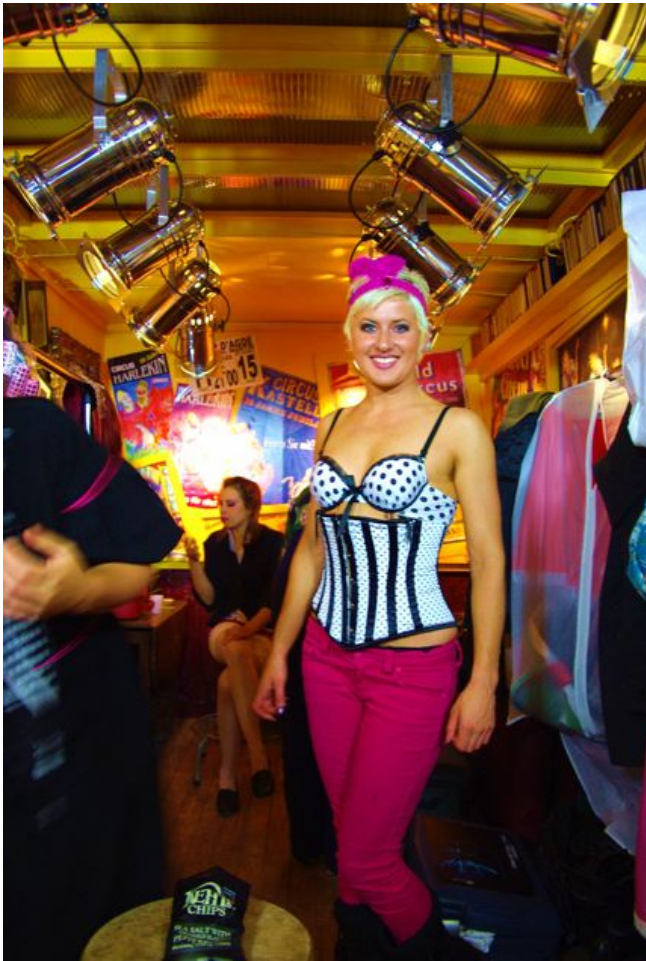


Zahra Stardust at the Amsterdam Burlesque Festival

Written by zahra stardust

Tuesday, 12 January 2010 10:53



The end of last year was somewhat of a whirlwind for me! After shooting my first explicit nudes with Tony Hunter on the Gold Coast, winning the Open Pairs with Stacey at the Australian Pole Championships in Melbourne, filming our new Sex Party ad with Fiona Patten, life modelling at Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School Tokyo, and teaching workshops at Lu Nagata's famous studio Art Flow Tokyo, I had the incredible privilege of featuring at the Amsterdam Burlesque Festival!

In the famous Casablanca Circus Tent, a small void of illusion, carnival, social-inversion and anti-hierarchical splendour, I joined other artists from the UK, Sweden, Germany and Seattle, celebrating an art form that has been renowned for its anti-establishment disdain for social rules and cultural convention, and its plight to transgress patriarchal, social and governmental regulation of female sexuality.

From its historical flourish during the Long Depression of the 1870-90s and Great Depression of the 1920s- 30s, burlesque emerged as a mode of erotic performance that was profoundly political. The lavish decadence and extravagance of burlesque in a time of extreme poverty and disillusion acted to mimic, mock, ridicule and show up bourgeois. In the prohibitionist era of the 1920s with its restrictive social mores about nudity and 'vice', the act of taking one's clothes off in public was highly political. Burlesque performances were often executed with bawdy humour, sexual innuendo and sharp edged wit to challenge conventions about decency, equality, and

regulation. Certainly, my favourite thing about burlesque is its ability to overthrow, undermine, resist and contest the representation of female sexuality and her body in society.

I had the pleasure in Amsterdam of performing a kind of drag king trapeze act. I emerged a cocky, arrogant man singing to the lustful and suave tunes of Leonard Cohen with a cigar, top hat, cane, suspenders and very fetching caramel handlebar moustache! I winked and flirted my way about stage until my music suddenly burst into Christina Aguilera, promptly causing me to rip of my suit pants (thank you, Velcro!) and my other masculine paraphernalia. But when I went to remove off my moustache, I decided that I enjoyed being a frilly, corseted, stockinged, shimmering dame complete with hairy armpits and a luscious tash (it was Movember, after all!) And when I proceeded to my trapeze, rose stem in mouth, pink rose petals falling from my blouse as I hung above the audience, of course it was just my luck that my fanny tickler stayed intact while my pasties fell slowly to the floor, my breasts thus queering the performance even further (I had in fact, been introduced to the stage as male!).

For someone who advocates loudly to end the plethora of rules, expectations and stigmas that continue to oppress the female body and her sexuality (including how she appears and behaves) I have certainly had my fair share of occupational mishaps that have, remarkably, only served to further reinforce my point. Only for me would my pasties miraculously fall off during the middle of a specifically no-nudity show (but then, why was it ok for the male performers to expose their nipples but not mine?). Only for me would my shoe accidentally fall off during the Miss Pole Dance Australia heats in which competitors were required to wear high heels (a rule I had protested vehemently against!). And only I would be enjoying an R Rated show so much that I completely forgot to take off my g string! (Didn't I mention people should stop regulating female sexual display?)

Performing in Amsterdam reiterated for me the ways in which the stage has long been and can still be a catalyst for social revolution and critique. Performance can expose and challenge normative ideas about gender, class, beauty, the 'acceptable' and the 'grotesque.' On my trip not only was I able to meet other activists, lovers and artists interested in spreading love around the world from upside down, and creating a new iconography through which to express and celebrate our perversities, idiosyncrasies, hopes and desires, but I was also able to explore the delights of Amsterdam's iconic red light district and sex museum. The enormous dildos, intricate vibrators and other wonderful toys unashamedly displayed in shop front windows (next to

H+M

and other mainstream fashion outlets) only served to remind me of Australia's political conservatism when it comes to sexuality, where one might only see a discreetly titled doorway and a narrow flight of stairs, where there remain state prohibitions on selling X rated material, where abortion remains in the Crimes Act, where children receive inadequate sex education,

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and where the government proposes to filter access to the internet.

It is sometimes easy to forget that we live in a cosy little bubble outside which there remains such fear and stigma about eroticism, sex and gender. If you care about these issues, if you have ever wanted to pour icing all over your body, paint yourself in glow paint, bath in a giant champagne class or take your clothes off to Beethoven without fear of stigma or ridicule, then get involved with the Australian Sex Party!