

A Performance-Paper

The Voice of the Showgirl

BY ALISON J CARR

Introduction

My performance derives from a script composed of real first-person accounts I have collected from a range of sources across time-periods; from published memoirs, oral history archives, personal and found interviews and also Twitter. A narrative of personal experiences and insights will emerge as the thoughts join together and subtly suggest different time-periods and subjectivities. Uniting the voices is their occupation; all ‘showgirls’; from the Parisian music hall to Las Vegas revue to contemporary burlesque. The agency of the performer, our new viewing contexts and a re-consideration of glamour form my ongoing research strands, which I investigate through theory and historical texts, and the generation of new artworks most often taking the form of photographs, video and live art. This paper is an experiment; a way for me to platform the voice of the showgirl, to see if the complexities of her experience tell us about the role of the object of desire. This performance-paper is a celebration of the women whose lives I explore, a homage to their oeuvre, a thank you to some of the most exciting women I have met.

Script

Constance Tomkinson¹

We arrived at a door in a narrow street. It was not imposing, but to us it looked formidable. It was the stage door of the Folies Bergère. Pat and Sally, our best dancers were sent in first to find Miss Bluebell. She was responsible for booking the chorus—Les Girls.

Bluebell was no shy, retiring flower, but a hardy Parisian perennial. She was a capable woman, and under that fragile exterior lurked a will of iron. ‘Do you want a job?’ Bluebell was speaking to me. ‘Yes,’ I said, somewhat taken aback. I had given up all hope. She gave me a careful appraising look from my open-toed sandals to my top curl. ‘When can you start?’

‘Oh-er, any time.’

¹ Tomkinson, Constance. *Les Girls*. London: Michael Joseph, 1956.

‘The pay is 550 francs a week.’ There was nonsense about Bluebell. ‘Come back in fifteen minutes and I’ll take you out front to watch the show. You can go on tomorrow in the easy numbers.’

The Folies Bergère is one of the best shows in Europe. The cast includes some of the cream of Continental revue artists, and as a spectacle, with its beautiful sets and lavish costumes, it has no equal. The show changes every year, but the pattern remains the same.

As a spectator, I saw it only once, and then I was concentrating on Les Girls. After that, I merely had a kaleidoscopic impression of entrances and exits; whom we followed and who followed us. I might catch the last few seconds of some Gallic skit, my appreciation of which was marred by feverish efforts to do up the snaps on my costume, or as I left the stage, making equally feverish efforts to undo them, I would bump into the act that followed.

‘I adore the Can-Can,’ said a friend of mine. ‘It’s so gay!’

‘Gay,’ I said bitterly. ‘It’s murder!’

A strong instinct of self-preservation had taught me ways of faking this devastating dance. My star turn (carefully selected by me) had been the jumping splits. It may seem an odd choice, but there I saw opportunities for faking not possible in the exhausting turns holding an ankle in one hand, or in the killing double kicks and terrifying cartwheels. In the splits I had perfected the technique of going half-way down and then with a great flourish throwing my billowing petticoats around so that no one could see the gap between me and the floor.

Jillian Kabat²

Bring your rehearsal clothes and that is all we had to go. We would go down to this dusty little, in the centre of London, rehearsal studios and you would line up and this sort of thing, but the lady, Miss Bluebell, who hired all the girls called the ‘Bluebell Girls’, she looked at me when I walked in and said, where do you want to go, which I was really thrilled. I hadn’t even got my tights off yet and I just said I want to go to Las Vegas, but would you give me a day to think about it? I really thought it was going to be a longer process than just saying, where do you want to go, because I was working in town, in London at the moment. That was obviously, a good enough recommendation for her. The process the, I called my parents and said what do you think about me going to Las Vegas. I was 22 and they said, go, go for it. So I came back the next day, signed the contract and I had three weeks to get ready. Got rid of my little apartment. We were allowed to bring one suitcase, 44 pounds and I didn’t have much more anyway in those days. Have case will travel. We all met at the big train station and were shipped on the train to Paris and that’s where I met the other 24 girls and we rehearsed for three weeks in Paris which was long days from eight in the morning til eight at night or whenever they wanted. There was no such thing as a union for kids like us, but we all got to know each other and there were girls already in Paris and we met up with girls from other shows, Paris and Tokyo and that’s how Miss Bluebell

