

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

WOUNDED DELICACY:

Female-bodied sexual performance as a mode of resistance to objectification.

A Thesis in Theatre Arts

by

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DEDICATION

In dedication to my mother Guadalupe and my father William.

“Cuando me veas volar, recuerda que tu me pinataste las alas.”

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores ways in which female performers can both be subject to and disrupt the male gaze. I argue that women can resist the male gaze by creating and participating in empowering performances that give them agency over their representation as well as challenge the notion of the active male viewer and the passive female object; however, as I later discuss, such performances rely on a certain level of anonymity and a separation between one's public and private personas. The following chapters outline research done through embodied performance in conversation with Dolan, Mulvey, and Brechtian theory. This research was led by questions that arose throughout a devising process in collaboration with the performers.

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INTRODUCTION

The first dance which I saw upon the stage shocked me. The dresses and the beauty of the performers were enchanting; but, no sooner did the dance commence, then I felt my delicacy wounded, and I was ashamed to be seen to look at them.

These words were written by Abigail Adams in a letter to Mary Smith Cranch on the 20th of February, 1785. She was visiting what she called the “Old World” Europe, where she watched a performance of female-bodied dancers in thin silk and no sign of a petticoat. She recalls that at first this ensemble disgusted her as she considered it distasteful, but soon she found herself intrigued and fascinated by the women (Adams, “To Mary Smith Cranch”). I shared this same fascination when I saw burlesque for the first time. After a quick search on YouTube, I had sifted through all the Cher videos and came upon Sally Rand’s 1942 fan dance. She wore a beautiful translucent gown and skillfully handled two feathered fans which later would become her angel wings. This performance kindled my interest in burlesque, but I knew I could never be the performer. It left me inspired, yet I felt a thought tugging at my conscience: Why was I afraid to be seen onstage dressed as they were?

Sexual empowerment brings up a lot of doubt within me. When faced with sexual instincts, I sometimes experience guilt, despite their intrinsic nature. Growing up with a Catholic schooling conditioned me to associate a woman’s naked body with sin. Morals, which were deeply rooted in my younger self, prevent me from feeling comfortable in the

bodily occurrences of my older self. There exists a constant internal battle that decides how I present myself in order to balance both sensuality and respectability. It informs daily choices; a balancing act between my wanting to own my sensuality and my wanting to hide it. All this led me to investigate my fascination with burlesque. Was I supporting a form that empowers female-bodied performers or was I being fooled by the illusion of empowerment? These questions were the “hunch”¹ during the early stages of my thesis.

The origin of this project comes from a place of shame and an innocent curiosity of that shame. I was drawn to study sexual performance because of its complexity and its power to induce both fascination and fear. This thesis is an attempt to resist the notion that sexualized performance by female artists is exclusively a form of objectification. In my artistic work, I wondered if it were possible to create positive depictions of female sensuality and desire that aims to reject this objectification.

By definition, the medium of performance relies on the relationship between spectator and performer. The term “theatre” itself is derived from the Greek *theatron*, meaning “place for viewing.” In Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she coins the term “the male gaze”:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their

¹ A “hunch” refers to a broad idea that leads the research process during early stages of a devised piece, a term I learned while studying with Tectonic Theatre Project.

appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 837)

According to Mulvey, the female performer's presence onstage is inescapably subject to the male gaze by virtue of being on display, and is thus, by definition, objectified and robbed of her subjectivity. Rather than drive the narrative, she assumes a passive role, which often places her as the erotic object for the benefit of the audience and/or for the benefit of the audience (Mulvey 838). A female-identified performer in a patriarchal society that associates her body with erotic pleasure thus finds herself trapped.

Feminist performance scholar Jill Dolan shares Mulvey's concerns about female objectification, adding that American theatre "usually addresses the male spectator as an active subject, and...tend[s] to objectify women performers and female spectators as passive, invisible, unspoken subjects" (Dolan 2). However, Dolan claims that the feminist spectator can become "a 'resistant reader,' who analyzes a performance's meaning by reading against the grain of stereotypes and resisting the manipulation of both the performance text and the cultural text that it helps to shape it" (Dolan 2). Mulvey views the male gaze as an inevitable truth as long as a female is being observed; however, Dolan suggests that both the feminist reader and performer can challenge this dynamic; for instance, what happens when spectators are made self-aware of their own voyeurism or when female performers gaze back? How might the power dynamics shift depending on the configuration of the audience? Can the female body be altered using theatrical

techniques such as manipulation of light and shadows and scenic elements to thwart the audience's pleasure?

This thesis explores ways in which female performers can both be subject to and disrupt the male gaze. I argue that women can resist the male gaze by creating and participating in empowering performances that give them agency over their representation as well as challenge the notion of the active male viewer and the passive female object; however, as I later discuss, such performances rely on a certain level of anonymity and a separation between one's public and private personas.

As a theatre artist, I wanted to investigate these questions not merely from an academic standpoint, analyzing others' performances from a distanced, critical view, but using Performance as Research. Mark Fleishman, member of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) Performance as Research Working Group, defines PaR as "research that is carried out through or by means of performance, using methodologies and specific methods familiar to performance practitioners, and where the output is at least in part, if not entirely, presented through performance"(28). I aim to use PaR to further understand the factors that determine sexual objectification or empowerment.

For this topic, writing is not enough. Performance has served as "an instrument of cultural analysis" that mirrors society but also focuses on the audience's reaction to this reflection (Taylor 77). Performance allows a space for our production team to actively explore questions as they arise and attempt to resolve them. Performance enables us to observe the audience's reactions and under what conditions they might differ. This is a space only theatre can provide.

Additionally, the act of women presenting women's stories onstage "radically challenges traditional notions of agency, spectacle, and spectatorship as female performers move their voices and bodies from the background to the foreground" (Carver 16). This embodiment will not only attempt to empower the female performers by giving them authorship and instrumentality of their performance but will allow them to evaluate how these performances feel: which circumstances leave them feeling empowered and which leave them feeling objectified? Overall, using Performance as Research allows me to take note of the experience of the performers, of the audience, and of myself.

