

A WINK AND A SMILE

A documentary by Deirdre Timmons

90 minutes, color, 2008



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SYNOPSIS

An intoxicating mix of private yearnings and public spectacle, the feature length documentary *A Wink and a Smile* exposes more than the human body by putting gender, power, sexuality and social identity under the glittery spotlight, as it follows the lives of ten "ordinary" women who do something extraordinary - learn the art burlesque dancing and striptease.

Students of Seattle's Academy of Burlesque have just six weeks to peel and reveal their hidden talents with little more than a tassel and a twirl. Seasoned burlesque divas strut on stage in their own entertaining, satirical and beautiful performances to illustrate the candid and often hilarious lectures by the Academy's headmistress, Miss Indigo Blue.

As director Deirdre Timmons draws back the velvet curtain providing a rare glimpse into the intimate experience, audiences watch with glee as Miss Indigo's budding divas learn to shimmy, shake, bump and grind their way into our hearts. Through their adventures, we see how a homemaker, a doctor, an opera singer, a taxidermist, a college student and five other women join the American cultural revival of burlesque, as it moves from fringe fascination to mainstream obsession, engaging a world where performance art and showgirl spectacle, music, theater and sensuality crash into over-the-top glamour - a world where many want to go, but very few dare.

BIOS

DIERDRE TIMMONS, Writer/Director

Delighting in the juxtaposition of light and dark themes, musicals, comedy, and true stories that enlighten, educate and entertain, Deirdre Timmons made her directorial debut with the feature-length documentary, *A Wink and a Smile*. Timmons has been an award-winning journalist for the past 15 years in Seattle. She now writes, directs, edits and produces full-time for the company she founded in 2007, Golden Echo Films.

PETER WAWERU, Director of Photography

Combining the skills of a photographer and an artist, Peter Waweru's cinematic abilities guarantee that no matter what he's shooting, he captures visual poetry in each shot. Waweru began his career as a photojournalist covering breaking news and feature stories in East and Central Africa. He was the director of photography for *A Wink and a Smile* and numerous short films. Waweru specializes in photography, cinematography, graphic design and editing for Golden Echo.

JACK TIMMONS, Producer

Jack Timmons hails from a background in aerospace and high-tech. As a director at Microsoft, Timmons spearheaded new product developments and boasts business acumen that is as flexible as it is solid. He recently completed the Producing Program at UCLA after producing *A Wink and a Smile*. Timmons handles business development and producing for Golden Echo.

MISS INDIGO BLUE, Headmistress, Academy of Burlesque (Seattle)

It could be the elephant trunk attached to her crotch, or the dozens of blown up latex gloves surrounding her torso, but you just know that sultry bombshell on stage isn't your uncle's burlesque dancer. She's Miss Indigo Blue -- and get ready, because she's one comely coquette that will leave you panting for more.

Sexy, funny, irreverent and ingeniously clever, Miss Indigo Blue flirts with the edgy, exotic and erotic fringes of burlesque. Evoking the elegant tease of legend Gypsy Rose Lee, and inspired by the brilliant comic wit of Miss Exotic World 2006 Julie Atlas Muz, Miss Indigo is more than just a great practitioner of the ol' bump and grind; she enlivens her performances with a heady blend of brainy and bawdy that makes audience's mouths water, as their minds whirl.

For the last twelve years, this “neo-burlesque” entertainer has titillated crowds across the world with her wild tassel-twirling techniques and smart, sexy, and funny skits. With a strong dance and theater background and extensive experience as a stripper, Miss Indigo Blue brings sensuality, musicality, eroticism, and humor to her carefully crafted routines. Miss Indigo is known for her creative and hilarious surprises, erotic dance skills, detailed and authentic retro 1930's-1960's costuming, and naughty reduxes of popular characters like Holly Golightly, Carmen Miranda and Wonder Woman.

