the art form by wielding fans and twirling tassels; developed acts by assembling costumes and creating choreography; and engaged in the craft practices of the scene by embellishing pasties and constructing headpieces. In all the classes I participated in I encountered a strong DIY, or do-it-yourself, impulse. Performers have a hand in every aspect of creation from conception to performance. And they engage with neo-burlesque on their own terms and at their level of ability. In class, prospective burlesquers are taught conventions, receive feedback and helpful tips they can incorporate or reject in their own acts. New performers like myself are constantly negotiating what aspects of the art form work for them and what they can bring to it. Like other craft communities, burlesquers engage in slow and sensuous making. And as in other DIY subcultures, neo-burlesque allows for the expression of creativity by any means necessary, connection and self-making. Performers use classes, and neo-burlesque,

to make and interact with material objects, to fashion and refashion their bodies and themselves.

Conclusion

As I conclude the writing of this dissertation, the world is grappling with a peculiar and precarious reality. The coronavirus pandemic has forced most nations, including the United States to quarantine and self-isolate. New York City has been hit particularly hard, identified as one of the epicenters of the pandemic. Venues are closed and like other gig workers, burlesquers who make their living from performing are out of work. After a brief but notable panic, some performers have turned to social media and other online outlets for ways to make money, stay connected and express themselves creatively. A few shows have moved online. Some burlesquers are performing live on Facebook and Instagram. Others have filmed individual acts in their apartments and producers have edited them together into a show that can be watched for free or rented on YouTube or Vimeo. In these videos performers utilize their bathrooms, living areas and bedrooms for sets and props. In a recent Slipper Room show on Vimeo, Little Miss Lixx used her shower door as she might use a piece of fabric, opening and closing it, concealing and revealing herself. I watched the show for free, but was encouraged to tip the performers and donate to the venue.

Still other performers have initiated creative challenges. A group of performers including Tansy, Darlinda Just Darlinda, and Jenny C'est Quoi have been participating in a "#ClothesinChallenge" on Instagram in which they raid their closets, don various ensembles and post about them. Tansy has posted short videos of herself in which she

talks about the various pieces she wears, how they make her feel and what memories they trigger. And in true form, Medianoche has produced a series of pinup shots in which she poses in lingerie perched upon various pieces of furniture in her apartment. In one series of shots, followers see only her nude torso, the bottom of her breasts to just above her pubic area, and her blue plastic-gloved hands resting on her hips.

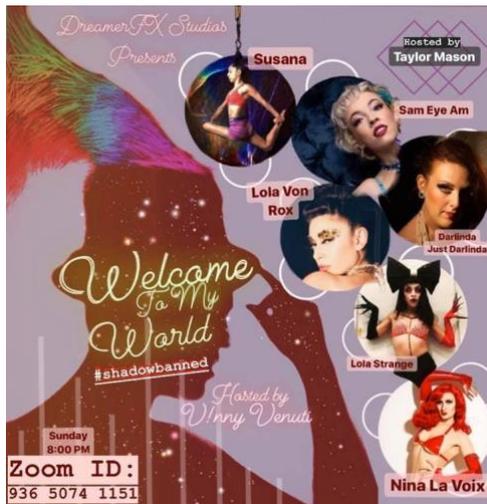


Figure 4.1
A flyer for a burlesque show on Zoom

Those who sew have been churning out face masks. Cheeky Cheetah, who runs her small business Glorious Pasties out of her apartment in Brooklyn, has been posting pictures of rows of face masks in outrageous fabrics ready for shipment. Not surprisingly, Cheeky has also made an exquisite crystal embellished mask for the more glamorously inclined. While Jo Weldon has moved all of the New York School of Burlesque classes online. Posting an image of her teaching a fan dance class on Zoom, Jo sits in front of her computer with fans in tow, while ten to twelve images of students in their individual apartments holding their own pairs appear on screen.