PART I: THE DEVISING PROCESS

I began my experimentation at the Orchard Project during the Summer of 2018. The Orchard Project is an artistic residency that supports developmental productions every summer in Saratoga Springs, NY. I had the opportunity to join their Core Company, which is a group of apprentices for the artists-in-residency program. We were also encouraged to work on our own personal projects which could take any form we wanted. With the help and mentorship of resident artists such as Tonya Pinkins, Whitney Mosery and James Kennedy, I began to explore the aforementioned questions about female sexual performance by experimenting with projections, screens, and shadows. The use of shadows to show the female body was especially intriguing because they minimized the dancer to one dimension. When this was set up as the norm of the performance, presenting the flesh of a multi-dimensional body felt radical. I also experimented with the proximity of the audience to the dancer. I found the farther the performer's body from the audience, the easier it was to objectify it as it is just a shape that could conveniently be projected onto by the viewer. The closer the dancer's body was to the audience, the harder it was to ignore details such as pores, hair, cuticles, and scars, thus making it harder to detach the body from the person. Because of these discoveries, the use of shadow and proximity became approaches I would later revisit in the creative project for this thesis.

At the end of the summer, I was to perform my work to the rest of the Orchard Project. To present my findings, I looked to the form that initially made me pose these questions: burlesque. The mere presence of a female body onstage heightens her

sensuality. My work focused on dance forms that include nudity, specifically stripping and burlesque, two dance styles that undoubtedly lead to objectification because of their inclusion of nudity.

The term “burlesque” derives from the literary tradition of the same name characterized by parodying serious art forms. Burlesque has long evolved from its origin roots in vaudeville and satiric performance art. Currently, there exists different waves of burlesque including neo-burlesque, or new burlesque, where dancers draw on traditional American burlesque for their choreography but also take risks by incorporating a larger range of genres and dance styles, as well as “boylesque” which invites male-identifying performers to join the burlesque scene (Weldon 11-14). Burlesque can be summed up by this quote from Richard Grant White:

The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the natural and conventional together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system. (Allen 25)

Burlesque’s incorporation of the absurd and the grotesque became other tools I could utilize in creative project to defy the male gaze.

Stripping can take a variety of forms including pole dancing, lap dancing, or table dancing, depending on the regulations of each location and the laws of each county. Despite popular assumptions and mainstream media, strippers sell an erotic experience that does not lead to sexual release, self-provoked or otherwise.

According to former stripper Katherine Frank in her book titled *G-Strings and Sympathy*, this interactive fantasy provided by strip clubs is intriguing, specifically for heterosexual males, because of its immoral implications brought on by gender inequality, the virgin-whore dichotomy, and expectations of heteronormative marriage (Frank 35). Its voyeuristic form allows the male audience to hide and assume a passive role. It's voyeuristic form allows the male audience to enjoy the presence of "naughty girls" while still avoiding the moral weight of social standards. My creative project would need to call out the audience and not allow them to be mere voyeurs, making them self-conscious of their role as spectators.

This development of using burlesque and stripping felt logical as the project was already playing with the teasing and revealing of bodies. During my time in Saratoga, I was given the opportunity to run a full room of resident artists of all different genders, but mostly female. This means all the artists who were in residency at the time, joined my team for forty minutes, watched our performance, and gave feedback. This performance was a combination of our shadow, dance, striptease, and projection work. It was done in a pitch-black room with a measured distance between the stage and the audience.

In addition to showcasing the experiments I had worked on during that summer, I decided to allow the audience to contribute with an interactive exercise. Posters were taped up that read statements such as "burlesque is an art" and "stripping is empowering." Upon entering, each artist received a sheet of "garage sale" tags that came with red, green, and yellow stickers. The artists were instructed to place a red sticker if they disagreed with the statement on the poster, green if they agreed with the statement,

and finally yellow if they are unsure of their answer or believed the answer was more complicated than a yes or a no. They could only choose one sticker. The following figure is a summary of the overall results.

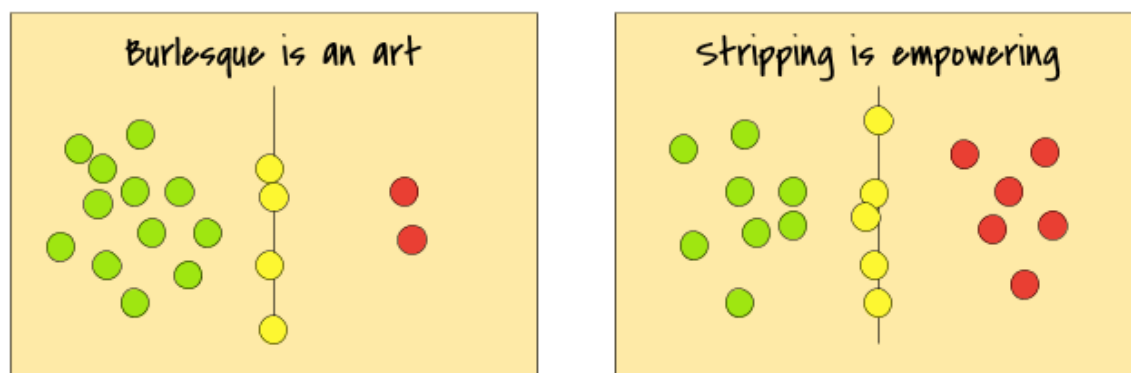


FIG. 1 Recreation of the posters used during a presentation at The Orchard Project

Once the last person placed their stickers, we took a moment to review. I assumed that the mixed results were due to a lack of information following each statement and therefore produced more yellow responses than expected. I was sure this was because the artists were waiting to hear details about this case: how much is the stripper paid, who owned the location where they danced, who choreographed the routine, etc. The large number of yellow stickers affirmed my instinct that attitudes towards female erotic performance are conflicted. A discussion followed in which the artists became heated and passionate about their perspectives. We were shocked. Even in a room of working theatre artists, these results varied greatly. Questions arose for which we did not have answers. Most of us identified as women, yet we did not arrive at the same conclusions, leaving us frustrated and confused. This is when I knew this topic had heat: it struck people deeply on a personal level.

I decided that my thesis would be a play that explored the claims of Mulvey and Dolan for myself. The piece would be performed at Drew University which presents its own limitations. Our audience would be exclusively students from Drew University, a liberal institution, which does not necessarily reflect the audience outside our community. Moreover, amidst the #MeToo movement and tensions on campus over Title IX policies regarding sexual consent, the environment on campus in 2019 is particularly anxious around sex. This was made evident to me after reaching out to the school's lawyer so I could further my research. My questions concerning the nudity laws in New Jersey was received with alarm and immediate push back. Although they addressed my advisor about the project with panic, they never responded to my questions. This interaction further demonstrates the anxieties around sex that exist in this community. This anxiety would be especially present during our performances because of the offstage relationships between the performers and audience members, many of whom know each other personally. While I would therefore not be able to generalize about female erotic performance at large, I could still attempt to experiment with the ramifications of creating a performance that both invited and subverted the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the female performer.

