

TITS, TEETH & TALENT^{*} :

**THE SHOWGIRL'S BODY AND
WHAT SHE CAN DO WITH IT**

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AF: You know, I have an interesting journey with that show. So I had a private audition and when I came in for our first rehearsal all of the girls were smaller than me, shorter in stature and very tiny and for me I'm kind of curvy girl, you know I'm a real woman as you might say. At first I was a little bit concerned and thought maybe she'd made a mistake, maybe she just didn't realise how I would look next to these other girls so I actually had a conversation with the director about it 'n wanted to make sure, are you sure you want and she said, no no no I like having women up there of all different sizes so the next thing for me was to really get in touch with my own, my own sexuality, my own femininity, my feelings about my body, everything. And everything was coming up for me, so what I started to think about was I know and I love my body, so I, I really started just really working with that so when I was inside of the dances, I actually was not so concerned with you know it's not about how does my body look per se, it's about an energy, this feeling that you're having in your body and the dance moves because they are so sensual and strong feel good so it creates that real sensual and sexual energy inside of yourself so I, what I do, I just really tapped into that and so when I'm dancing I feel sexy, I feel beautiful, I feel strong, desirable, attractive, all of those things. And, it's a very powerful experience. It's also fun too because there's a great sense of humour in a lot of the dances, so it's not like you're taking yourself, you know over the top seriously, you know it's also fun, it's like we're all here to have a good time, so it's been a really extraordinary, wonderful experience.

AC: It's interesting what you were saying about, about the energy you're creating, do you feel that you're connecting with the audience, and how does that work?

AF: Right, you could be creating an energy but only kind of like sitting with that, with yourself and no, absolutely not, I mean, what I love about live performance is the connection with the audience, so with each dance it's, I'm very aware of the connection I want with the

audience, so for example in *Willkommen* all about welcoming, let's have a good time, I'm so happy you're here, so it's feeling the energy in the body, that sexual, sensual energy but sharing it and inviting people to feel it too in their own bodies, I mean one of great things that for me is inspiring other women. I love that. Feeling like you don't have to be, you know in Los Angeles you have that total like Hollywood kind of look, it's like, no, you don't have to look like that look, right? So that's part of what I'm doing up there is wanting to connect with women and empower and inspire other women, so that's a lot of my connection, but my connection too is also a playful one. I like being playful with the audience and I think that that thread is kind of there throughout. There's an awareness of I'm performing for you, and you're in the audience and you're here to have a good time and let's play, so, yeah. There's a lot of that going on.

AC: Is that something that you always feel in control of? The kind of energy, or do you ever feel, that it, that you're not, you know...

AF: It's a very interesting, this question is actually more complex than it seems. Because you cannot fully control an audience I mean, you can't fully like, 'I'm gonna make you pay attention to me'. In fact, you might actually, maybe, maybe that's somebody else's energy and they've harnessed that and perhaps for them. Not for me, though, I'm all about an invitation. So for me it's a continual inviting and I find, that if I have a little bit of an off night, and I'm not fully inside of that and I feel the less connectedness so there's an element of a certain a level of power of how I'm showing up in order to have that interaction, with the audience, definitely. I don't say its fully one hundred per cent of my control, but definitely there's a power there that if you're tapped into it and you're inside of it and you're truly, really your heart needs to be open, you can't be up there just strutting around, you could, I mean, you can, you can be up there strutting around and maybe people enjoy that too, but I find that the more my heart is

open and loving, actually, just truly like loving, we're all one, the more connected, the more attention I feel, the more eyes I feel I'm connecting with, yeah, there's definitely something to that. Yeah.

I think that you have to be careful when you're inside of a show like this that you're, because when your tapping so much into an energy which is very real that you're able to then tuck it away after you leave so that you're not walking around with this excess kind of... It was interesting before I really realised that at the very, you know very adult realisation that how real energy is and how people respond because in the beginning of the show, when I was just you know, I was really I was making an effort like I'm gonna wear all sexy clothes 'cos I really wanna get inside of this, it was really kind of doing this sort of Method Acting thing and I was starting to get all kind of unwanted attention so, I think there is a negative side. I think that when you're very aware that this is for show, this is for fun and this is something very also very private that I'm sharing that when I leave the stage, its going back inside and I'll share that with, you know in private with a person of my choosing but. I had to, I had to recognise that, I had to really, I think that if you, stepping into that energy is very powerful, yeah. It's not a negative, if you're walking around with it, you might get some attention that you might not want, put it that way. I think you wanna be your full self your full radiant self which is encompassing, a whole rainbow of elements, not just your sexuality. I guess. Yeah.

