

Fraudulent Undressings: Bawdy Politics in Burlesque Performance

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Contemporary (or neo-) burlesque performance as a cheeky, playful, sexy, imitative, explicit performance form, cites the girly show striptease of the mid twentieth century in USAmerica. Though not usually considered an insincere or criminal venture, burlesque performance centers on an illicit play on deception in its parody. Combining elements of parody, satire, camp, clowning, performance art, theatre and circus, burlesque redefines itself in its cultural moment as it expands its referents and performative parameters. There is a necessary understanding to this coded performance; the coding performers and decoding audience are in on the joke together. Amassed in solidarity (if not solidarity) with the caricatured nature of gender and sexuality, audience and performers together in shared fraudulence stage a form of resistance that, conscious or not, has political overtures. The target of the fraud changes per performance, per performer and style and works with the form's inherent parody to create a complex, productive performative. Specifically focusing on NY-based performers The World Famous *Bob*, who touts herself as a 'female female impersonator', and humorist performers Nasty Canasta and Little Brooklyn, I am interested in how contemporary burlesque performance, as fraud, works to align audience and performers in an iniquitous union of pert social resistance.

Generally burlesque performers contribute between 1-3 acts to an evening of performance. Burlesque performances (in the NYC area) are staged in bars and small performing arts spaces, with any variety of small stage spaces on which to work. The audience generally pays a cover charge and moves between cocktail tables, a bar, or other times, assembled seating. In addition to the 3-5 performers an evening, there can also be go-go dancing by a few performers as intermission and/or post-show entertainment. The acts are choreographed by each performer (who usually has a style or genre that mark her performances), set to music, and last, generally, under five minutes, for the length of a song, or a pastiche of songs. Often times there are hosts or emcees who introduce each performer, and banter with the audience in between acts. There are a few venues which organize weekly or sporadic performances, in addition to ongoing weekly, or monthly shows produced by groups of performers. For the most part, the performers organize themselves, booking each other for gigs. This slightly informal organizational structure borders the burlesque community, aiding to the slightly insular, connected, familial unit of NY burlesque performers.

Throughout the burlesque community, performers' styles range from classic striptease-esque to vaudevillian skill-based performers, to those who rely on pastiche and contemporary contextual references. Burlesque, as a coded performance works as parody which Linda Hutcheon describes as "both textual doubling (which unifies

and reconciles) and differentiation (which foregrounds irreconcilable opposition between texts and between texts and 'world') (102). The undressing in burlesque adds another layer. For though the form overtly uses parody, that burlesque can be considered by normative standards an illicit community endeavor, the levels of that which is concealed and revealed in burlesque striptease separate the genre from being housed completely within a definition of parody. Rachel Shteir posits that striptease is a public spectacle, different from the private, at times awkward, and an unbalanced act of undressing. Striptease spoofs sexuality, calling attention to the private act in the public space: "Confronting Americans with a private act in a public space, the best stripteases wove together the mask of humor with corporeal unmasking, intellectual dazzle with physical prowess" (8). Burlesque performance today is more similar to early striptease than it is to contemporary stripping; rather than follow the histories of the genre, as such scholars as Shteir have done, I point to the history of burlesque to acknowledge the community's roots. While burlesque once traversed the trade routes of USAmerica via the train and river-based vaudeville circuit, contemporary burlesque primarily huddles in urban centers, though is consistently eking out into more bucolic soils.

The World Famous *Bob*

Of course the performance of gender is inherent to burlesque's spectacle. Stylized hyper-feminine costumes, parodies of iconic cultural characters and the very act of undressing constantly point to how we play at gender on and off burlesque stages. The World Famous *Bob* in her enhanced-classic look, from name to style, persistently problematizes the gender she performs. Her work best exemplifies burlesque's project of dismantling the gender that is (literally) exposed, especially as its citational references are 1940's-1950's gender aesthetics. The parody of, in imitating as well as differentiating, undressing now vs. (and because of) then as one of burlesque's signatures, avails itself to gender discourse. "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to simply be reduced to it" (Irigaray 76). This is *Bob*'s shtick. She wears platinum blonde hair, ala Marilyn. She often wears pink and her accessory-sized dog is named *Movie Star*. As one of the premiere performers in the burlesque circuit, *Bob* performed in a rare full-length solo show in the fall of 2006 entitled "F to F." "F to F" was an autobiographical cabaret performance, with three striptease numbers inter-dispersed among monologues (unusual for the burlesque evening). *Bob*, a

self-explained Female Female impersonator (the title of her show references transgender folks who move from female to male [F to M], or male to female [M to F]), often references the fluidity of gender in her numbers. She employed fraud, during her full-length show, in the juxtaposition of her monologues and her strip-tease numbers.