Although the pandemic has temporarily altered the way burlesquers perform, their responses further reveal the tricks of their trade. The mass sewing of masks is an extension of the scene's craft impulse and DIY sensibility. The clothes challenge mirrors the interaction performers have on stage and in rehearsal with their costumes—as well as their particular resourcefulness, simply looking around their spaces for pieces. While Medianoche's pinup pictorials zoom in on the texture and sensuousness of bodies in relation to non-sentient things.

§

This dissertation uses the lens of labor to explore the history, performances and artistic process of New York neo-burlesque. By focusing on artistic labor, or the work that goes into creating a piece of art or performance, I sought to foreground the *how* of neo-burlesque, rather than the *why*. As an ethnographer, I wanted to follow the material, the artists themselves and the objects they employ. Doing so has allowed me to highlight aspects of the scene often overlooked: patterns of choreography, the agency of costume, and the DIY ethos of the community.

My attention to labor departs from previous studies of neo-burlesque which have focused primarily on whether or not the art form reproduces gender norms and/or is feminist. Although well intentioned, such analyses have become reductive ways of reading the scene, reiterating a familiar binary.

My project is more in line with recent studies in theatre and performance studies that center on how artists labor and Volumes such as Osbourne and Woodworth's

Working in the Wings, which highlight, among other forms of labor, the invisible work performed backstage. Part of the recent interest in artistic labor is due to the fact that the characteristics of the new economy (sometimes referred to as Post-Fordism, or neo-capitalism), including flexibility, affective labor and economic precariousness, describe the ways and conditions under which artists have always labored. Given such parallels, dance scholars such as Andre Lepeki and Bojana Kunst have pondered how artists might negotiate their closeness to capitalism. This dissertation hopes to contribute to these studies by focusing on the popular nightlife entertainers of neo-burlesque. In my discussion of labor I not only look at the labor of performers, but explore the *work* of costumes, how they activate performance and cue human actors. Thus, my project also hopes to add to scholarship in theatre and performance studies that has taken up the ideas of new materialism, such as Schweitzer and Zerdy's *Performing Objects & Theatrical Things*, and applied them to some of the "things" that liter and enliven live performance and theatre archives including props, costumes, and scenery.

In chapter one, I began by offering a history of the emergence of the New York neo-burlesque scene in the mid-1990s in order to contextualize the current scene. Unlike Los Angeles and New Orleans, the term burlesque and the history of the art form was not on New York performers' radar in the 90s. Performance artists like Bambi the Mermaid were experimenting with nudity and masks; and strip club strippers were incorporating different aesthetics into their acts. And still others, like Angie Pontani, fell in with producers looking to the past in order to bring more spectacle into New York nightlife. The work of these artists and the aesthetics they were employing laid a foundation for the kinds of burlesque performed today.

From their recollections, it becomes clear that the spaces in which these artists were performing fostered their experimentation. The Blue Angel, in particular, was a unique space: a strip club owned by Ute Hanna, who was also a former stripper who wanted to create a space where other strippers, as well as female patrons, would feel comfortable. This meant performers were able to choose whether or not to give lap dances, and they could experiment with different aesthetics in their acts. In my interview with Bonnie Dunn, who worked at The Blue Angel and later took over as producer, as well as my conversations with Bambi the Mermaid and Jo Weldon, who performed there as well, the dancers at The Blue Angel were also working in mainstream strip clubs or were outcasts from those venues. Otter, for example, a manager of the Blue Angel at one time, claims she was thrown out of regular strip joints because she was “too weird.” What is interesting to me about Otter, and driven home in Jo Weldon’s experience as a feature dancer in mainstream strip joints (as well as Bonnie’s mention of stripper-grams in the 1980s), is the continuum of theatricality in stripping they point to. Typically distinct lines are drawn between strip club stripping and burlesque. There are of course many differences, however, the recollections and experiences of my informants also speak many similarities. And although most mainstream strip clubs may not have been encouraging or tolerant of such theatricality—incorporating fans, a live pig, or eating fire—dancers in those spaces *were* incorporating such aesthetics, or at least wanted to. These performers are often left out of the historiography of neo-burlesque. And although there is some excellent scholarship on strip clubs in the 1980s and 90s (Hanna, Levinson, etc.), I believe chapter one builds a case for future research into the theatricality of feature dancing and stripper-grams during the 70s, 80s and 90s, and the links between

them and burlesque.