AC: That makes sense. So, is there a difference between the energy that you're talking about and the kind of the empowerment that you're talking about, I mean, how are they different 'cos, it feels like they are both something that come out of this experience, for you.

AF: They are different. The empowerment is when you know how to harness it, the empowerment is knowing, having dominion as we say, right, over your own energy so that

you, so you're in charge. Like, I'm gonna make a choice about when I'm displaying this aspect of my personality.

That's the empowerment. It's, it can, I think that if you, some people have the energy so naturally and they're not even aware, they're walking around with it and it's influencing how they're interacting with people and I would say that that's not empowerment, that's just having the energy but it's not empowered. Yeah, it's empowered when you, when you make a choice.

AC: And so, I'm kind of interested in, if you could talk a bit about your kind of background in dance, if you draw on that now in your dancing, in your burlesque performing and I wonder also if your BA and your MA is anything that kind of you think about now in your current kind of practice?

BVB: Well I'll start with the education stuff because when I started performing I was, I came at burlesque from an angle that a lot of people nowadays preach about not doing, so established performers preach 'don't get onstage to work out your sexuality, do that in your own time, you should be onstage to entertain'. And so, technically that was a bad thing for me to do to start with and also when I started my education was being taught to me almost everyday and so of course it was influencing what I was thinking about and how I was thinking about burlesque. And I really wanted to draw on all the feminist topics that I was covering and reading and I wanted to celebrate my body and the shape that its in and I wanted to not stress about any lumps and bumps and just be proud and sing it loud! Kind of encourage other people to not have hang-ups about their bodies too. So, I was kind of mildly political in my head. I don't think I really put that directly into any of my acts, but I hoped that that would be an indirect inference. And I'm sure there would be other touches from my BA that were coming through in what I was doing with burlesque, it certainly helped me learn how to research things and I learned a lot about semiotics and signs and symbols, so that's probably effected how I put together the visual aspect of an act as well. And then my dance background, I think that its given me a really confident foundation because when I started performing burlesque I wasn't thinking about the actual execution of the act, I was focussing on the theme and the narrative and the content, because I knew I could do the dance stuff, I didn't have to think about it. So, at the basic level, yeah, it gave me confidence, but then beyond that I think naturally there are things that my body does while I perform that I'm not thinking about doing, yet they're things that I was taught years ago. So, I'm very aware of how

I place my hands and when I'm rehearsing I'm looking in the mirror to look at the lines on my body to try and make good shapes, I've got little pet hates for things a lot of people do that I think are ugly because I've had body lines hammered into me probably mostly through majorettes actually, that involved a lot of being in sync with other people I mean we had to lift our knees to a very particular height otherwise it was sloppy.

There's a particular way of doing what I call 'The Showgirl Stance' that's a little bit lazy, so for me 'The Showgirl Stance' is in the legs you have a sort of one back leg that's pretty straight and then you cross the knee of the front leg over the knee of the back leg, so you have one leg in front of the other, the front leg at about two o'clock, if the back leg's at twelve and then the hips are off to the side of the back leg, the hand of the front, the hand on the, no the arm on the side of the front leg is on the hip and the arm on the side of the back leg is in the air in a presentation. The sloppy version is to bend the back leg as well as the front leg and that just looks awkward, it makes the performer look a little nervous. Its confident with the straight leg and just a bit playful, with the back leg bent if doesn't for me, it doesn't hit the right spot, it doesn't look finished. And timing of course, with a dance background, I know where the beat is. I know how to hit the beat, I did tap dance, so I know how to hear a rhythm and make a rhythm, so I never worry about being out of time with the music because I can't dance out of time!

As part of my research, I interview showgirls of all kinds to find out how they produce themselves as showgirls. Hearing them voice their reflections continually challenges me. I encounter emancipated intelligent performers very aware of the process of transformation they undergo to produce the showgirl.

The figure of the showgirl is precarious. Creating a critically engaged context for the showgirl is both a difficult and necessary act of recuperation, following the infamous, polemic essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey. In a single gesture, Mulvey's essay voided the showgirl archetype. It effectively reduced the possibility of actually *seeing* the showgirl. The showgirl was reduced to nothing more than a sign, representing an object for the filmic male protagonist and actual male spectator to enjoy.