One tactic was to disrupt the fantasy and make the audience aware of its own spectatorship. Early on I decided the piece would not have a linear plot but more of an episodic structure. I knew the piece would not have characters but would have generalized figures that signify specific people. In this way, the creative project would take a route closer to epic theatre, carrying characteristics that lead to alienation and

estrangement. Bertolt Brecht identifies empathy as one of the factors in the way as it encourages this uninvolved relationship between the audience and the stage. “Their relations are those of a lot of sleepers...they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance” (Brecht 187). This is in line with my goal to challenge the spectator to be a conscious audience member instead of giving in to passive voyeurism.

Additionally, Brecht claims that empathy closes the distance between the audience and the characters: “The feelings, thoughts and impulses of the chief characters are forced on us, and so we learn nothing more about society than we can get from the ‘setting’” (Brecht 190). The audience is unknowingly a victim to this closure which is therefore further promoting a brainless, apathetic state. If we are not aware of this submersion, we are also unaware of our own political opinions as we are inclined to sympathize with the characters. To encourage critical thinking that would not be clouded by empathy, the characters in the piece are at times specific but are not carried through to the end. Again, this requires the audience to participate by doing some of the work. The audience must come to their own conclusions of the performance’s arrangement.

Moreover, the piece would not be comprised of the performer’s stories. It would be a montage of snapshots into the world of erotic dancing which creates only a representation of a larger reality. Furthermore, while much of the content would come from interviews with erotic performers, the actors would not take the interviewees words and make them their own, as if they were becoming those characters. They would be overtly performing their words through the use of devices such as projections. All of the

above creates distance from realism and makes the distinction between actress and character without reducing them into caricatures or stereotypes. Not only would our structure keep necessary distance, but it would also stay true to the burlesque form itself. As Allen mentions in *Horrible Prettiness*, “burlesque makes no attempt to bring all its parts together into a unified and ideologically monovical whole” (Allen 28). The burlesque form encapsulates incongruity. Similarly, the performance allows for the presented text and dance to be juxtaposed to create contradiction and tension.

Another factor I hoped to observe was the relationship between the performers and the audience. This is something that came up often in the interviews. Most believed, in one way or another, a notable distinction between stripping and burlesque was the audience and their relationship to the audience. One night, the dancers would perform the creative project in front of a female-identified audience. The next night they would perform it in front of a male-identified audience. The final night they would perform it in front of an all-genders audience. Overall, we will be tracking the difference in reaction from the audience, the performer’s relationship to the audience, the performer’s authorship to the choreography, and how this may differ depending on whether or not the performer has kept anonymity.

PART II: METHODOLOGY

Recognizing that I am writing as an outsider of the burlesque/striptease community, I chose to take an ethnographic approach. Ethnodrama presents a theatrical study of people and their culture (Saldana 2). To get a better understanding of burlesque and strip cultures, I conducted interviews with working artists in these industries. Initially the interviews were strictly with strippers and burlesque performers; however, I later started to interview women who are associated with any type of performance. This expansion was interesting to observe when juxtaposing the insider perspectives with the outsider perspectives.

Every individual I interviewed agreed and allowed me to use their words in both this thesis and the writing of the script. These interviews informed and provided most of the dialogue for the creative project. Additionally, they revealed issues surrounding sexual empowerment that the interviewees encounter on a regular basis. Not only do the women influence the creative project through their responses, but through nonverbal cues, which also informed our staging choices. For the privacy of the dancers, I have decided to keep the transcripts private so that they may remain anonymous. In the script, I have omitted revealing details, such as names and locations, and replaced them with fictional details.

Before compiling dialogue and visuals for the creative project, I wanted to cast the production so that I could work alongside the performers. This way the performers had more agency and authorship in the piece and were comfortable with what they were embodying. I scouted for performers at the dance auditions for the university. First I

presented a brief explanation of the project then emphasized that if cast, the performers would be assuming the roles of burlesque dancers and strippers. My only goal was to cast three women who were diverse not only in race but also in body type. To my surprise, many of the women auditioning showed great interest.

Following the casting, we met before starting the rehearsal process. I went into greater detail about the project and explained that the piece requires them to be comfortable with erotic performance. When it came to privacy, I was willing to work with the performers to find a ground with which they were comfortable. However, even after taking these precautions, one performer declined the role as she felt uncomfortable even before starting rehearsals. I took advantage of this vacancy. Once I found a performer to replace her, I decided to keep her identity anonymous. I hypothesized that this anonymity would make the performer feel more comfortable and empowered. Additionally, there is value in observing two different experiences: the two dancers who have revealed their identity and the dancer who remains anonymous. Anonymity is especially relevant at a small university level where most everyone is acquainted with everyone. It is certain the performers will know most of the audience members.



FIG. 2 Performer, Cristina Martinez, during rehearsals.

We are attempting to match the anonymity most erotic performers take on by creating a performer persona which is common practice for this genre. After the performance, I planned on interviewing the three performers. If the anonymous dancer ultimately feels more empowered than the dancers with revealed identities, does that mean identifying your connection to a sexual piece threatens your character and reputation? Is the exchange of anonymity for empowerment any less objectifying?

Once our team was complete, we began rehearsals. On Thursdays, we worked on choreography. Our research included watching burlesque videos of Gypsy Rose Lee, Sally Rand, Faith Bacon and more contemporary neo-burlesque performances. In addition, we researched stripper routines within what was available online. I also attended a burlesque show in New York City and visited a strip club in New Jersey. On Fridays, we worked on dialogue. Each week, I sifted through interviews and brought in quotations

completely unattached from the name of the interviewee to protect their anonymity. We read the quotations out loud and collaboratively stitched them together to create characters and monologues. On Saturdays, we put all of these elements together and observed how they played out as well as how they made us feel. Everyone in the room seems to have a different reaction to each step in the process. I noticed that a number of these differences relied on the performer's personal relationship to their body.