Miss Indigo has performed across the globe, most recently Stockholm, Shanghai, Lisbon, Dublin, London, and Amsterdam. She has a national following, having taught and performed in New York, Chicago, Denver, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Miss Indigo is a three-time award winner at the annual Miss Exotic World competition. In 2008 she was selected by Heeb Magazine for the “Heeb 100”, won “Sexiest Eyes” at the New York Burlesque Festival, and starred in the documentary film “A Wink And A Smile” about her Academy of Burlesque. Seattle's burlesque stalwart, Miss Indigo is one of the most sought after performers in the nation and currently performs as a soloist, as well as in Swedish Housewife Productions, with Lily Verlaine and Jasper McCann Presents, and with the Atomic Bombshells.

Miss Indigo Blue is also the President and Chief Twirling Officer of TwirlyGirl Pasties, the founder and President of the BurlyCon convention, and the co-Director of Education at the Burlesque Hall of Fame. Miss Indigo Blue is based in Seattle, WA.

“Delicious”
–*Seattle Weekly*

“Fierce diva”
–*Village Voice*

“Obscenely comedic”
–*Heeb Magazine*

CREDITS

Director: Deirdre Allen Timmons

Directors of Photography: Peter Waweru, Marie Joëlle Rizk

Producers: Jack Timmons, Deirdre Allen Timmons

Associate Producer: Abigail Carter

Editors: Deirdre Allen Timmons, Peter Waweru

Starring: Miss Indigo Blue, The Shanghai Pearl

Featured Performers: Miss Indigo Blue, The Shanghai Pearl, Tamara the Trapeze Lady, The Swedish Housewife, Waxie Moon, Vienna le Rouge, Lily Verlaine, Kitten la Rue, Inga Ingénue, Ernie von Schmaltz, Ultra

The Students: Diane Bruch, Casey Ellison, Janie Hanson, Megan Keller, Amy Klar, Vicky R. Moczi, Christi Jo Petrucelli, Sara Robinson, Rachel Shimp, Tami Veralund

Shadow Dancing: Babbette la Fave

Also Featuring: Tana the Tattooed Lady, Wes Brockbank, Daisy Cutter, Lydia Mclane, Belle Cozette, Fanny in Flames, Ruby Mimosa, Lucky Penny, Kaleb Hagan-Kerr, Evilin Saint Claire

Camera Operators: Christian Hansen, Brian McMillan, Suzie Rudloff

Sound Recordist: Matt Sheldon

Additional Sound Recording: Dennis Schweitzer

Color Correction and Sound Sweetening: Brin Addison, Hype Schwartz Productions

Production Assistant: KC Lynch

Assistant to the Director: Elena Windgate

Still Photography: Marcus Donner

Live Musical Performances: Orchestra l'Pow! Featuring The Swedish Housewife on vocals, Kaleb Hagan-Kerr on vocals, Loren Dutton on guitar, Dain Hudson on drums, Tim Sharpe on bass, Josh Clifford on sax

SELECTED PRAISE

“Highly entertaining, eye-opening ...an old-fashioned postmodern hoot!”
–Ronnie Scheib, *Variety*

““[A] quest for sexy self-discovery.” –Nathan Lee, *The New York Times*

“Electrifying moments... artful struts with subversive wit...retro fantasies and gender-bending impersonations are as expressive and deliberate as performance art through the ages.”
–Sheri Linden, *Los Angeles Times*

“[Four stars]! Revealing & genuinely erotic!” –Kam Williams, *Newsblaze.com*

“Lighthearted and humorous, but also an affirmation of the physical and emotional liberation the women realize as they explore and reveal their inner vamp and revel in their sexuality.”

–Jennifer Merin, *About.com*

“Inspirational... reveals a burlesque community as varied as the students in the film... With *Wink and a Smile*, everyone shines!” –Steve Ramos, *Box Office*

“Elegantly shot, nicely paced ...a revealing look at the art of burlesque.”