² Oral History interview, UNLV archive.

put a line of girls together. So the dancers, we worked very hard with Donn Arden, who did most of the big shows here. I remember long days and went home at night to the little apartments in Paris. We didn't, my roommate and I certainly didn't go anywhere. We were too tired. We were going over the steps or getting ready for the next day. We were given rehearsal pay, I mean, I went with nothing and my roommate, I remember, had a purse full of money and I thought she was very rich. She was buying food for me until I got, everyday we got a little bit of rehearsal money. Very different days, but I never remember being afraid of it, not having any money or anything because I felt I was so fortunate to get this job. Three weeks later, we all go on a charter and everybody, the acts, the costumes. During those three weeks, we were fitted for the beautiful costumes that we wore in those days and that was another wonderful experience. The girls that already knew Paris took us in the little taxis, up the stairs, these little French women met us and I remember I walked in the room and this lady put her hands right on my breasts and that was it. That was the fitting. She took one look at me. This is how experienced these women were. She knew my size just by feeling. She wrote down little comments, okay, go to the next room and there were seven of these exquisite costumes. I had one fitting after that. We were taken again back and they fit like a glove. I couldn't get over it. This is how good these women were, feathers and plumes and zips in those days, no spandex. These little ladies, all in black, were just incredible. Everything came on the plane with us. We never, until dress rehearsal, get into those costumes. I remember that, how just blind faith, okay, everything will fit and it did. It was amazing. The hairdressers, I must tell you about, they gave us hairpins. We had to wear a hairpiece, that was the look of the Bluebell girl and the headdress weighed anything from five pounds to eight pounds. You pulled your own hair up into a ponytail and then wrapped it around. They wanted to have this big, tall, it gave more height. I was the shortest in the show. They went from my height, five foot seven to six foot two, so they wanted me to look a little bit taller and certainly did with that. But, we had to take these huge hairpins and stick it into the hairpiece to keep on these headdresses on. I have a lot of hair, but the girls with thin hair used to have bleeding scalps until you got used to it. It's amazing what you get used to.

Jo Weldon³

My stripping career occurred during the era between burlesque and pole dancing. Because I started working the clubs in 1980, there was still a few dancers who had done burlesque in the fifties and sixties around. Some of them were still dancing but most of them were not interested in the full-nude table-dance format of those clubs (and were sometimes quite willing to air their contempt for us for doing it); however, they could still be found working in the clubs as costumers or managers, wearing fabulous hair and nails and giving us great advice about showmanship and terrible advice about how to make money. I listened to them with delight, loving their stories of diamonds and minks and martinis, even when they insulted us for our spandex and cocaine. In my pragmatic way I understood that my job was essentially a service and sales job, albeit one that allowed for a certain kind of self-

³ Weldon, Jo. *The Burlesque Handbook*. NY, USA: itbooks, Harpercollins, 2010.

expression, and I studied books on maximizing sales as well as studying dance and the quotes of Mae West and Isadora Duncan.

Working in strip joints was high in drama but lacking in theater. Flush with cash yet yearning to express myself in some less commercial fashion, I performed at a Dylan Thomas level of drunkenness at punk poetry readings, where I inevitably took off my clothes rather than supplying footnotes. Managers of those bars often asked me not to strip in their places because they didn't have permits for it, but I kept thinking I was somehow going to tap into the spirit of Yoko Ono having her clothes cut off (which I later paid tribute to on a strip-joint stage in a way I'm sure would have been completely unrecognizable to Yoko) and of the Lady Godiva, and I kept taking off my clothes even when I wasn't getting paid. In fact, it meant more to me when I wasn't being paid—it meant a lot to me to be inappropriate, and in a strip joint, stripping is appropriate behavior.