This evening of performance commemorated her journey through her gender. For her first number, choreographed to classic, striptease-style trombone-led music, she undressed down to a bra and underwear, both pink and black, covered in fringe. Addressing the title of the show, in her first monologue segment she explained how she has felt: "Oh my God, I'm back where I started." This idea of returning back to a starting place reverberated throughout her performance. She described "F to F" as concept as like taking the same train twice. She qualified this by saying, almost as if she were throwing the statement away: "We all know that gender isn't what is between your legs." In tone and rhythm, she betrayed the complexity of this idea (the idea less-discussed in non-theoretical circles), suggesting that it is general, given, and accepted knowledge. For *Bob*, gender was problematic until she was able to perform herself as woman through burlesque. There is deception in the performance of gender, she suggests, something fraudulent afoot in the un-questioned performance.

For this first monologue, she performed in the bra and underwear she had previously stripped down to. Female to Female, she described her life's journey as "starting at one thing and moving around the block a few hundred thousand times and finally coming back to your home." She began the new phase of her story, "There's something to be said for things being said over and over and over and over again..." As she spoke she began to get dressed in front of us. She remained on stage, in our view for the entirety of the performance. As she dressed, she talked about beginning to develop (sizable) breasts at a young age (maybe 8 or 9), and her mother putting her on a diet, forever measuring cups of cereal each morning for breakfast. In her pre-adolescence and into adolescence, she didn't identify with women. She shared her definition of hero: someone who stands tall, if not alone in the face of little or no agreement, which, she said, embodied transsexuals. *Bob*'s monologues, simple yet sincere, countered the bejeweled spectacle of her stripteases. As she dressed herself (only to take it all off again, momentarily, as we in the audience all understood), she suggested that it was drag that allowed her access to her own gender. She was raised by gay men, she described, "similar to a *Jungalbook* pack of homosexuals training me how to be a woman."

Finally dressed for her second number, she simply and quickly shifted into the next act. She finished a sentence and then fixed her eyes downward. This slight, if unclear, shift in performance hiccupped us as audience to her striptease. The tone in this

performance was, in its cabaret-niche, unapologetically inconsistent - casual during her monologues, then highly polished during her burlesque numbers. With *Bob* still outfitted in a classic 50s pin-up style, the second number was choreographed to a contemporary song, which was comprised of voice-overs, more than lyrics, as if captured quotes, rather than a continuous verse from one voice. The lyrics consisted of contradicting statements such as "Oh my God, if you lost 10lbs, I'd love to design clothes for you," "Man, I like big girls," "I like you better without makeup," "You are so sensitive!" "Are those real?!" "The reason I fuck you from behind is so I don't have to look at your face," and "Look at the fat girl in her underwear!" The act was choreographed as if she was being pulled in different directions from these voices, stripping off her clothes to the confusing, violent, abusive and dismissive language of the lyrics, her movements at times seemingly involuntary. By the number's end, and final reveal of pink jeweled pasties, she had moved to a more traditional tempo in her movements. *Bob*, whose style is inherently classic though with a bit of a caustic edge, works overtly with how fraudulent she believes gender to be. It is only through deception, in both staged and daily performance, that she could come to a genuine understanding of her own gender. There was fraud at work in between the choreography of un/re-dressing a body, while the text of her monologues exposed the abuse that the body had endured.

Nasty Canasta

Nasty Canasta's style is based almost entirely on parody - more than just referencing burlesque performance of the past, she incorporates contemporary references in playful satire. Some recent numbers include an act where she strips as an animatronic Chuck E. Cheese, a number where she is dressed as *Sesame Street*'s The Count, and to a song sung by The Count, strips down to several pasties, adhered all over her chest and stomach, a traditional strip tease choreographed to the sound of a car alarm, a fan dance, choreographed not with elongated plumes, but an electric box window fan. Nasty has categorized the reveals as one of the main differences between stripping and burlesque; that in stripping "once the top comes off, you are still on the pole for twenty or thirty more minutes" and that in burlesque, the act is centered on the reveal. The reveal, though, is not necessarily about nudity; as when a top or bra comes off in burlesque, it is the pasties covering the nipples that star in the reveal. For performers who use plots, stories, and comedy, Nasty described, the pasties themselves are more than often the pay off: "it's not [about] the boobs so much as what is on them."