PART III: THE PERFORMANCES

The play opened with a title card, similar to one you might see at the start of a film, projected on a screen. It announced: “Wounded Delicacy, a montage of quotations, interviews, and dance.” The lights were brought down low isolating the audience from the outside world, transforming the space with a slow sensual beat. The first voice we hear is that of DJ Squam, the MC for the night. She explains the rules of the space while riling up the audience, letting them know it is appropriate, favored even, to vocally encourage the performers. Before the show, the spectators were asked whether or not they had ever seen burlesque. With the exception of one person, this show was about to be everyone’s first encounter. I predicted this would be the case and feared it might intimidate the audience. For this reason, I included a quick explanation of burlesque etiquette from DJ Squam. Its purpose was to blatantly give permission to the audience to be loud and responsive. Towards the beginning of the show, the audiences (all-female audience, all-male audience, and all-gender audience) responded well to DJ Squam and followed her lead. Thus the audience was engaged in the performance, rather than sinking into a passive spectating role.

DJ Squam announced the first act and the opening burlesque number commenced. The lights came up to reveal the shadows of three dancers. As previously mentioned, the shadows allowed for generalized figures of hyper-feminine bodies. This hyper femininity is crucial because later it is juxtaposed by absurd and monstrous elements. The shadows started their beats of tease by stripping their bras and throwing them towards the audience. They slid their legs past the material of the screens, temporarily breaking the

shadow norm and exposing their skin. Suddenly, the striptease shifted in tone when the dancers removed their gloves to unveil irregular claws which were made of long feathers. The shadows were no longer images of arched backs and dainty fingers but of women morphing into animals. This scene continued to subvert the expectations of the audience with the following action: “Our first dancer gives birth to a baby monster. The other dancers help her deliver. The third dancer begins to eat the baby starting from the chord. The first dancer gives birth to a second baby. This baby is quickly thrown behind them.” The number initially showed a lustful and intimate portrait of the performer’s bodies. It then progressed to show an equally intimate but less lustful portrait of childbirth. When the scene was done, bras, gloves, and feathers littered the floor. They stayed there for the rest of the show and were later joined by more articles of clothing, napkins, and food. The primary purpose of the mess is to once again add to the metatheatricality of the piece.



FIG. 3 All three performers during rehearsals of the opening number.

In their individual interviews, two of the performers mentioned their relationship to their shadow. One of the dancers had a positive experience. She hypothesized this was because she harshly scrutinized her body and her dancing when she rehearsed in front of mirrors; however, working with shadows allowed her enough distance to focus on the shapes. She claims, “I now trust my shadow more than I trust my reflection.” Overall, it gave her more confidence and therefore more agency in her performance. This was not the experience of the second dancer who felt the urge to constantly compare her shadow to the shadows of the other two dancers. This created negative thought patterns that effected her confidence and prevented her from feeling empowered.



FIG. 4 Dialogue between Trish and Stef [Photo courtesy of Chelsea Tan]

Following the opening dance was the first of the dialogue scenes. These scenes were between the two dancers who were not anonymous. Standing behind the two outer

frames, they lowered the screens only to reveal their heads. The fold of the white fabric gave the suggestion that they were lying in a bed. It also served to cover the body of the performer. Although this illusion was accidental, the image was intriguing. It covered the performers body but could still suggest sexual implications. The performers held up a small square of poster board from which they read their lines to create visual distance between the actress and the character. When they first approached their mark, they were only lit by the cool light coming from the projector. As they assumed their characters, which are titled at the bottom of their frames as shown in figure 3, a warmer light was brought up. Once the actress has broken character and returned to being herself, the warm light is brought back down. This Brechtian inspired staging reminded the audience that they were watching performers presenting other people's words rather than becoming the characters; thus thwarting the audience's empathy and pushing them towards critical thinking.

Next, were the introductions. For the first time, the performers revealed their body to the audience. Once DJ Squam announced their burlesque personas, the performer addressed and flirted with the audience. By this point, DJ Squam became the only thing to which the all-male audience comfortably responded. I speculate this was because DJ Squam assumed the most masculine role in our production of all female artists. This could be especially true because a DJ or an MC are usually roles associated with men. However, this response to DJ Squam was exclusive to the all-male audience. The other audiences followed DJ Squam's cue to cheer but soon cheered by their own volition.

The performers later mentioned this scene was challenging for them, despite it being one of the simplest. They were nervous to reveal their bodies in front of the all-female audience. They predicted the all-female audience would be more critical of their bodies and compare them to their own. In front of the all-male audience the performers felt surprisingly more comfortable. They figured they would be less criticized and more appreciated. These anxieties on body comparison were also present during the performance for the all-gender audience.

Once this scene ended, the lights were brought back up to a neutral warmth, imitating house lights. The performers no longer followed the rules of the screens. They were not hiding behind them and did not exit upstage. They simply walked straight across the stage to get their props for the next scene. This shift from burlesque persona to performer backstage was as quick as the change in lights. The performers kicked off their heels and relaxed in the most unguarded and pedestrian way the audience has seen so far. They silently brought in chairs and food while the recording of *Barnes v Glen Theatre* played over them. This is where the proximity of the dancers to the audience was intentional. They sat up real close to the first row of the audience. So close, if they wanted to they could share their meal with the audience. At the same time, their pedestrian actions reminded the audience of their humanity.

The selected audio of *Barnes v Glen Theatre* juxtaposed the performer's demeanor. *Barnes v Glen Theatre* is a case that questioned whether nudity in striptease, particularly in this adult book shop, should be protected under the first amendment. For the majority of the recording it is male voices discussing whether or not the women of

these performances should be wearing pasties and a G-string. We do not hear a female voice until the very end of the recording. Her voice is refreshing and questions the thinking of the other men who are making assumptions about the women who dance in this particular venue in Indiana. The portrait the men paint of the dancers, desperate and money hungry, is not the image the performers depict while eating in front of the audience. They're human. In fact, one of the dancers drops food on her costume. The second dancer brings her a napkin and helps her clean the stain.



FIG. 5 Backstage eating interlude. [Photo courtesy of Chelsea Tan]

The next scene was the anonymous dancer's solo. The dance began with a slow sensual beat and was flirty but moderate. The dancer plays with the form of shadow and at one point lifts up the bottom corners of the screen exposing her legs. She slowly descends revealing more and more of her body and stopping right before her face is in view. She is not just teasing the audience with her body, but also with her identity. About two minutes into the routine, the music drastically changes as Cardi B's "Money" starts to play, in particular the lines that read, "All I really wanna see is the money. I don't really need the D, I need the money. All a bad bitch need is the money." The style of the dancing completely shifts. It is not longer a moderate calculated striptease but a free and wild dance with twerking and floor work.