–Maira Macdonald, *The Seattle Times*

“There's lots of talk about empowerment, body issues, and the fluidity of gender and sexuality, but it doesn't feel didactic in the slightest—just ladies working it out...a sophisticated, many-tentacled, and nationally admired phenomenon. It's about time it got to tell its story.”

–Brendan Kiley, *The Stranger*

“Timmons has cleverly crafted *A Wink and a Smile* so as to cover not only each student's personal transition at the academy, but also the history of burlesque as an entertainment form ...

The breathtakingly intricate costumes and tongue-in-cheek humour that accompany the performances certainly don't hurt, either.” –Christopher Sykes, *The Montreal Mirror*

“Endearingly bawdy...a window into the tantalizing world of contemporary burlesque.”

–Tanja Laden, *Flavorpill*

“A masterful look inside the world of burlesque.. delightfully amusing, impossible to look away from.” –Fianna MacGregor, *Daily Vanguard* (Portland State)

“These true stories of women who for one reason or another, decided to take on the physical and emotional challenge of taking it off, may just inspire you to leave that door open.”

–Nicole C, *Fine Arts LA*

“Colorful, sometimes outrageous performances.” –Stan Hall, *The Oregonian*

“The women involved serve as the most fascinating subject matter...showcases exceptional performers in the Seattle scene.” –*Cinestrata Montreal*

“Worth seeing!” –Megan Lehar, *Scorecard Review*

“Fascinating, Excellent... I honestly don't know how you can afford to miss this..”

–Steve Prokopy, *Gapers Block*

“This breathtaking doc just might be the sexy feel-good flick of the year.”

–Lauren Wissot, *Spout Blog*

“A thorough and easeful account of who might want to be a burlesque performer and why.”

–*Cinemonkey*



LEARNING CURVES

A Conversation With Burlesque Documentarian Deirdre Timmons

By Scot Bastian

In 2007, Deirdre Timmons followed the experiences of ten students enrolled in Seattle’s Academy of Burlesque under internationally acclaimed instructor Miss Indigo Blue. *A Wink and A Smile* is a lavishly filmed musical documentary that plays like a cross between *The Full Monty* and *Moulin Rouge*—a sexually charged exploration of female empowerment with song and dance.

On Screen (OS): Define the term burlesque.

Deirdre Timmons (DT): For me, burlesque is musical theater that involves stripping. If you talk to Miss Indigo Blue, the head of the Academy of Burlesque, she’d say, “Somebody with some clothes on, something happens, and someone walks off the stage with less clothes on.” I think it’s a combination of vaudeville, and cabaret, and stripping, and I think there’s usually some comedy thrown in there.

OS: What motivated you to make a film about it?

DT: I went to Sundance [in 2007] and I’d never been to a film festival except a couple movies at the Seattle International Film Festival. I watched probably twenty films, and about half of them I thought, “I can never do that,” or, I couldn’t do that now. But the other half, I thought, “I could do that.” I could do that and that and that. But what I wanted to see, I couldn’t find. I wanted to see musicals and I wanted to laugh and see some reality in there and I wanted to see something sexy and fun—and there’s just a dearth of that kind of filmmaking. So when I came back to Seattle I said “I’m going to make a movie, what’s it going to be?” I spoke to a woman who was a student at the Academy of Burlesque and I knew, the minute she said she was doing burlesque. It’s fairly shallow really. I just wanted something fun, and musical, and sexy, and sweet, and sort of female-based. That’s important to me. Somebody might want to make films that might be a lot more alluring to a male audience, but I wanted to make something that might appeal to me and my girlfriends.

“I think what attracts a lot of women and men to it is that they don’t feel they’re too fat to get on stage, or they’re too old to get on stage. They can just be who they are.”

OS: I assume that it is mostly women who want to be burlesque performers. What attracts them and what do they get out of it?