In her number, "What's the Story Morning Glory?" while trying to bring a wilted plant to life, she realizes the plant (puppeted by her sometimes-partner Jonny Porkpie) responds to her body. She begins the number unknowingly sexy, bending over to pick up a can of plant food, while the plant checks out her upturned bottom. The choreography then leads Nasty leaning over the flower - the flower "looks" at her breasts, she notices the flower staring, the flower and Nasty look at each other and then out to the audience, each of these moments punctuated by four beats of the music. The audience then sees Nasty realize that the puppet is ogling her. A sunflower in a typical flower pot with two small leaves which act as tiny arms once we see the puppet alive, the flower looks to be a fake, real looking plant, that is, without facial or further anthropomorphic features. She plays with parody in the next moments, using iconic strip tease moves to entice both the flower and her audience; she hikes up her dress and twice kicks her red-stockinged leg. The strip tease then moves to more traditional style; she undresses out of elbow-length gloves, twirling one above her head, as the flower mimics the circular track of the glove with its exaggerated gaze. Nasty slips out of her dress (a red gingham dress, with images of chickens emblazoned over the almost picnic tablecloth-like pattern, a 1950s re-dux in print and style), the flower, clearly not yet satisfied with Nasty in white bra with red-ribboned bow, white underwear and red stockings, pouts. Nasty silently stomps a foot, crosses her arms, performing a clear "no!" in response to the flower's desire for even more undressing. With a tucked down chin, Nasty looks up toward arched eyebrows and, with a coy sideways glance, seems to come around to the idea. This expression, too, seems iconic, pointing at a known culture performance of a coaxed girl, maybe pivoting one foot from side to side, body language that would accompany her defeat: as if to say, "Well... just this once!" Turning her back to the audience Nasty unhooks her bra, slips the straps down over her shoulders, continuing her demure striptease, covers her breasts with her hands, and turns around to face the audience. This position, topless, but with pragmatically, precariously placed hands covering bare breasts is also a pin-up quote, a readable reference of decorous decency. For the final reveal, Nasty throws her hands to the air, exposing her breasts, which are covered by sunflower blossoms as pasties.

One obvious reference embedded in Nasty's Flower number is an homage to *Little Shop of Horrors*; this more contemporary reference, along with 1950s-esque images which Nasty peppers throughout the choreography point to gentle parody. Fraud functions in this piece in how Nasty uses deceit - as is her general style, Nasty's numbers frequently have a linear plotline; there are usually reasons why she is undressing - which are at least reasonable within the world of the number. The parody at play

in the "Flower" number is in Nasty's resistance to undressing - the flowers covering her nipples at the number's end indicate that she was always going to be naked (be)fore the flower. Was she deceiving the flower? Her audience? Or the genre in general? This is where she veers away from parody and moves into fraudulence. Her iconic modesty is but a performance. The clothes were always going to come off, planned to come off, suggests Nasty through her final reveal. This must linger with her audience. As undressing is always going to happen throughout a burlesque number, the performers work with why, how and to whom they undress, and further, what such endowed stripping does to prohibited nudity. The play between performer and audience, in what they expect and then receive, resists that imposed-illicitness of an erotic, unclothed body.

Little Brooklyn

Little Brooklyn, much like Nasty Canasta, uses parody, humor and irony throughout her performances. Brooklyn's fraud works to betray the expectations of aesthetics associated with striptease, working against traditional notions of softness or beauty in striptease not through explicit performance intended to shock, but rather in layering aesthetics of beauty and performance with the odd, the perverse or androgynous. Clowning and mime work throughout her choreography, whether informing her rhythm and style of movement, or in the specific subject of the number; one number in particular she is a clown donned entirely in black and white with exaggerated, recognizably clowny choreography. One of her most well known and celebrated numbers is a Pee Wee Herman parody, in which she performs as Pee Wee, imitating his iconic style of movement: halted, angular, forceful and controlled. Brooklyn's parody relies on stylized movement - her choreography quotes readable figures and contemporary references, notably (in addition to Pee Wee) parodies of Buffalo Bill, the quasi-transvestite serial killer from *Silence of the Lambs* (this number entitled "Lotion" includes a well, rope and bucket, lotion and a tiny dog), and a campy Richard Simmons. The performances are clear parodies, cultural references that are easily recognizable by her audience, the fraud happens in juxtaposing these traditionally unappealing performances with striptease. As might be expected, her Buffalo Bill number peaks with the Christ-like image of arms raised, parallel to the ground, after she has taken time (hands hidden under a dressing robe) to perform tucking a non-existent penis between her legs. Buffalo Bill's choreography mirrors the slurred, heavy movements of that character. The choreography in Richard Simmons mirrors a 1980s aerobic aesthetic,

though purposefully flattened with missteps (which reads not that the performer is tired, but that there is something wrong about this Richard). Brooklyn's Simmons is more clown-like: elbows out, feet land in erratic positions while jogging in place.