FIG. 6 Anonymous dancer's solo [Photo courtesy of Chelsea Tan]

This scene is unique to the rest of the show because it was choreographed by the dancer herself. When asked whether or not the authorship of the choreography changed her perspective, she replied with, “I felt the freedom to improvise. And only I know how my body moves so I felt confident.” Because she could claim authorship of the dance, she did not feel restricted by the moves decided by someone else. Furthermore, she reflected once again on her anonymity. This scene has the most outrageous choreography, as we had to do Cardi justice. The anonymous dancer knows that she wouldn’t have been able to invest herself completely in the role if her identity was compromised.

After this, we move into another dialogue scene between the two other dancers. This scene runs similarly to the first dialogue scene. And just as the transition into the last backstage scene, once the monologues are over, the dancers walk straight across the stage to get their food and their chairs, once again breaking the rules of the production. This break is meant to remind the audience of the productions nature. It is only a representation of reality, not reality itself. There is a new discovery during this backstage scene. Because the characters have learned from the stains they acquired in the last eating scene, they both come in with bibs on. They’ve tucked in large paper towels on top of their lingerie and continue to challenge the hyper-femininity that comes with being a burlesque performer in this particular production. Furthermore, the dancers share their food with one another. Because we are presenting our show to such a small community, it is almost certain that the audience was aware that the two performers were actually in a romantic relationship. Even if unintentionally, this knowledge could change the nature of

the service these two dancers are providing. They are not in service of the audience, but of each other and themselves.

There is one final dialogue scene before the end of the play. The purpose of the dialogue is not to preach a specific message or validate any one opinion. It is to present different perspectives and experiences to the audience and allow them to decide their own opinion. In their individual interviews, the dancers recall that the all-female audience listened intently; however the all-male audience was trying to visually validate the monologues. The performers saw many of the men making eye contact with them and nodding in support and agreement, even though the monologues did not agree with one another. I speculate their reaction was their surrendering to the performers. They had no interest in disagreeing with the monologues. They were only interested in comforting the performers. This interaction is intriguing considering the performers later agreed that during the performance, they felt the need to comfort and protect their all-male audience, as opposed to their performance for the all-female audience where they felt the need to protect themselves. One dancer noted that this dynamic might be switched if they had not personally known the men and women in the audience.

The final scene of the play is the stripper's scene. We started by placing a chair facing upstage in front of the audience. The anonymous dancer came out covered in sweats and a hoodie to both hide her identity and her figure. She sits in the chair with her back to the audience and thus joined the audience as a spectator. This metatheatrical tool again created distance between the audience and the performance by making them aware of their spectatorship. If they were immediately involved with the stripper, as the

anonymous dancer would soon be, they might be too concerned with their visible reaction than to see the larger picture.

The following action is inspired by something I came across in Rachel Shteir's book *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*. She explains that during World War I, if a woman exposed herself to a room of soldiers, she was doing an honorable and patriotic service for her country (Shteir 66). I decided to dress the stripper in a costume that resembled the Statue of Liberty, a landmark that symbolizes freedom of oppression and pride. The stripper walked forward with a tablet in one hand and a flashlight in the other. The other dancers, DJ Squam, and myself all sit behind the chair, our backs to the audience, staring up at the dancer. We have also joined the spectators. The stripper hands the tablet to DJ Squam and hands the flashlight to the other dancer. She then removes her crown and places it on the anonymous dancer's head who is still seated in the chair. She is directly involving the spectators in her dance. They are no longer passive, but an active part of the performance.

The stage lights were now turned off completely. The space was dark until the dancer turned on the flashlight she was given and aimed the beam at the stripper. The others followed by using their phones as flashlights. The stripper was completely lit. The stripper continued her routine, taking off her blue velvet garment and soon her bra as she performed the following lines from a quote said by William Dean Howells which inspired the title of Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness*:

Though they were not like men, they were in most things 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. (Allen 25)



FIG. 7 Dialogue between Trish and Stef [Photo courtesy of Chelsea Tan]

After the stripper finished reciting that quote, her torso was completely nude with the exception of two pasties. Within seconds, the flashlights that were aimed at the stripper were now turned on the audience and were just as quickly turned off. This was the most explicit attempt to turn the gaze back on the audience. Because the moment is so quick, we did not allow the audience to sink too deep in the moment. It was an abrupt awakening. It was a reflection of the gaze.

Once the flashlights were turned off, the other players moved the screens to surround the stripper in a triangle. The lights were brought up to a dim setting. The

strippers hands hung over the top of the screen facing the empty chair that still sat facing her. The stage was now covered in costume pieces, undergarments, food, and scripts.



FIG. 8 Last image of the play: stripper trapped between three screens [Photo courtesy of Chelsea Tan]

At the end of the all-male audience performance, because I noticed a large amount of fidgeting and nervous energy, I posed a question to them. I asked them to close their eyes and raise their hand if the performance had made them uncomfortable. Only one person raised their hand. However, later in the week I received messages from a few others admitting that they'd lied, and they were made uncomfortable, they just could not explain exactly why.

The audience was then free to leave the space, the stripper still trapped between the screens until everyone had exit. Another notable difference between the all-female audience and the all-male audience was the way they addressed me when leaving the space. I held the door open to let everyone out. As the women passed me, they hugged me and enthusiastically congratulated me. This was much different from the interactions I had with the all-male audience. They were cautious of the type of hug they were giving me, if I even got a hug at all. This seems trivial, but because I knew the men in the audience, I recognized that this was outside of their normal behavior.

CONCLUSION

Sexual empowerment is a point of contention for the current wave of feminism and is still an ongoing discussion. There are debates concerning who has the power in a given situation. Radical feminists and sex libertarians have been in discussion about what Pilcher describes as the “feminist sex wars” since the 1980s (Pilcher 73). The practices of stripping and burlesque are under constant sexual scrutiny and are dripping with stigmas that ultimately affect the dancers’ private lives; yet, these two mediums of performance are argued by some feminists to give some of the power over to the women: “A variety of power relations exist within the strip club and similar locales.... Such complex power relations make any simple suggestion that power is a ‘zero-sum’ game, solely in the hands of one party, difficult” (Pilcher 73). There are so many factors that shift the power back and forth between the dancer, the client, the management staff, and the law.

