

## COVERING LETTER

- a.- Title, dates, place, timescale of project/ conference etc.
- b.- How far the purpose of your project was achieved
- c.- Notes about any particular highlights in your travels
- d.- Suggestions which could help future awardees
- e.- Plans to share information about your project with others.

a.- **Title:** Researching the Art of Undressing in Performance

The core of my research project was to participate in the Tease-o-rama Burlesque Convention in San Francisco, from the 30<sup>th</sup> of September to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2005. There I hoped to learn about the history and practice of Striptease and Burlesque, attend shows and make contacts with performers.

Flying to Los Angeles on September the 26<sup>th</sup> gave me the chance to interview Burlesque artists I had previously contacted, visit the Hollywood club "40 Deuce", watch the show and interview the performers before travelling to San Francisco. Once the intense Burlesque convention had passed, I concentrated on interviewing individual artists, collecting personal stories and as much visual information as possible. I also visited various live shows including the USA's first worker-owned strip club, The Lusty Lady, Madame Moschino's House of Burlesque, Little Minsky's and SoMa's Cherry Bar.

b.- The outcome of my research was very successful and I am grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Fund for giving me the opportunity to make it happen. Attending Tease-o-rama was a great opportunity for me to become familiar with the tradition of Burlesque and meet some of its original stars. Most of the people I had previously contacted were very willing to collaborate and introduce me to other dancers and venues. All the artists I talked to expressed varied perspectives on their work thus giving me the chance to compare and contrast different situations and opinions.

c.- Apart from the highly eventful Tease-o-rama, I would like to stress two main highlights of my journey which I had not previously anticipated. In both occasions I was able to address the subjects of dance and choreography talking to former Strippers who have now become educators.

One of these was meeting Ms Sybil Holiday, an experienced Stripper and now a Certified Hypnotherapist and Sex Educator. Ms Holiday had a long career as a Stripper and was willing to tell me her story while supporting it with some wonderful visual material of her, along with friends and colleagues and other Strippers from the 1940's and 50's. Despite the fact that she had only attended some Ballet training at a very young age, Ms Holiday expressed many ideas about dance and choreography, which she had developed by performing, observing and feeding from other media such as television and music.

Ms Holiday's narration touched on many practical issues related to choreography and dance. Her evolution as a performer, learning to do less in order to achieve more and to give her dancing a coherent relationship to music, amongst others. Her testimony very much supports my thoughts that there is great technique in the work of some Strippers, self taught and undocumented and perhaps, from an academic point of view, lacking recognised methodology yet valid nevertheless.

Another highlight of my travels was meeting Ms Cleo Dubois, a former Burlesque Dancer and Stripper who is now a highly respected BD/SM Educator and much sought after speaker for established organisations such as Differences, QSM and Society of Janus amongst others. Ms Dubois introduced me to the San Francisco Centre for Sex and Culture and its director Ms Carol Queen. Ms Queen, who had also worked as a Stripper, is now a cultural sexologist with a doctorate in education (EdD/ sexology) teaches sex education workshops, and her erotic writing and social commentary have been widely anthologised. While at the Centre for Sex and Culture I attended the opening of an exhibition of erotic photography by Michael Rosen, and a Ritual performance.

d.- My suggestion for future awardees would be to have a well structured plan of the activities they wish to undertake, whilst being prepared to change and/or add things to it, if the occasion arose. Travelling to another country or continent may present opportunities which one has not anticipated.

e.- During my travels I became aware of the scarcity of other performers like myself who, coming from one particular dance discipline, wanted to study a different one, in my case the art of Striptease and Burlesque. I have experienced how studying other styles, aesthetic canons and attitudes towards the body in performance can give new insights into the nature of dance. For this reason I want to pass on the information I have gathered to as many people as possible, by publishing my report in different dance and art web sites and magazines. Such information will be useful as choreographic research material and will inform the making of future shows and educational work.

I have always had a particular fascination for the art of Striptease and Erotic Dance. My active research of the subject was triggered by a small paragraph I read in a book called "Stripping in Time", by Lucinda Jarret:

"...(Under the banner of the Minsky Brothers)...Striptease became known as a craft which combined the art of seductive teasing with the craft of comic timing and a dance performed while undressing to music."

To me, this sounded like the ideal performance. I thought that the performer who could successfully represent the description above should be a person of strong character, great skill and some sort of knowledge or understanding of their sexuality; in any case, an awareness of sexuality important enough to lead them into this field. These thoughts were also encouraged by Ms Jarret in the following words:

"(The erotic dancer in the West) on the one hand is admired as a strong, sexually powerful woman who has the power to challenge the state of carnal sin which all women inherit from Eve. On the other hand she celebrates and reaffirms the divinity of sex, placing it at the core of the experience of love."  
"Women who make a career out of stripping in performance must be strong, powerful non-conformists; they must be prepared to defy the tide of moral opinion and to defend their work in the press and the law courts."