I had loved the character of punk in the seventies, when we looked at pictures of Bettie Page and wondered what her story might be (which was shortly revealed to us in Greg Theakston's *The Betty Pages*). In the 1980s, while doing poetry readings and ingesting horrifying amounts of contraband, I enjoyed hanging out at a huge elaborate bar called Club Rio, where the Cramps played and where I saw performance art and drag by John Sex, Jayne County, Phoebe Legere, and RuPaul, who summed it up with a shrug: "We're born naked. After that, it's all drag." I identified with this because we strip-joint strippers called our spandex costumes, fake tans, teased hair, and colored contacts drag because we had to drag it with us to go to work and wouldn't have dreamed of wearing it anywhere else. But it was every kind of drag.

Ruby Boukabou⁴

I perform in a cabaret and burlesque tap-dancing and doing numbers normally with tap but also with physical theatre and performance art and sometimes straight cabaret also. I perform as a... I work as a performer and I also work as a journalist so its two very separate identities. As a performer, I've been working in cabaret on and off since about 2000. The reason I work in cabaret and in burlesque is because when I started tap dancing and started wanting to perform it was what was happening at the time, what was popular so at the time it was cabaret, so if I wanted to do a show, it was easy to do a show in a cabaret because it was rather than doing a whole show or a whole musical where you have to do the same thing every night, I wasn't really interested in those kind of auditions or doing someone else's show, but with cabaret I can say I wanna come and do a tap dance, I can do a 3-minute piece, I could try something out, I could just jump up and tap dance on the bar, and that was fine, that was good, that fitted in to this format. And then burlesque started becoming popular, so I continued tap-dancing but in a burlesque setting so there were had to be clothes that were taken off at some point, so it was just changing the milieu, the context of what I was already doing and I remember once saying to, there was a girl-run of burlesque or a lesbian-run or so burlesque in Sydney called Girlesque and I remember

⁴ Personal interview August 2010.

saying to them ‘so do we have to take our tops off, do we have to take some clothes off?’ and she said, ‘ah, not everything, but if not then I’ll probably run onstage at the end and deck you’, (laughs) so because its, because there is a skill which is tap-dancing, lots of people appreciate it because it stands apart from it and it means, you don’t have to, your not, obliged to be as sexual or as overtly, it doesn’t have to even if its in a strip, burlesque-strip setting you can get away with being softer because you have skill. And so I’ve found also that sometimes... if you want to you can talk about sexuality and it can have that kind of element in it, but it doesn’t always have to but then sometimes in burlesque you have to because if I mean I’m doing a strict burlesque show they’re not going to programme you if there isn’t some type of a strip. So sometimes I find that’s a bit limiting or a bit, why do we, sometimes its fun, but why do you always have to... you can talk about lots of other things not just about the body in a way where both are coming off, so often when, with the partners I work with when there are clothes coming off, when it’s a strip its not about the strip, like the girl I’m working with at the moment is Marianne Sadner and she’s very anti that also she said oh, so its... we... there’s one thing that we have a tap stand off and so I’m a very prim and proper girl waiting at a bus stop and she’s likes funky DJ and then we have this kind of fight and so when we’re pulling off our clothes so that we can kind of, getting into this kind of boxing kind of match and then we start throwing out clothes back at each other but its kind of in a fight scene so you don’t even know that its not... ah now I’m taking off to look sexy, no we’re taking off and that we’re throwing them at each other, and then as we do that we end up putting them back on and so we change outfits and at the end I’m dressed as she is and she’s dressed as I am. Or, you know there’s always in it for me, if its about clothes having to come off in that setting then its all... it’s not about... it’s always a play with something that it’s important to play with the ideas behind... otherwise it’s not at all, its completely different, different art. Another number that I do, that I’ve been doing which is the one that I’ll do when you come to see me is espionage, sort of so its still fairly light. It’s an espion who’s looking for ... she gets a call, the person is in the audience, her... victim and so... that through seduction she gets him on stage and she does this kind of striptease and then pulls out a handcuff but its all very sexy and so he lets her and it’s an audience member and so she strips into a James Bond kind of girl and tap-dances for him, but at the same time ties him up and takes him on stage and kills him. I come back with the gun and his knickers (laughs), but yeah, so it’s a using performance and using the body as a as a way to have fun and I think the difference between a straight strip show and a burlesque show isn’t always what it should be, is that you’re having fun with the idea or you’re playing with them, you’re playing with a character and its not to it’s not a titillation, it’s not to tease, its to have fun with an idea, and its to use the body and use sexuality to have fun with an audience, which is a female audience, or male audience but its not a titillation. Its you’re on the same team as them, it’s not you versus them its you and them having a laugh, about some ideas, I guess there’s a whole load of different versions of it.