This conversation is much larger than the scope of this thesis. My project does not explore power relationships between the producer and the performers, or financial or legal matters. However, the elements explored in this thesis have taught me that women can resist the male gaze by creating and participating in empowering performances when they have agency over their representation as well as challenge the notion of the active male view and the passive female object. Still, such performances rely on a certain level of anonymity and a separation between one’s public and private personas. In an interview with a burlesque performer who teaches costuming at an afterschool program, she said:

I have to work very hard to make sure that that’s separate. Because even though my boss at [censored] probably won’t care, everyone at [censored]

is an artist, even my boss is an artist, so they see it as largely just a costuming endeavor. But if parents found out, I could potentially lose my job...They don't. They don't know at all. I keep it very separate. My students don't know. I keep my personal Facebook really locked down so that they can't find it at all. And then I keep my performer Facebook completely separate.

(anonymous)

Because of her passion for constructing outrageous costumes, anonymous continues to perform burlesque despite the risk that a parent might walk in and see her onstage. Her sexuality in her personal life could potentially invade her reputation in her professional life, even though it does not make her any less qualified for either position. Although in the scenario anonymous sets up a parent was also present at this locale, anonymous would nevertheless be punished. She would be the one to lose her job.

The anonymous dancer in my play expressed a similar response. Her anonymity allowed her to dance freely and explore her own body in a way she wouldn't have otherwise. After the show, anonymous did not have to face the comments and questions of her peers the way the other dancers did. Another notable discovery that the anonymous dancer made in her individual interview, was that her shadow did not indicate her race. She did not fear that her race would influence the sexual expectations of the audience.

The anonymous dancer's experience was the most empowered as she had authorship of her choreography, maintained privacy, and made discoveries and positive connections about her relationship to her body. Additionally, I learned that positive sexuality can be personal and reliant on the individual's body image. Nevertheless, these

discoveries give examples of concrete steps that may be taken to pursue female empowerment and challenge the male gaze.

Furthermore, this thesis informed me on the fragility of addressing sex in our community more than I could have predicted. This thesis, and other similar projects, not only has the potential of creating safe spaces for sex positivity and encouraging consensual interactions but also could serve as a form of therapy, allowing performers the chance to be present in their bodies and for audiences to unpack their responses to erotic presentations.

In her correspondence with Mary Smith Cranch, Abigail Adams continues, “Shall I speak a truth and say that repeatedly seeing these dances has worn off that disgust which I first felt, and that I see them now with pleasure” (Adams, “To Mary Smith Cranch”). Like Adams, I have stepped away from this project with a deeper understanding of myself and a better appreciation for burlesque and similar forms. I no longer approach them with as much hesitance but with an analytical eye, but especially with pride and support.

APPENDIX: THE SCRIPT

The following is a copy of our working script.

W O U N D E D D E L I C A C Y

A Montage of Quotations, Interviews, and Dance

Compiled by Rebecca Filetti-Andujo

In collaboration with Cristina Martinez,

Emily Deuchar, and Grace Castillo

Key: Sound / Projection / Lights

PROLOGUE

Quick Musical Doodles – Two Feet

House Lights Out

Projected on the screens we see:

W O U N D E D D E L I C A C Y

A Montage of Quotations, Interviews, and Dance

“Burlesque makes no attempt to bring all its part together into a unified and ideologically monovical whole.” --Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*

And neither will we.

DJ Squam is behind the audience in a tech booth where she remains visible and speaks directly to the audience. It is important to note that DJ Squam is also a woman.

DJ SQUAM

The sun has set, the lights of the city are on full glow, and you’re about to see some of your town’s sassiest gals. Welcome to tonight’s show! I am DJ Squam and I do not take song requests unless it’s All Star by Smash Mouth. For those of you who are new to the scene, just a few things: Do show encouragement but don’t make demands. Do bring cash but don’t assume you can tip. Do watch but don’t touch. Hooting and hollering is acceptable. In fact, we encourage it. Just DON’T be tasteless. And now, put your hands together for, The Panty-Hoooooes! Show them some love!

BEAT A

Burlesque Dance: She-Wolves

Back Lights Up

Boogieman- Childish Gambino

There are three screens onstage. The screens are all backlit. Enter a dancer. She is behind the screens. We do not see her, only her shadow. She gets to the middle and the Boogieman by Childish Gambino begins. Two other dancers enter and join the first dancer in her routine. All dancers have a different body type. Together, their shadows make sensual shapes of femininity. They begin to take off their bra straps and soon after their bras. They move onto the first glove. As the gloves are slowly peeled away, we see shadows of claws and fur. Next, they peel of the other glove to reveal another claw and more fur. The shapes of the feminine dancers suddenly start to shift into monstrous figures with unexpected proportions and animalistic movements. Our first dancer gives birth to a baby monster. The other dancers help her deliver. The third dancer begins to eat the baby starting from the chord. The first dancer gives birth to a second baby. This baby is quickly thrown behind them. The dancers return to their sensual feminine movements with no trace of their monstrous selves.

Back Light Out

BEAT B

Dialogue Excerpt 1

Monologue Lights Up

Projection on right screen: CRYSTAL

Dancers perform all monologues behind a screen that only reveals them from the shoulders up. They read from a script.

CRYSTAL

Sure, I knew the woman. I only met her in passing when she came to order food at my day job. She's the wife of the man sitting right over there. She's the kind of white middle aged women who says gracias at a Mexican restaurant. And he's the kind of white middle aged man who feels he needs to teach a Dominican how to make platanos. He's the one trying to put me in jail. That man, is also my client. My consistent client. He took a liking to me when he came to see me dance. He offered me \$300 for a night at the Red Roof Inn. Not a deal every dancer would take, but a gal's got to make her money somehow. It was nothing special. But for a guy like that, it was scandalous and he couldn't stay away. They think I did it. I admit it doesn't look great. "Stripper kills lover's wife." Why do headlines always start with my occupation? That's hardly fair. I'm already second-class. They think I was jealous of his wife. They think I was jealous of her stable life, of her financial stability and that I killed her. For what? So her husband could finally love me completely? Fucking boring! It's just my job, I could care less about anything other than the money in his pocket.