Brooklyn's reveal often centers around her bottoms as well as her top. In the Pee Wee number, she pulls a rubber chicken out of the men's white briefs she wears prior to the final reveal of googly-eyes on slinky-springs as pasties (ala the joke-store style glasses of the same ilk). The chicken is hidden in her briefs, though it is possible to see some something in the front (which later turns out to be the beak and crown of the rubber chicken); the audience can know that something is hidden, but what that something is part of how fraud works in burlesque. In the "Lotion" number, there is little stripping - she begins loose-fitting shorts and sleeveless shirt, which she quickly undresses out of and into a women's dressing robe. When she finally undresses out of the robe (after the 'tucking' quote) she is wearing only pasties and a merkin (a pubic hair wig), which is also her bare essential at the conclusion of her Richard Simmons number. In the Simmons number, she begins in knee-high athletic socks, short, running shorts (indicative of the early 1980s), and sweat bands around her wrists as well as over the curly brown wig she wears. The merkin is more the reveal itself in the Simmons number than in the Lotion number, but in both instances works against the enticing aesthetic of the striptease. The thick, artificial hair, too long, shiny and substantial to read as genuine pubic hair, stands in for the authentic, while mocking the body and the audience's expectations of it. Though in part parody (here, specifically of pubic hair, and more generally, burlesque as genre) in that the audience participates in the trick, decoding what was explicitly encoded for them. The reading of these codes, of striptease, of beauty, of nudity, not only plays at the performative nature of gender, but also to our expectations of performance and of parody.

For as *Bob* plays because of the form, Nasty within the structure of the form, and Brooklyn within the style, these three burlesquers entice and enchant their audiences in fraudulent behaviors. *Bob*'s audience (the evening I attended the performance) was sympathetic and celebratory. Nasty's audience is charmed and plays along with her. Brooklyn's audience looks to laugh along with her. More than with other performance forms, the relationship and communication between performer and audience acts as the *sin qua non* of burlesque. To pick up the art form and move it to an audience unfamiliar with its codes, parody and innate deception would be to deflate burlesque. Though fledgling audience members to any performance pick up on cues of how to read that performance and how to act upon their readings based on other audience members, the expectations among audience members and between audience

and performers are heightened in burlesque. From this view, most audiences could be viewed as a body politic; community happens in and because of an audience (however fleeting or tacit the community may be). For burlesque, however, especially as the form garners more attention (both in media coverage and fandom) the community between performers and audience has, at its core, a politic bent. These politics derive from the fraud at play in the performance. The striptease in burlesque isn't what it seems - there is always (already) a twist. Whether mocking current, belabored stripping practices, exploding beleaguered societal norms of sexuality and eroticism, exposing cultural characters or references, the audience expects that the performance begins with something hidden. The reveal, as burlesque's signature moment, exposes more than flesh. Nasty's reveals are often cheeky, thematic or witty, Brooklyn's audacious, purposefully unappealing or playful, while *Bob*'s (though more traditional) uncover deeper bodily truths. As the audience expects the reveal, and perhaps expects that though each reveal might expose the unexpected, the fraud isn't necessarily committed against the audience; rather, the audience and performer, joined in a bawdy politic, play at fraud against greater societal-regulating expectations and normative ideals. Burlesque performance anticipates, as part of its cheeky deceit, which the world outside its community either doesn't know, or doesn't understand what it is up to. As a fraudulent striptease, burlesque doesn't allow for the self-serving satisfaction of its audience; it exposes more of the limits on exposure than it does of the undressed body. Beyond the shared codes between coder/performers and decoder/audience, burlesque stretches parody because of and in what it hides. Focusing on the fraud at play in burlesque allows for an understanding of the politic nature of the art form. That body politic is assembled in pasties, hoots and hollers and it acts together, resisting that which it parodies.

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