Resisting this perpetuation of the showgirl as object, Adrienne L McLean, a film scholar and dancer writes of Rita Hayworth's dancing emphasising the skill with which she dances; Quote 'Hayworth's physical competence as a dancer—the demonstrated ability to employ her talented, trained and disciplined body in the performance and, equally important, enjoyment of difficult and expressive feats—complicates almost all of our assumptions about classical Hollywood cinema's routine ordering of the visual world along the lines of sexual difference.'¹ Unquote. McLean, writing from her position as a dancer observes nuances in Hayworth's dancing that were not visible or notable to other writers, for example, Quote 'Hayworth's very visible legs bulge with the sorts of sinewy

¹ McLean, Adrienne L. *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p.117.

muscles seldom found in pinup photographs'.² Unquote. McLean's subjectivity enabled her to see more clearly.

I would like to emphasise that the showgirl is more than the screen example. The showgirl is produced through particular tropes of self, in a performance context in excessive coded costumes, through which, the audience are given permission to look, enjoy and experience pleasure. The implications of the word depend on the context in which it is used. 'Showgirl' has variously been used to cover a number of differing practices, modes of employment and bodily commodification: singer, dancer, chorus girl, stripper have variously been part her repertoire. The milieu change; she can be seen on large stages of spectacles, in smaller venues in burlesque cabarets or in strip clubs. My emphasis within these roles is the showgirl as a professional with a set of skills and honed abilities. For Andrea Stuart, the showgirl's evolution is part of her construction; her appeal relies on giving the audience what they want and thus is a reflection of the time; Quote 'She is a cipher on to which her audiences have projected profound social anxieties, and a barometer indicating her era's concerns.'³ Unquote. Following Stuart's logic, we must recognise our contemporary showgirl examples: burlesque dancers, strippers, Lady Gaga, Lana Del Rey and Paloma Faith, what is particular about each them? What do their shiny surfaces reflect back at us?

The interview excerpts I quoted earlier reveal how much is done to produce a shiny surface. The perfection of the exterior conceals the labour, so that it is rendered

² Ibid p.114.

³ Andrea Stuart *Showgirls* London: Random House 1996. p.2.

invisible. Doing ‘femininity’ even in the wider, offstage sense is always about concealing the effort, and recognising the labour of feminine construction that produces professional visibility, as Catherin Hakim terms ‘erotic capital’ gives us scope for resisting or at least complicating objectification politics. As McLean says Quote ‘if women’s skills *were* routinely discussed ... then it would paradoxically become much more difficult to justify relegating women to the status of the object.’⁴ Unquote. This process of ‘seeing’ the labour of the body disrupts the body’s status as an object, yet complexly, we see the labour by addressing the materiality of the body, the surface layer.

The showgirl is under renewed critical attack. This time, she is conflated with wider issues of sexualisation. Laurie Penny, the journalist, blogger and author, has written of her time in a burlesque troop whilst at university. In her *après coupe* evaluation of her experience, Penny focuses on the exploitation and sexualisation demands that were placed upon her from the director of her troupe. In any discussion of the erotic performing showgirl we have to be vigilant not to conclude too quickly that bodily display is in itself empowering—it *is* difficult work. What I would like to suggest is that we do not close down the possibilities of the showgirl because of more general fears of sexualisation and objectification. The opportunities for resisting these critiques come from *really looking* at the body, understanding and dealing with what it is telling us and looking for the signs that the showgirl has dominion over her body, her mind, her agency.

⁴ McLean *Being Rita Hayworth* p.114

I mobilise the showgirl figure in my artwork in order to explore, navigate and contest received ideas of women in representation. This has led to a fuller body of research investigating particular instances of the showgirl and her lived experiences. Studying the showgirl closely brought me to reflect on my own mode of viewing and thus throughout my research I ask myself *'How Do I Look?'*

I contend that pleasure is a feminist issue; that owning my own pleasure and claiming it can be a valuable feminist gesture. I love seeing the showgirl as an embodied subject. I love watching showgirls of all kinds perform. I love dancing, watching dancing, I love excess, I love display and shameless nudity, I love make-up. As an artist doing a practice-led PhD I approach research in a particular way, what I can offer the showgirl is the hand of friendship, sisterhood. I use my desire to navigate the performance space of the showgirl, and the critical spaces of thinking. The continuum between showgirl and artist, and sometimes, I think researcher, is not that far. All involve particular constructions of self, performance, visibility and persuasion: Tits n Teeth. That's what they call this posture.

* With thanks to Jeni Ferguson, my dancing teacher who wished me 'Tits and Teeth' before I went on stage for the Constance Grant Dance Centre shows at the City Hall, Sheffield. She credits Judith Sylvester, the dancing school's Principal, as introducing the phrase to her.