Kate⁵

I think its strange I think my living sort of situation, because I live on my own, I don't have... and when you're growing up your parents are constantly giving you sort of making like oh well done (clapping) and everything's great but when you're on your own you get little pats on the back from friends and stuff but there are times when you actually, I need someone to go 'fucking well done', big round of applause and cheers and brilliant. I never thought that would come from taking my clothes off, you know, but its, kind of its kind of just me and I... I get pleasure from doing something creative and I get pleasure in the fact that this is something totally new and its not anything I've done before, and in a weird way, when I first thought I was going to do a show, I thought that would be it and I would have my fix and it'd be done and that's and there'd be something else to do. But actually, what the beauty of what burlesque is is the fact it gives you so much scope to develop and actually change and be a bit of a chameleon even though it is yourself, and responding to different music or words or you know depending on what it is that progression takes you. So, the pleasure is the fact that I just need to do it now really and it just makes me feel like I'm achieving something. And actually, whenever you achieve something that's a celebration right there. You know, I've achieved it, I'm allowed a glass of champers, thank you very much. So. Also, when I first saw the live show, I was celebrating the fact that these women were so comfortable you know, with their own bodies. That, if I, if someone's in the audience and they look at me and go 'wow' you know, 'women are great', then that's their celebration too and if I've done that then that's a bonus, in a way, because I've managed to extend to the audience. But it's the same with my paintings, if I've done something and its, I think its aesthetically lovely, if someone else responds to it and they get a really deep sort of amazing feeling then I've not dictated that to them, I've not said you have to feel this way, they've just taken it. And so that's, I think that's part of the creative process and that's why I do see burlesque as potentially as an art form, which is to be celebrated. Yeah.

@sashafreeman⁶

Is tired from ballet class. Maybe an Earl of Sandwich brownie ice cream sandwich will help. Oh man, my room is such a mess... Looks like it's time for a late night cleaning session, with the help of Mr. Wine and Mrs. TV. Score! I just found a bag of steam veggies I forgot I bought... Dinner is going to be yummy in my tummy. Fear of the unknown; the cornerstone of faith. Tackling that giant paper-filled drawer that we all have... Bills, receipts, invoices, junk... Ugh. Finished watching 'Chéri.' Horribly depressing with a terribly abrupt ending. Brilliant. But I can't go to bed right after that :(Two shows at Jubilee. Please no. Rolled my ankle and went splat on stage for the first time in my almost two years at Jubilee. Not awesome. My twisted ankle hurts. And it also happens to be my clutch foot on a 30 minute commute :(Downloaded FaceTime for my computer... awesome! I'm not at Jubilee right now because I'm drinking margaritas, waiting on fajitas, and eating this. I ran over my own foot with a very large set piece today. Stupid Powder cart. There is now a gash with

⁵ Personal interview January 2011.