These empowering words set me off wanting to find out more about the art of Striptease, wanting to find out if there were performers out there who would match those definitions, meet them and ask them directly about their work. Thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund, I was able to proceed with my investigation.

With a professional career of fourteen years in Contemporary Dance, I decided to study the art of Striptease from a dance/ performance perspective. I wanted to give my research an analytical tone, which I could relate with my previous experiences in choreography and performance. I also wished to find out how each performer made their stage decisions, how much choreography or lack of it (which is also a choreographic decision) would compose their work, and where was their focus of attention while performing.

In the last years, a lot has been said in the mainstream media about performance in the sex industry, making it rather "hip" and fashionable but hardly talking about the existence of any skill or talent from the performers. Television and press tend to emphasise the stories of exploitation and lack of consent which undoubtedly exist. During my research I have also found testimonies and bibliography that narrate such issues and I do not intend to neglect them. I have great sympathy for the people who have suffered such abuse. However I feel that this media hype reaffirms the stigmas and taboos that revolve around the world of the sex industry, thus glamourising them in the eyes of the outsider in a way that might help sales, but does not always match the reality behind the scenes. For the sake of this study I tried to collect as many perspectives as possible which may or may not confront such established clichés.

My journey started in Los Angeles, where I talked to the following artists:

Ms Kitty Diggins, who is not attached to a particular company and also works as a Go Go Dancer. Ms Diggins has created a most mysterious and fascinating personal image based on 1930's fashion. She has many interesting ideas on how beneficial it has been for her to accept her body through stripping, and believes that "sex work is one of the most valuable forms of education."

Ms Scarlett Fever, who dances for the famous Burlesque Company Velvet Hammer Burlesque, and also performs with her partner and one man band Reverend Beat Man. Ms Fever has a strong artistic background and is familiar with many dance styles, especially Butoh which she has been practicing for many years. She has a degree in Art History and has worked as a journalist for LA magazine Juxtaposed. Her discourse is very rich and full of artistic references. She has taken great care in reproducing the elements of beauty, glamour and elegance which for herself and for the Velvet Hammer are so crucial to Burlesque.

Ms Scarlet Letter, an artist very much inspired by the "show girl" and "chorus girl" performing roles which the New Burlesque celebrates. Ms Letter wears immaculate vintage attire when she attends Burlesque related events and her attractive presence resembles a vision from another period. Her numbers are built around one "breathtaking move or image. Most of the time it is revealing my hair, sometimes it is a part of the costume. I feel that one good Aaah makes a number." Ms Letter has a long but selective list of actresses from the 20's to the 50's whom she admires, "most of them famous for their sex appeal or for having played a show girl in certain movies", such as Marlene Dietrich, Cyd Charisse and Judy Garland.

Ms Carolina and Ms Hanna, best friends and dancers at Forty Deuce Club in Hollywood. These are two exceptional professional dancers who talked to me about celebrating dance through their work and this was clearly expressed in their performance. They are trained in many styles of which Jazz and Salsa seem to inform their dance the most. It is a treat to see these two performers accompanied by three wonderful jazz musicians, Willie McNeil (drums), Jay Work (saxophone) and Ravi Knypstra (bass) who play and also perform with them. Together they create an atmosphere of sensuality and humour which is, in their words, "very inviting and inspiring to a female audience".

Time was running out and I had to get to San Francisco in time for Tease-o-rama, "The Only Burlesque Convention on Planet Earth!". This was a most intense and exciting experience, organised by Baby Doe Productions, Alison Fensterstoch and Liftoff. In the space of two days, I attended:

- An Advanced Burlesque Dance and Choreography Workshop by Miss Exotic World 2005, Ms Michelle l'Amour, who also answered questions related to my research.

- An autobiographical Play by Satan's Angel, the Devil's Own Mistress. Famous for setting her tassels on fire!

- A lecture on "Comedy in the Burlesque Show" by Andy Davies, Ph.D in Performance Studies from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and director of Baggy Pants Burlesque.

- A workshop on Vintage Moves led by Satan's Angel.

- A talk by the stars of Burlesque: Ms Viva la Fever, Ms Dixie Evans ("The Marilyn of Burlesque", dancer for the Minsky Brothers in New York), Ms Satan's Angel and Ms Isis Starr. These legends talked about their experiences and gave their own personal tips for new aspiring Strippers.

