

## Friedberg Report

Feather boas, high heels, red lipstick, and sly critiques of patriarchal power: these are the ingredients of neo-burlesque performance. Thanks to the support of the Marguerite W. Friedberg Memorial Travel Fellowship, I spent many Parisian nights in the company of neo-burlesque performers who use their artistry and humor to create feminist entertainment. This genre of performance seeks to refashion the codes of classic burlesque (think Belle Époque Paris and the *Moulin Rouge*) with a new, radical point of view. At a typical neo-burlesque show, the audience—the majority of whom are women and many of whom identify as queer—watches a diverse set of performers challenge normative standards of beauty and traditional gender roles. For example,



*Les Sweet Simones*

*Les Sweet Simones*, a troupe of women whose show I watched at a theater inside a public library, did a number using props such as pots, pans, and vacuum cleaners to caricature old-fashioned depictions of women as desexualized housewives. During the course of my year abroad with *Hamilton* in France, I had the opportunity to interview different burlesque performers and ask

about the political impact of their art. How does neo-burlesque create a space for intersectional feminism? How do performers express their unique points of view in their acts, and what impact does their artwork have on their everyday lives? I was also interested in the genealogy of neo-burlesque; in America, when we talk about “burlesque,” we often think of famous French venues like the *Moulin Rouge* or *Le Chat Noir*. Do French people think of burlesque similarly, as a uniquely French and Parisian genre? To answer these questions, I

attended around two dozen burlesque shows and interviewed performers over coffee (and wine, of course) to learn more about their fascinating world.

One of the first shows I attended took place at *La Nouvelle Seine*, a theater below-deck on a boat in the Seine near Notre Dame. There, I was able to meet members of the *Cabaret Burlesque* and attend several of their ever-changing, twice-a-week shows. I became friends with Charly, a burlesque performer whose artistry helped her develop a more positive relationship with her



Me with performers from the *Cabaret Burlesque*

body. Charly sees neo-burlesque performance as an opportunity to provide “a moment to breathe” to her audiences: while she is on stage, she is not thinking about being too fat or too old; rather, she puts her “imperfect, human” body on display, and asserts herself as sexy and desirable. She talked to me about the confidence she feels when performing, particularly among audiences of other women, where the atmosphere is light-hearted and supportive. Audiences clap and cheer at her every gesture and eyebrow-raise; in neo-burlesque, performers like Charly are not seeking to objectify themselves for the male gaze, but to celebrate their bodies and sexualities in a place where the emphasis is on fun, not on conforming to narrow standards of beauty and womanhood. Interestingly, at the *Cabaret Burlesque* where Charly often performs, they advertise their shows as “American-style entertainment,” and one of the performers asserted that “*le burlesque vient des États-Unis*”: burlesque comes from the United States! Despite burlesque’s roots in nineteenth century Parisian cabarets and British music halls, many of the burlesque performers who I talked to in Paris referred to it as an American art. I learned that neo-burlesque actually started in New York in the mid-1990s, when sex-positive

feminists sought to combine feminist performance art with the historically subversive genre of burlesque. Thus, even though Americans often think of “classic burlesque” as synonymous with the legendary Parisian cabarets where it was performed, French neo-burlesque artists see themselves as having more in common with artists from New York than with dancers at the *Moulin Rouge*. That being said, many still assert their French identity; one performer who I interviewed, Cherry, was quick to distinguish Parisian burlesque as emphasizing the “tease” of “striptease,” and categorized American burlesque as too objectifying. Although I would contest this generalization, Cherry was not the only French performer to hold this view, and I think it represents a sort of nationalist pride in light of the Americanization that many performers face—it is not unusual for shows to feature American music or English-language dialogue in order to appeal to the many tourists who visit Paris.



*La Big Bertha*

Many European neo-burlesque performances feature acts by drag queens. Although in America, drag shows often take place in gay bars, in Paris, much of the drag scene occurs as part of neo-burlesque performance. One drag queen who I met, La Big Bertha, even runs a performance series with his best friend, Charly—the burlesque performer from the *Cabaret Burlesque*. Charly introduced the two of us, and I was able to ask Bertha about ways in which his art incorporates his queer identity. Bertha explained that his style of drag, which mixes elements of femininity and masculinity (for example, he puts glitter in his beard) serves to highlight the artifice of gender performance and challenge audiences to examine how we gender bodies in our everyday lives. Bertha also uses drag to combat what he calls

“*grossophobie*,” (“fat-phobia”); for example, in one number, he strips out of his dress and corset to reveal his near-naked body on stage, encouraging audiences to see the beauty in different types of bodies. Another drag performer I met, Mika, who identifies as gender non-binary, uses drag and neo-burlesque performance to highlight racism that they experience living in France as a person of color. In one number, Mika dresses as the Virgin Mary, calling to mind France’s Catholic history, but holds a sign that says



Mika

“Le Queer Terroriste,” referencing the ways in which French people racialize and stereotype their body. For Mika, not only does neo-burlesque performance provide a venue to challenge the bigotry that they experience in their everyday life, but it also allows them to practice loving and celebrating a body that French society often explicitly and implicitly condemns.

The time that I spent in Paris going to burlesque shows and meeting artists helped me understand the power of this genre of performance. Burlesque is a tool of empowerment: performers and audiences alike get to experience a space where different bodies and sexualities are applauded, and where artists can engage with subjects as complex as misogyny, racism, and homophobia in comical yet critical ways. At a neo-burlesque show, you will meet mothers, survivors, queer people, and other diverse performers who take to the stage and undress not only their clothing but also the bigotry and challenges they face in their everyday lives. It is an international art; burlesque was born in the Parisian cabaret, but resurrected in New York only to travel back across the ocean to French stages. I am incredibly grateful to Dr. Friedberg and to Williams College for supporting my research, which became the foundation of my Senior

Honors Thesis. The community of people who I met taught me about one of today's most entrancing—and most radical—forms of art, and I am excited to continue learning about their work.



a particularly “American” performance