DT: It's mostly women, but there are "boylesque" performers in town. There are boylesque students—not in this film. We just let whoever signed up for the class sign up for it, and it happened to be all women this time. Some of the most dramatic performances in Seattle are men. But by and large it's women, and what I think attracts women to burlesque is as unique and varied as the women. In the film we have women who do it because they simply want the experience. We have other women who do it because they want to become more comfortable with their bodies. We have other women who are doing it because they want to play around with power and how to present themselves on stage. It's kind of all over the map. For sure, in the film each woman has a different reason for doing it. Some are really simple: "I just want to be pretty." "I just want some glamour inside." "I just want to push some of my own erotic envelope."

OS: Are there people who are very against it as sexist? Is that view represented in the film?

DT: I haven't run into anybody who's wildly opposed to it. The women do not go all the way down to nothing. The performance is very narrative-based, very comedically based. It's not, and it doesn't feel, objectified. They don't attract the trench coat crowd. The audience is at least fifty percent female in burlesque houses. It's more about fun and beauty and the glorification of the female and the male form than it is about stripping. You'll see, on stage, women and men that are all sizes, all shapes, and all ages and all races. There is no "right" burlesque body. There is no "better" burlesque style performance. I think what attracts a lot of women and men to it is that they don't feel they're too fat to get on stage, they're too old to get on stage, or too—anything. They can just be who they are and they will receive audience appreciation because they just got up there and they did it, and they're proud of it, and they were entertaining, and they loved every minute of it. We had one student in our class who's fifty-one, and it was her fifty-first birthday present to herself, this class. She was amazing!

OS: Is it hard to find performers that will let you film them?

DT: Yes, because everybody and their dog wants to film women taking their clothes off. And, ultimately, these women have to protect themselves and their privacy. I had to talk to a lot of producers in town, and a lot of performers, before I had gained their trust and explained to them exactly what I wanted to do.

OS: Can you tell me something surprising in terms of the difference between your expectations and the reality of making this film?

DT: I think the women opened up more than I was expecting. That was surprising to me. It went very personal, very fast, with the subject matter—which was really nice. It was probably the most exhausting thing I've ever done. I don't know whether that was surprising, or not, but it was really exhausting. There was a lot of drama. There is this whole process when you learn burlesque. You get taken down to the essence of who you are, then you build yourself back up. I think a lot of the women went through that, and a lot of the crew went through that too.

OS: What else was surprising?

DT: Okay, this is a really stupid thing. This is so “my-bad” or “duh” but it was a lot more “sexual” than I thought it would be. I mean, these are a group of women who decide to take a class to strip. There is this *huge* sensual element to it. But, for some reason, I just thought they’d all want to be doing this for glitter and glamour purposes. But it turns out that there is this huge erotic element to the film that I kind of wasn’t expecting—and I don’t know why.

OS: That surprised you?

DT: It did! I just thought they wanted red, glittery lips and rhinestone pasties. It really is an extension of their sexuality, and that surprised me, for some reason. This is very much a feminist film—about women taking back their bodies. And that’s one of the reasons why I wanted to make it. I wanted to portray some reality to women and how they feel about the issue of getting up on stage and removing their clothes and not just a sexual portrayal of women objectifying themselves. There’s a lot of feminist theory behind it. Why does feminism preclude celebrating the female form?



"A WINK AND A SMILE": INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR DEIRDRE TIMMONS

by KJ Doughton
(2008-07-29)

There’s a half-naked woman onscreen at Seattle’s Egyptian Theater, and her name is Indigo Blue.

A shapely brunette delicately waving a four-foot long feather umbrella in each hand, Blue commands the opening frames of “A Wink and a Smile,” filmmaker Deirdre Timmons’ revealing documentary about the thriving Seattle burlesque scene. The flesh-tones of this veteran dancer turn emerald-green or cotton candy turquoise, depending on which floodlight tracks body her across a nightclub stage. Aside from the feather-shields that Blue teasingly fans about like massive butterfly wings, there’s precious little covering her curvaceous female form.