- A night of performances by the most recognised Burlesque artists in the world, led by famous artist Ms Kitten on the Keys as Master of Ceremonies.

Tease-o-rama very much represents the New Burlesque, a movement which revives the aesthetics of an American past when the original Burlesque reigned – from the 1930's to the 50's, spilling into the 60's and 70's. For some of its fans it has become a life style. Specialised shops, like WAKO in Los Angeles, provide their followers with all kinds of supplies, from clothes, to kitchen utensils, to books. Their favourite form of performance, the Burlesque Theatre, includes dancers, singers, Stripteasers and large doses of humour from the comedians, singers and Stripteasers themselves.

The world of the New Burlesque celebrates the voluptuous female form and the fact that, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this could not be completely revealed. Thus the New Burlesque glorifies all the elements of the tease: the very elaborate costumes, the props such as giant feathery fans and the nipple tassels, enhancing in this way their fetishistic element.

The crowds that attended the events at Tease-o-rama were large and very enthusiastic. However, the New Burlesque still seems a movement which belongs mainly to a specialised, alternative audience, with the occasional crossover into the mainstream. Many of the artists I talked to agreed that they have found very warm and receptive audiences within the gay and lesbian communities for example.

Most artists in the New Burlesque would not necessarily make a living out of their artistic work. They would do it because it is their devotion, their life style, and/or it helps them and others to accept and celebrate their own canons of beauty and eroticism. I found a great example of this in the testimony of Ms Queen Justine, a Belly dance teacher, performer and an ex member of San Francisco based company Big Burlesque. Ms Justine found in Burlesque the possibility of expressing her "most feminine self". After having experienced and shared that joy with her audience:

"Helping people to change their perspectives about their body, inspiring people, is the most gratifying thing, the greatest thing that could ever come out of this."

Ms Justine talked to me about how her work, though largely improvised, is informed by her training in Belly Dancing and from the audience's feedback. She practices a particular style called American Tribal Belly Dancing which has been developed by a woman called Carolena Norechio. This style is based on a principle of copying and following a leader, thus creating the possibility of well synchronized group performances with the minimum rehearsal time.

To get a different perspective on my area of research, I talked to other performers who had decided to take their clothes off on stage. I attended a meeting with Dandelion Dance Company, a modern dance company based in the Bay Area and directed by Eric Kupers. This group of modern dancers, together with their choreographer, have been stripping in front of their audiences since 2001 to perform their ongoing project "Undressed". They have had to appoint one of their members to study the laws in each of the states they will be visiting. As the laws change in each state, they are never sure of how much they will be allowed to reveal, especially as their project will soon be incorporating public nudity (part of the piece will take place in the street).

Eric Kupers seems fascinated with the possibilities of the naked body, especially with the potential of fat, and his enthusiasm is contagious. He talks about fat as another great element to craft your dance with, considering you can hold on to it or you can roll with it, amongst many other possibilities. "Grabbing, jiggling, bouncing, rippling, sagging, folding... Fat brought a new level to the material." His work is highly physical and based on the people he is working with. He also includes in his project performers with different levels of ability and disability.

Eric has strong ideas relating to "redefining what "sexual" is, and "sexual" not being a shameful thing". He is, at this stage, exploring "sexual experience being part of what the audience sees in the piece, i.e. you feel sad at one point, you feel turned on at another point".

Dandelion's company meeting evolved into a very interesting debate where dancers and choreographer shared some of their experiences in working with nudity. One of Eric's dancers, Jez Lee, expressed her thoughts about how performing with nudity started off being more of a limitation than a liberation for her. In her own solo work she had been questioning gender and image, by exploring performance in drag. By being naked, she could not play with the ambiguity of her image. The experience helped her "accept my feminine side. It also made me more appreciative of the times and ways I could play with gender-expression."

I found through the stories of these modern dancers a way of connecting my research with the world of Contemporary dance. It was interesting to see how much this particular group of people had considered and discussed nudity in performance.

I continued comparing and contrasting experiences, this time talking to women who had been Strippers and could talk about it with hindsight. I was very fortunate to meet Ms Cleo Dubois, who told me about her times as a Stripper and Burlesque artist under the exotic name of Maleka'Mour. Ms 'Mour had been a belly dancer and fire juggler, and performed at the Follies in San Francisco, now the Victoria Theatre. Ms Dubois had fond memories of her time as a dancer, and expressed the feeling that a lot of the craft and artistry of that time – the 70's and 80's - had been lost. Her present work is also most fascinating. She is the director of an Academy of SM Arts, where she teaches workshops for men and women on Erotic Play, Dominance and Submission, and also counsels couples and individuals who wish to understand further and better their sexuality. Although her actual work is not strictly stripping I found that it dealt with similar issues, such as sexual understanding and empowerment, to the ones I envisaged a good Stripper would master. It is for this reason I would like to mention Ms Dubois and her work, and encourage anyone with the slight curiosity in the potential of their bodies, their sexuality and their relationships to consider checking her educational work.