In chapter two I zoom in on the contemporary neo-burlesque stage, and look at labor in performance. In the first half of the chapter I focus on the work of costume. Unlike in other performance genres, burlesque costumes are constructed to be deconstructed—that is, they are assembled to be removed on stage in front of an audience. For costume makers, this means a different way of thinking about clothing construction. Not only do snaps, zippers and ties become incredibly important, but building layers, creating different visual pictures usually from the last layer out must be thought out. Instead of merely being worn and being accommodating to the wearer's body, burlesque costume pieces must be considered as set pieces that performers will be able to interact with and negotiate. This presents a significantly different understanding of costume construction. More than representing or symbolizing a director or performer's vision, burlesque costumes must be able to be played with and manipulated.

In performance neo-burlesque costumes present a unique opportunity to observe the ways performers negotiate them, and how costume affects performers. In the acts I observed, costumes not only spectacularized performers' bodies and helped establish character, they also were objects to be negotiated: performers react to the shape, size and material. Specifically I argue that costumes in burlesque are actants, or objects with agency, which cue performers' choreographic choices. This analysis differs from most scholarship on clothes and costume that often read garments through a semiotic lens. By employing theories articulated in new materialism and object theory, I was able to demonstrate the phenomenological role of costumes I was observing on burlesque stages. Not only does neo-burlesque performance offer a unique opportunity to see costume in action,

and to observe the ways human actors react to them, but more broadly, to observe how humans think through things, and are sometimes turned into things themselves. This is not just interesting to think about in terms of theatre and performance history. It is also important to consider in terms of our relationship to and interaction with the larger material world.

In the second half of chapter two, I trace performances of exertion in neo-burlesque choreography. In both classic and neo acts, burlesque performers exude through their physical gestures and faciality, strong emotions, literal starts and stops, and frenzied movements that call attention to work it takes to perform. Whether thrusting their pelvises, or contorting their faces, their choreography reads as laborious, and a lot like work itself. In the chapter I identify three ways performers demonstrate this: in classic acts, using the conventions of burlesque which are heated and erotic; in comedic acts in which performers are immobilized or ungraceful; and in zany or frenzied acts, in which performers' playfulness contains an element of danger or precariousness. My focus in this chapter is a response to scholars of dance and aesthetics who have examined the relationship between the way performers move and political and economic realities. Because movement (and stillness) is both physical and emotive, these scholars argue that dance is a critical site to examine the way we move with(in) the world.

Our current state of capitalism has been marked by more individualized forms of work, encouraging flexibility and adaptability (being able to take on any job at any given moment) and requiring the use of our creative and affective abilities. Furthermore, unlike older forms of capitalism (i.e. Taylorism), which encouraged a distinction between public and private life, our new economy blurs such boundaries. The laborious choreography in

neo-burlesque, although certainly evocative of sex and often done for laughs, contains some eerily similar characteristics. I argue that neo-burlesque evoke these characteristics in their hyper-flexible and emotive choreographies. Yet in moments of stillness, or “holding space” performers call attention to and resist the ways bodies must keep up with external momentums.

Finally in chapter three, I go behind the scenes, into the classes offered through the New York School of Burlesque. In this chapter I trace my own labor as a student and performer, offering an embodied approach to understanding the artistic practices of neo-burlesque. By handling feather fans and twirling tassels, I learned the conventions of the art form and the importance of showcasing (and revealing) one’s body. In act development classes I selected music, assembled costumes and choreographed my reveals. And when rehearsing floorwork, I navigated my emotional labor while observing that of my instructors. In all the classes I participated in I encountered a distinct DIY sensibility. This sensibility is realized in the immediacy and artistic control burlesquers have over their acts—overseeing all aspects of the performance, applying prior training, and teaching themselves how to engage with the conventions of the scene. It is also realized in costume making; assembling and embellishing allows neo-burlesquers to engage in slow, sensuous making, as well as forge community. For some performers the DIY practices of the scene have enabled them to become full time artists. For others, it has afforded them opportunities to create part time. For all neo-burlesquers, the DIY ethos of the community has provided an artistic platform not available to them by other artistic and performance genres.