Suddenly, Blue’s projected image flutters like a wind-whipped curtain, distorted and fuzzy. Strange sounds emanate from the theater projection room. The movie stops. Fade to black. Was Indigo Blue too hot for the Egyptian to handle?

Playing to a sold-out crowd at the 2008 Seattle International Film Festival, “A Wink and a Smile” is delayed by some minor technical difficulties – but the unplanned down time is anything but boring. A dancer in full fishnet stocking ‘n feather boa regalia bolts to the screen, faces the unprepared audience, and shoots off a pupil-jarring flash photograph. Like some manic paperboy distributing the morning news, another scantily-clad stage strutter darts up and down the Egyptian’s aisles, passing out invitations to a gig by local strip troupe The Atomic Bombshells.

Suddenly, the screen explodes in more sultry wall-shadows of Indigo Blue. Armed with glitter application, garters, and a revived film projector, “A Wink and a Smile” is up and running. “A Wink and a Smile” serves up plentiful scenes of onstage tassel twirling and dud doffing. However, Timmons’ thoughtful film is more about the human need for expression than it is about female nudity (those expecting a full-frontal bonanza will be disappointed. There’s a lot of provocative skin, but pasties and panties remain intact).

In fact, the heart of “A Wink and a Smile” is comprised of ten women willingly enrolled in Seattle’s Academy of Burlesque. A sort of “Striptease 101,” the seven-week crash course in all things bump-and-grind is far removed from an employment audition at some sleazy peep-show emporium. Run by Indigo Blue herself, it’s more of a hobby try-out, like a fly-tying session, skydiving plunge, or basket-weaving class. Graduation is celebrated via a bona-fide club performance, complete with catcalls and wolf-whistles from a live audience.

The featured Academy novices want to perform burlesque not for the cash or attention, but because they feel it will satisfy some psychological void. One woman, for example, is an opera singer who sees the class as a means of combating stage fright. It makes sense. Whipping around a feather boa in stiletto heels and pasties is not a ritual commonly associated with fear of one’s audience. A 51-year-old mother sees burlesque training as a healthy, middle-aged rebellion against stay-at-home stagnation. “I always tried to gain approval and fit in,” she laments of her younger years. “Now, I don’t care. For every person who disapproves, there’s someone to applaud me.”

The gutsy disclosures continue with Megan, who endured bulimia for five years and says, “I’ve never been happy with my body.” She hopes burlesque training will be the catalyst for feeling comfortable in her own skin. Casey, another class member, confesses to personal biases against make-up. Burlesque, she says, allows her to explore the realm of lipstick and mascara with total freedom, challenging past judgments. The Shanghai Pearl, a professional dancer and assistant to Blue’s Academy projects, sees stripping as empowerment. “I’m from Taiwan,” she reveals, “where women don’t mean anything.”

Obviously, these rationales subvert the common stereotypes associated with stripper culture – that it’s an exploitative, lecherous business full of couch test castings and misguided teen runaways. Such assumptions might be accurate in some cases, but not among Timmons’ cast of reporters, students, housewives, and taxidermists. They’re all levelheaded, completely aware of what they’re doing, and in control.

“A Wink and a Smile” also clarifies another cliché often attributed to Burlesque. It’s a niche far removed from the spread-eagle peep-show emporiums, like those nearby - surrounding downtown Seattle’s Pike Place Market. There’s a sense of theatrics and nostalgic costumes that transcend the nudity. In fact, Miss Indigo Blue insists that Burlesque and stripping are two entirely different stiletto heel clad animals.

“Stripping’s objective is revealing nudity,” informs her Academy of Burlesque site. “Burlesque’s objective is to call attention to all the moments of revealing, and to tease just shy of nudity.

Burlesque also encourages mockery and parody, so tends to be funnier and more lighthearted than Stripping.”