⁶ Alexandra Freeman 'tweets' on Twitter 2010-11 <http://twitter.com/#!/sashafreeman>

bruising. Can't fall asleep. And after the doctor told me I could go back to work tomorrow he filled out paperwork that doesn't release me until Monday. Really? #badweek I'm pretty sure no one likes it when a doctor says, "That's your fault," or "Well that's not my fault." Very professional. Red Bull in one hand, water and cigarette in the other. New low. Attempting to beat the sunrise home. I might make it. At Diddy's table at Marquis. No really. No. Really. Eff you Sleepytime Tea. Vodka works just fine. Been having a lot of arrhythmias lately. Not my favorite feeling. Spring fashion this year is so blah, I may very well die of boredom. I still feel like a little kid when I go through the car wash... Now sitting in the sun while they do the interior :) Feeling like a lazy person for not going to the Cirque audition. Moping a little. Okay. Jubilee time. I think Girl Scout cookies arrived today. If that's the case, I may not be able to fit into my costumes. #fat #ohnoes I thought that Flamingo would be ok to take considering there's no one on the freeway. #wrong Jubileers - There is NO parking on 5. Don't even try. My phone says that it has all 5 bars of 3G. That is such a lie. #ATTfail. I swear I was in a good mood when I got here. Maybe I left it in the car. Glad I left early... This stop-and-go traffic is #gross. Clutch + stilettos = :(Okay, so the traffic was due to an SUV upside down on the freeway. #holysshit \$90 on rhinestones. Kill me. Oh, and the WellNurse told me that my body fat percentage is too high. Umm... The valets at Forum Shoppes recognize me. Bad sign? Walgreens, Yogurtland, Fresh and Easy, then it's chili time!! Okay, the Valentine's section of Walgreens is waaaay too much fun. Where the hell did my day off go? Tummy full of Chipotle. Leaving for work soon... Not exactly looking forward to two shows at Jub. Day off was not refreshing. Getting to watch Jubilee on Thursday really made me appreciate this amazing show I am a part of each night. Everyone looked beautiful! Big day tomorrow... Up early for a cheerleading gig. Wearing Cowboys' garb for a Steelers/Packers Superbowl game. #gofigure I think my sternum just popped. That was weird. Paul Mitchell casting. Fingers crossed! Sometimes it makes me sad to be at work. Feeling awful. #yuck I love driving to work on Sunday: there's no one on the road... It's now more than \$40 to fill up my tank :(#thingsthatsuck. First short-nude rehearsal: annd... Go. How am I going to get through the rest of this day? #toomuchwork I got the baby in the Mardi Gras King Cake!... What does that mean?! I love getting donation requests from my Fine Arts Alumni board. We're artists. We can barely afford to pay our own bills. Nice try, though. Saw #Burlesque. It was fabulous!! So many costume ideas... Making Pillsbury "Cinnabon" Cinnamon Rolls. They cannot possibly cook fast enough. I'm going to need more icing... Four cinnamon rolls in my tummy... Bedtime! :) #fact 6AM gig this morning. Waking up from nap. Missed a text about a casting that started and ended while I was sleeping. #annoyed This just in -- :(To deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human. My iPad says there's 1,072 minutes remaining to download one track of Adele's new album. I'm guessing my connection speed isn't stellar. Adele is really speaking to me right now...

Maria Slowinska⁷

The choice of still being glamorous and I don't know, polite and all of that, I like having that choice, I find that very appealing, only I guess because I don't have to have it all the time but I can actually choose when I want that and when I don't, and I think its also self-fashioning, like how do you want to see yourself. I like to look at other people, I like to look at myself that way. Its also I think, to be honest, in a way, a concept of making yourself un... not vulnerable, really, like the more perfect you are from the outside, the less you feel maybe, insecure or weak, or subject to critique, or also to inappropriate approaches which is interesting because I find although the theory is that glamour is for a woman that they are objectified they might be, I don't know, but, its still like the more glamorous you are when you go out and you're really glamorous in the sense that you're well dressed and your shirt skirt is not to short, or whatever but your really like this elegant glamorous woman or the idea of her, or the woman that comes to my mind when I think about glamorous women, no guy will probably approach you, they will look at you but no-one will talk to you, 'cos they'll be like oh (sucks in air) you know she seems cold or unapproachable or something, so I think glamour is also a strategy of self- not preservation, what's the word... like safety, for you safety.

⁷ Personal interview August 2010.