This dissertation has aimed to expand discussions of neo-burlesque, but also to

offer a different site from which to examine issues of labor and work. By focusing on the neo-burlesque scene in New York, I have attempted to demonstrate how different forms of labor, typically reserved for or associated with economics and class, can be seen in relation to artistic communities, craft practices, choreography, costume, self-expression, and even humor.

APPENDIX A

FIELDWORK TIMELINE

2015

- June *Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender, Las Vegas*
- July Essential Series with Jo Weldon (4 weeks)
- August Act Development with Jo Weldon (4 weeks)
- September Ultimate Self-Confidence with the World Famous *BOB*
- New York Burlesque Festival Classes*
- Business of Burlesque
 - Fan Dance with Dirty Martini
 - Wig Workshop with Kitten LaRue
- October Burlesque Booty with Peekaboo Pointe
Flirting with Burlesque with Darlinda Just Darlinda
- November Stripping Out of Your Coat with Jo Weldon
- BurlyCon, Seattle*
- Burlesque Booty with Peekaboo Pointe
- December Burlesque Intensive
Stage Kittening with Lefty Lucy
Perlesque with Perle Noire (3 weeks)



2016

- January Tributes with Miss Indigo Blue
Tassel Twirling with Miss Indigo Blue
Working with Dusters
Intermediate Act Development with Dirty Martini (4 weeks)
Bubble Class with Jo Weldon (2x)

February	<i>Burlesque Lab-Post Show Discussion</i> Making Pasties with Cheeky Cheetah Dirty Martini Dance Classes (2)
March	Acting with Tigger! Producing with Calamity Chang Delsarte (2x) Twerkshop with Jeez Louise
April	Nerdlesque Classes at The Beauty Bar Movement with Lux LaCroix Comedy with Nasty Canasta Performance Art Burlesque with Darlinda Just Darlinda (4)
May	Dollar Store Showgirl with Nasty Canasta
June	<i>Mermaid Parade, Coney Island</i>
July	Veil Fans with Jo Weldon Interviews— Darlinda Just Darlinda Cheeky Cheetah Nasty Canasta
September	<i>New York Burlesque Festival, Tippler</i>
October	Choreo and Chair Dance with Lux LaCroix
November	Forever Hair with Darlinda

2017

January	History of Neo-Burlesque with Jo Weldon
February	Fan Dance with Calamity Chang
March	Costuming with Amber Ray
May	Bare Essentials with Ray Gunn

June	Political Burlesque with Aurora Boobrealis <i>Mermaid Parade, Coney Island</i> Go-Go with Angie Pontani <i>Pastie Project Book Launch</i>
July	Floorwork Class with Sweetpea Stripping with Power w/Perle Noir
August	Floorwork with Freya West Walking in High Heels with Gigi La Femme Interview—Bambi the Mermaid
September	<i>New York Burlesque Festival</i> Capes with Gabrielle Maze
October	Floorwork with Perle Noire
November	Interview—Angie Pontani

2018

March	Silk Fans with Jezebel Express
April	Spellbinding Burlesque with Veronica Varlow Veil Workshop with Gaea Lady
June	<i>Mermaid Parade, Coney Island</i>
September	<i>New York Burlesque Festival</i>

2019

February	Lap Dance with Jo Weldon and Peekaboo Pointe The Art of the Eye Fuck with Jo Weldon
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Hairography with Jo Weldon

March Journey to Splits with Freya West

June *Mermaid Parade, Coney Island*

August Floorwork Seduction with Perle Noire



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