The film backs up this differentiation through profiles of both its amateur academy recruits and more experienced industry pros. We meet Tamara the Trapeze Lady, the Swedish Housewife, Kitten la Rue, Miss Inga Ingenue, and Waxie Moon, among others. As each performs his or her routine (yes, male dancers also enter into Timmons’ onscreen mix), we’re struck not by the exposed flesh, but by the creative style with which the frilly, flashy garments are removed.

Take Inga Ingenue. Initially covered with white balloons that resemble poodle tufts, the air-filled orbs are gradually popped, revealing ever-increasing skin. My favorite film performer, however, is Ernie Von Schmaltz. Representing everything reptilian and repulsive about the male persona, Von Schmaltz resembles a cross between Tony Soprano, Ron Jeremy, and Weird Al Yankovich in obese, full fat-suited “Eat It” mode. The onstage routine – all crotch-thrusting moves and exaggerated male cockiness - is a guaranteed hoot. In fact, Von Schmaltz is so utterly convincing in his sweaty, gyrating self-worship that I had this charismatic whirlwind pegged as a male performer.

Not true, corrected Timmons and her DOP Peter Waweru with a laugh, during a recent interview. Beneath the gold chains and sleazy dark shades, Von Schmaltz is a – gulp! – female dancer. In the paragraphs that follow, Timmons clarifies other ambiguities concerning “A Wink and a Smile” and the world of Burlesque dancing.

Why did you choose Burlesque as a theme for your film?

It’s now becoming a mainstream form of entertainment. It’s really good timing. There have been other documentaries on burlesque, but they have focused primarily on individual troupes, or history. But nobody has focused yet on the journey of burlesque – what it takes to go from day one to performance one, and beyond.

“A Wink and a Smile” feels like three films for the price of one. You have the past history, the current contemporary performers, then these newbies going through the academy. Had you intended for this three-layer approach?

Absolutely. Originally, my intention was to show the journey - getting to this place where you can completely reveal yourself for the first time, and have the audience learn a little bit about what neo-burlesque is, at least in Seattle. Then (I intended to) illustrate the journey, the lessons, and the lectures with professionals performing today. I wanted it to be a multi-layered experience. I think just following the journey would have been interesting on its own, but the women were busy. It’s difficult to have ten people involved every single day. I really wanted it to feel a bit like “Cabaret,” “Moulin Rouge,” and “The Full Monty,” and be funny, sexy, and have a story. And I wanted it to be educational. I was going for the journalistic triumvirate – educational, enlightening, and entertaining.

Which of the three layers was the most challenging to achieve?

The most challenging part was tracking these women. They all had busy lives. None had been in front of a camera before. (It was challenging to) get them comfortable enough to open up – they were learning to bare their souls in front of the camera, knowing that the world was going to hear what they were saying. The second most challenging thing was taking 300 hours of footage and whittling it down to 90 minutes. That was a lot of footage. Trying to keep a really clean story line for each woman, bringing out her major challenges, was a biggie.

One Burlesque Academy performer decides not to follow through with the end stage performance. She is worried about protecting her family. Did she ever request that all of her footage be removed, or that she be taken out of the film completely?

Well, that was my first worry – that she would drop out of the whole project, and that I would be stuck having her image in all of our footage. Also, she was such an eloquent speaker I didn't want to lose her as a character. She was able to unveil a lot of complications related to becoming a burlesque performer, even though she didn't do it in the end. She's an intelligent woman and a professional performer who I think understood that this would really blow up a huge thing for us. She was willing to continue singing on camera, and do her exit interview. This is a big deal with burlesque. As we saw with the Shanghai Pearl, she still hasn't told her parents, and she's one of the consummate performers around town. Miss Indigo Blue didn't tell her parents until she knew her story was going to go public. It's one of the largest things that the women grapple with – choosing an art form that society considers edgy and to many people unacceptable. Doing this in front of their families, and in spite of their families, is a big deal. I told her that it was really relevant to keep her in. We needed to explain that this wasn't just some slutty thing that women do. They put a lot of thought into it. Burlesque performers are intelligent and not your average pole dancer who is "putting herself through college." They're amazing women – and men!