With Ms Dubois and her husband Fakir Musafar (also a fascinating artist; together they teach classes and perform rituals on piercing, branding and scarification, but I am afraid this would deserve another research project altogether) I visited the San Francisco Centre for Sex and Culture. There I met Ms Carol Queen (whose wonderful writings on sex education and erotic literature I was already familiar with) and her partner Robert Morgan. They showed me authentic Burlesque posters from the 1940s and talked about their experiences within the world of Striptease. Ms Queen had danced at the Lusty Lady Theatre in San Francisco, a venue which has been working for the last few years as a cooperative run by unionized dancers. The evening became a great occasion for me to meet some of the most knowledgeable, transgressive and welcoming people I encountered in San Francisco.

Intrigued I visited the Lusty Lady. The theatre works as a Peep Show, which made it impossible for me to talk to the performers during my visit. However, after addressing myself to the direction of the venue, I was able to contact and interview some of their dancers.

Finally, the most empowering and enthusiastic testimony of a Stripper I collected during my travels was that of Ms Sybil Holiday. Ms Holiday had a wonderful time during her fifteen years as a professional Stripper “apart from two weeks in Colorado” she pointed out. Ms Holiday told me that she became aware at a very young age that she was a good communicator. Perhaps as a result of this her narration excelled in clarity, detail and reflection. Most of that detail was of extreme interest to me, such as the way she thought about choreography, the importance of music and the way her dancing changed through years of experience and performing in different venues. Not only did she talk about her sources of inspiration but she also showed me pictures of her role models thus illustrating what it was she so admired in them. I was delighted to hear about her whole professional career – which culminated in her becoming the manager of a San Francisco venue - and her thoughts about dancing and stripping. Our meeting was embellished by a large amount of extraordinary photographs which she had collected throughout her career.

During my travels I have encountered all kind of performers who have chosen to take some or all their clothes off on stage for all sorts of different reasons. Each one of them has gone through a different thought process in order to explain to themselves what they do and what it means to them. I have found performers who do not want to be called Strippers, but professional dancers; modern dancers who strip; Burlesque artists who find full nudity “vulgar”, “undignified” or “gross” while they happily strip down to a g-string; Strippers who love the fact that their dancing is about sex and totally embrace full nudity. People from all sorts of different backgrounds, with different interests, needs and values.

Most Strippers’ work evolves with the experience gained through hard work, endless performances and audience feedback. Their sources of material originate in many diverse areas and are often self-taught: from Latin dance (salsa, samba), African dance (belly dancing), jazz steps picked up from movies (such as “Cabaret”), and even sampling the actors or actresses attitudes and movements they may choose to emulate (as in the case of Ms Dixie Evans). Some of them do work with set material, although they are always prepared to confront technical “accidents” – drinks spilled on the dance floor, stuck zips etc.- Their capacity for improvisation and audience interaction is admirable, especially from a performer’s point of view. Such skills are very valuable in order to build self confidence in performance and rapid reaction in the face of adversity.

These artists do not tend to have shared role models. Their inspiration comes from personal friends or artists they have met during their careers who have helped them improve in their work. Perhaps this is due to the fact that there have not been many Strippers in history whose work has been viewed worthy of intellectual investigation. Unlike many classical and modern dance artists, their stories have been lost, undocumented and unable to serve as guidance and inspiration to newcomers.

#### *Selected Bibliography*

*“Burlesque”, Robert Adler.*

*“Burlesque, the Baubles Bangles Babes- The story of a Unique American Institution”, Martin Collyer, 1964.*

*“Carnaval Strippers”, Susan Meiselas, Copublished by the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, and Steidl Publishers, Göttingen, Germany.*

*“Gipsy- A Memoir by Gipsy Rose Lee”, Futura Editions, 1988 (from original 1957 autobiography).*

*“Revelations- Essays on Striptease and Sexuality”, Margaret Dragu and A.S.A. Harrison, Nightwood editions, 1989.*

*“Sex Tips from Women Who Ride the Sexual Frontier”, Jo-Anne Baker, Fusion Press, 2000.*

*“Stripping in Time; a History of Erotic Dancing”- Lucinda Jarret, Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.*

*“Striptease- From Gaslight to Spotlight”, Jessica Glasscock, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 2003*

*“The Complete Belly Dancer”-Julie Russo Mishkin/ Marta Schill, Doubleday & Company Inc., 1973.*