Projection on left screen: CHERYLL

CHERYLL

A strip club? Oh, honey. You don't want to go there. Stay here with me and my girls. Burlesque is so much safer and so much better for an artist like you. Honey, stripping is low art! You get paid for revealing your body to an audience. But Burlesque? You get paid to dance! Oh no, honey. I would never consider being a stripper. Of all the strip clubs in the world, it's never been for me. Oh no, I don't do Burlesque either. But not because I don't like it. I just have a lot of really negative feelings about my own body. So that's why I'm the mama, baby girl. I'm here to take care of my girls. And I know how to take care of them. Because after all, what other industry is under as much sexual scrutiny? You need someone protecting you... You don't want to do either? No stripping, no Burlesque? Fine. Go be a stewardess. You think they're job is any different than ours? You think that's such a seemingly banal and safe role. Guess again, sugar. It's still a sexual role, because you're in service of other people, just like performance is a service. And who do you think chooses which pretty girls get to go on the plane and which don't? That's right, honey. The same man who runs the strip club, and the modeling agency, even the ice cream shop with all those pretty female high schoolers, working their after-school shift. You want to be an actress? Open your eyes, girl. You know who the man is here? You know who runs this joint? That's right. It's me, baby. I'm the mama. And I'll take care of you. Sure. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we made this a choice. This is your choice, babe! I would wish it to be a choice.

Lights Out

BEAT C

“Meet Our Dancers” Performance

La Di Da – The Internet

Back Lights Up & Some Front (Front DR/DL @ 15%)

An announcer introduces each dancer one at a time. When they are announced by their performer name, the dancer spins the screen around and will introduce to the audience their performer persona and perhaps a signature dance move.

DJ SQUAM

(improvisation encouraged) It’s time to meet our dancers! Our first dancer, coming to you from Los Angeles, California...Silk Rasp-Berry!

Projection: Silk Rasp-berry

Next, coming to you from Ocean Grove, New Jersey...Georgia O’Queef!

Projection: Georgia O’Queef

Lastly, our visiting dancer is coming to you anonymously. For one night only, we present to you, the elusive....Velvet Cherry!

Projection: Velvet Cherry

Let’s have fun tonight!

Lights Out

BEAT D

Sharing a Meal

Lights Up (Both Side MDS on 50%)

All the dancers are sat around and hunched over a table. They share a meal. They are eating big burritos in their extravagant and erotic costumes. Although they are covered in glitter and make-up, they sit and eat as if they were alone. Their backs are not arched, their shoulders are relaxed, and they are barefoot. This moment is shared in silence while the audio from the Barnes v Glen Theatre Inc. case. The dancers do not notice the recording:

Audio Excerpts:

WILLIAM H. REHNQUIST

We'll hear argument next in No. 90-26, Michael Barnes v. Glen Theatre, Inc.--

[audio cut]

ANTONIN SCALIA

Excuse me, I should have jumped in earlier I guess. I wish we could clarify exactly what the supreme court has said about nude dancing in the course of the theatrical production, because that does bear upon whether its content neutral. I mean, as I understand the law in Indiana, it isn't content neutral. You can dance nude but only in certain... I don't know... high-toned kinds of productions. Is that the test?

WAYNE E. UHL

As of now... all the supreme court has done in Indiana is said that the statute isn't overbroad and the reason the statute is not overbroad is because we assume... and I'm reading this in... We assume that the First Amendment puts limits on our ability to ban

nudity. And the way that assumption was stated in the Baysinger was we assumed that nudity must be tolerated in certain larger forms of expression.

ANTONIN SCALIA

Larger?

WAYNE E. UHL

Larger forms of expression.

ANTHONY M. KENNEDY

Some larger forms of expression meriting protection.

WAYNE E. UHL

Meriting protection.

DAVID H. SOUTER

Would you define the larger form of expression by particularized message?

WAYNE E. UHL

Yes, Your Honor.

DAVID H. SOUTER

So if the particularized message distinction is not upheld, then you have no way of drawing the line between the higher and lower form.

WAYNE E. UHL

That very well may be true. But if the Court holds that, then we still believe that this is a reasonable regulation upon the dancing.

[audio cut]

ANTONIN SCALIA

That's why Dickens wrote his books, too.

WAYNE E. UHL

Well, Your Honor, it's different. Dickens wrote his book largely because he needed income, not only because he needed income, and there's a distinction there to be made.

ANTONIN SCALIA

You're sure about that?

[Laughter]

WAYNE E. UHL

I'm sure what Darlene Miller's intent was, Your Honor, and that was to make money.

JOHN PAUL STEVENS

Yes, but your supreme court distinguishes between the opera singer and this dancer and I suppose the opera singer wants to make money, too.

WAYNE E. UHL

That's true, although again the opera singer is in the position where that's not the only thing that she wants to do, but that the money is an important part of it. So we can't distinguish this just on the fact that she's making money.

[audio cut]

As the recording continues, one of the dancers drops food on her costume. She starts to pick up the food she has dropped on herself and accidentally drops more. The dancer next to her helps her clean up the food and takes a napkin to her friend's costume as it has now stained. The recording continues:

WAYNE E. UHL

Furthermore, the Indiana courts have carefully defined the term public place. For example, a situation where a single viewer goes into a booth and views a single dancer through a glass plate and closes the door behind him to do so, the Indiana Supreme... the Indiana courts have said that that is not a public place under the statute. However, what we have in this case in the Chippewa Book Store is a ring of booths around a stage where a multitude of customers can watch the same dancers at the same time.

JOHN PAUL STEVENS

What's the State interest in that distinction? If you have one customer, it's okay. If you have ten, it's bad.

WAYNE E. UHL

Well, the State interest, Your Honor, is that the more this becomes an audience participation kind of a situation that the State's interest in regulating that kind of conduct increases.

[audio cut]

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR

Mr. Uhl, if there were a videotape of these performances, could the State ban outright the sale of the tape?

WAYNE E. UHL

No, Your Honor, because the videotape would not be live conduct, and the statute only goes to... and our First Amendment argument only applies to live conduct as opposed to depictions.”

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR

Yes, I'm asking you whether a statute could withstand a First Amendment test if it tried to ban sale of the videotape of the performance.

WAYNE E. UHL

No, Your Honor, not unless the videotape were obscene.