In a sense, do you think that the film was helped by the fact that one cast member drops out?

In the beginning I panicked, but when we did the exit interview, I was glad. It really brought home for audiences that this was not a simple thing to do. And it also provided a twist to the story. I couldn't have written it better. Ten go in, and nine come out. Which one doesn't survive? It's the most surprising one who doesn't survive. It's the one who says, "I'm fearless now, I can do anything. I don't want to be ordinary – I want to be extraordinary." But at the end of the day, the familial pressure kept her from doing this.

You hear about documentaries where something completely unexpected will happen, which takes the film in a totally different direction from which it had started out.

We were just relying on everyone's stories. Ultimately, it was fine. People say, "Okay, come on – you staged the scene with the "tour of the refrigerator" (in which a taxidermist dancer reveals a stash-pile of frozen, pre-stuffed animals residing alongside her foods). We didn't stage anything. The only things we staged were the interviews, where I guided them with my questions. Even then, their responses took us in directions we weren't expecting. When (dancer) Christi Jo says, "I'm a virgin," it all came crashing down to me why she was crafting an act that was so dark and

strange. She was creating sexuality that she had never had. She was completely making it up, and imagining what she thinks it would be. Until we had that confession, I didn't understand why she was doing this really unusual act, of Little Red Riding Hood turning into a wolf.

Part of what we were trying to understand was why the women chose the characters and acts that they chose. I believed from the beginning that the personal stories and touch points would reveal why they became those characters. And they did! Honey Moon, the woman who has grappled with eating disorders, just wanted a character who was really happy with her body. She could leave her old identity at the door, and Honey Moon is stepping onstage and she loves her body. It's a very powerful process. I think most people in the Burlesque community start out with an alter ego that is them, filtered in a way that they would like to see themselves. In the process of realizing this character, they become the people that they want to be.

Leave your inhibitions at the door...

Yeah! Leave your self-doubt at the door, and take your real person forward; who you want to be.

The Shanghai Pearl spoke about growing up in a culture where “Women meant nothing.” I could see how dancing would be empowering.

Absolutely. The Shanghai Pearl was able to enjoy herself as a woman through Burlesque, something that culturally was not acceptable in her background. That was very powerful for her. She was not given that ability growing up. She was taught that to be successful, she had to be a doctor or a lawyer. To be an artist, and revel in your own identity, completely holds no value. You can see through every single woman, how they are taking one step forward in their lives.

The burlesque subculture knows no gender boundaries. Is Ernie Von Schmaltz a really anal-retentive, proper guy in his real life, who needs to do this as a counterbalance?

At this point, both Timmons and Waweru trade smiles, before breaking into loud belly laughs. Waweru reveals that Von Schmaltz is actually a woman.

People are laughing so hard during that act. One thing we weren't anticipating in the film while editing was that the line, “Ernie Von Schmaltz is actually a very beautiful young woman named Anna,” is not heard. Nobody ever hears that line because they're laughing so hard at her act! She is considered a “drag king!” Meanwhile, Ultra and Waxy Moon are the two men in the film. I was really hoping that a man would sign up for the class. The Burlesque 101 Class does get men. I thought it would be very interesting to explore why a man would do this. We didn't dictate the class, or create the students. They simply signed up.

Some of the most surprising feedback I've had since the festival screenings is a lot of response from men saying that they have grappled with body issues their whole life, and held back from chasing their dreams because of self-doubt. In watching “A Wink and a Smile,” they are ready to accept themselves, move forward, and chase their dreams. I haven't gotten that from any women yet, but I've had five or six men send me long, detailed e-mails about it, thanking us for making this film. That really shocked me. I thought I would be inundated with e-mails from women,

saying, “I loved it so much,” but the men are the ones who are really giving detailed feedback and confessing their self-doubt, concerning body image.