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR

And why is that? Why can you ban the real thing but not the videotape of it?

WAYNE E. UHL

This Court has always made a distinction between depictions of conduct and live conduct itself. And I think that's because live conduct is something that is traditionally subject to State regulation and is something that more vividly presents the concerns that are at interest when the State try... legislates in this particular area. The Court has always said that live conduct is to be treated differently.

House Light Out

BEAT E

Anonymous Dancer

Back Light Up

Her Life- Two Feet

Another burlesque dance. This time it is just the anonymous dancer. We watch her shadow. At one point, she lifts up the bottom half of the screen so her legs are revealed.

There is a movement that leads her to the ground, revealing more of her body. She stops just before her face is revealed and raises herself back up. We watch her legs as she dances until the music crossfades to...

Cardi B - Money

The dance style changes dramatically to match the music. It is no longer burlesque but a strip routine. The dancer yanks down the bottom of the screen so she is completely covered again. She continues her dance.

Back Light Out

BEAT F

Dialogue Excerpt 2

Monologue Lights Up

Two of the dancers return to the stage. One dancer stands stage left, the other stands stage right. They are clearly in different locations and are not in conversation with one another. DANCER is being interviewed in her dressing room. Her responses are unrehearsed. EX-DANCER is being interviewed on live television. Her answers have been rehearsed.

TRISH (EX-DANCER)

As a victim of sexual assault and rape, you're a victim. Women are taught that their value is in their sexuality because that's all they've received attention for. In the sex industry, there's this allure, this false promise of empowerment that you can take what you've been

victimized by and use it as a tool and a weapon and as power to make money for yourself.

STEF (DANCER)

I was always encouraged to be visually modest, whatever the fuck that means. It wasn't until I was out of the house that I started showing my skin. And it was always at the risk that I was doing myself a disservice by showing my body parts. But now I can finally take the upper hand here and exploit for myself what's always been exploited.

TRISH

You kind of have this backwards way of thinking.

STEF

It's gonna happen anyway, I should be in control of it... You might think the customers have control but the women have the real control. It's a real ownership of the body. And it's sexy. And it's also not! I just gave birth to a baby animal onstage. And yeah, not every women in the world who is a stripper or a burlesque dancer feels empowered all the time. Maybe you do feel empowered all the time. That's wonderful. Maybe you feel objectified all the time. That's horrible... Truth is, you will always have an audience that is just there for the tits.

TRISH

It is possible to be objectified while being empowered. That line is determined by the dancer. Empowerment is personal. Objectification is public.

STEF

I can decide to feel empowered. That is a decision I make. For some reason we can't believe it's an organic interest... The narrative we are taught is that you choose to be a burlesque dancer but you're a stripper out of necessity or force.

TRISH

That being said, if one of my friends were to say, "look, I want to do this, I want to strip for money" I probably would check to see if they're okay. Like, what's going on with you that you feel you have to do this?

STEF

There's nudity in theatre all the time and that's okay. Because if it's on a Broadway stage, then it's suddenly okay. Suddenly, it's art. But! If it's kept in the back of a dim lit room, it becomes something else.

TRISH

The history of performance is so deeply entrenched in exploiting people. Performance is a service.

STEF

You know you always hear the thing about, "that's someone's daughter up there." Which of course yes that's true but also that's not like ... someone else's daughter and them as an individual, those are two different things. They don't have to be - I mean they can be the same and they can be different. That's the reality. And you also always hear about a woman's daddy issues. Everyone has daddy issues. Everyone has mommy issues. "She has daddy issues," is not a truthful reflection of why I do this. I could easily say, I can't

be a stripper because I have daddy issues. That's such a flawed statement. And why do you care? You're not my daddy.

Light Out

BEAT G

Sharing a Meal, Again

House Lights Up

The dancers have returned to their hunched over positions on the table. They share another meal just as before, except this time they are all wearing giant bibs and/or big napkins over their costumes. Their bra straps hold up the bibs. Again, they eat silently as the following videos play:

Cardi b talks about why she was a stripper (emotional)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKF7J_DDfS4&t=159s

FAITH BACON 'Lady with the Fans' Soundie 1942

www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVSWqJWZkUo

Soho Striptease Clubs (1958) - Extract

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1V1FjLGYfo

The dancers put their heels back on, grab their stuff, and exit.

House Light Out

BEAT H

Dialogue Excerpt 3

Monologue Lights Up

Projection: LETICIA

LETICIA

Have you seen the Sopranos? Where the girls just like stand there and dance the whole time. Like, they're just so emotionless. They're like glass-eyed, not because they're so drugged up or anything but they're just like...working, 9 to 5, you know? 80 million percent of the time stripping is a negative. You know like, circumstances lead to consequences which lead to more circumstances that lead to worse consequences. Like the downward slide of it. But then, you know, you see something like Magic Mike that glorified the stripping world. But that's of course because it's a bunch of men doing it. So of course it's free choice for them to have women slobbering all over them. But still, in Magic Mike, the guy doesn't stay with it all the way. He grows out of it. It's never a permanent solution or a goal. In flashdance, she needs money so she becomes a stripper. It's great because she gets paid tons to dance. But, the guy that she meets helps her get a dance audition at a big school. And what does she choose? She chooses the academic route, not the erotic dancing. The erotic dancing was a layover, a flyover state to her final destination.

Monologue Lights Out

BEAT I

Stripper's Chair Dance Routine

Front Lights Up

Red by xxyyxx

This is the most explicit scene in the piece. There is someone sitting in a chair. The back of the chair is facing the audience and the person sits facing upstage. We do not see their face. A dancer is sat behind the chair, holding the person's hands back to ensure they will not be tempted to touch.

Light Out

A dancer approaches. She is dressed as the statue of liberty with a flashlight as the torch. She begins her chair dance. As she dances, the other dancers have flashlights that are all pointed at her. These are the only lights on in the space. The stripper says the following as she strips:

STRIPPER

Though they were not like men, they were in most things 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.

She finally takes off her bra. (She is wearing pasties underneath.) The dancers turn the flashlights to face the audience. They can no longer see the dancers, just the lights. And the flashlights turn off. The screens are then moved to surround the stripper and enclose her centerstage. Her hands lay over the top of the screens facing the chair to which she was dancing before. At this point the stage should be littered with bras, gloves, food, etc. Everyone exits the stage but the enclosed stripper.

END

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