One of the reviewers in town said, “You won’t get any men identifying with this film. None of us have these issues.” But in fact, that’s all I’ve had! That kind of feedback has only come from men, so far, which I wasn’t expecting. I thought men would enjoy the film on a purely prurient level.

When I initially saw the theme, I thought, “A film on burlesque dancers! I can think of worse ways to spend two hours at a film festival!” But I came out of it realizing that the psychology and motivations behind the dancing are what really run the engine of the film.

If you watch any film, whether it’s about tri-athletes, or skiers, or racecar drivers, it isn’t about the thing they’re doing, but about what motivates them to do the thing they’re doing. That is the case in this film. It’s not about stripping, although that is what they’re doing. But it’s a vehicle to get to the next level in their lives.

The film’s finale is a montage, showing the dancers finally getting onstage. It goes by fairly quickly. You didn’t linger on the final performance. The film focuses more on what leads up to it, as opposed to the actual performance.

If we had shown all of the performances in their entirety, it would have been half the film. It is about eleven minutes at the end. We structured it so that you see them throughout their strip, starting in full costume, then taking layers off, then down to pasties. But I sort of felt like these women were not professional burlesque performers. Out of respect for them, I didn’t know if they wanted to live with their entire performance in a film for the rest of their lives. There are lots of little snags and snafus. Respect for the women was of utmost importance. I didn’t want them to feel violated when they saw the film. I wanted them to be proud of it. It’s their project as much as it’s our project.

You talk about the concept of “living with” the film. Was there any kind of a pact at the beginning of the film that all participants would carry on, despite knowing that this was a subculture that many people might disagree with or stereotype?

When they signed up for the class, it said at the bottom, “This will be filmed as part of a documentary.” So right away they knew, “If I sign up for this class, I’m gonna be on camera.” I’m sure that kept a number of people from signing up for the class.



Burlesque for Everybody

Posted on Tuesday, April 28th, 2009

Taxidermists do burlesque. Opera singers and college students do burlesque. Even men do “boylesque.” In “A Wink and a Smile,” a movie opening May 1st at the Quad Cinema in New York City, just about anybody can learn to take one’s clothes off, with music, costumes, and choreography.

Miss Indigo Blue teaches at the Academy of Burlesque in Seattle. A little over a year ago, she taught a class of ten women to bump, grind, strut and twirl. Their adventure formed the basis of the documentary.

New York has a very vibrant burlesque scene, as does Portland, San Francisco, and a score of other American cities. This slideshow illustrates how modern professionals in Seattle have updated your grandmother’s burlesque.

An interview with Deirdre Timmons, the film’s director, follows below.

Move on to hair.

Elisabeth Squires for NewsPlink: What made you choose a school of burlesque as your subject matter?

Deirdre Timmons, Director: I was looking for a topic that was female-oriented, edgy, funny, sexy, cultural and musical. I also wanted to cover a genuine journey with a happy ending. Miss Indigo Blue’s Academy of Burlesque 101 class met all those criteria.

Squires: There’s been a huge revival in burlesque theater in the past decade. Why do you think that is?

Timmons: There is a lot of over-exposed flesh these days, but that flesh is presented within very limited definitions of what’s considered beautiful. Those definitions exclude 99 percent of us!

Burlesque rejects that notion. Nothing is airbrushed, and everything is exaggerated, glorified and even celebrated. If you have big hips, swing ‘em. If you have big breasts, twirl ‘em. If you have a big booty, shake it. The performers are exaggerating their own physicality with great humor, amazing costumes, funny stories, captivating music, and truly, a lot of love and generosity. It’s like a gift they give their audiences.

Squires: How are today’s shows different from—or similar to—their predecessors?

Timmons: Traditional burlesque—fan dances, balloon dances, elegant striptease—is alive and well. But neo-burlesque takes off where that ends. There’s punk burlesque, goth burlesque, circus burlesque, boylesque, draglesque, and that’s just the beginning. Experimental modern burlesque goes more easily to extremes, and includes opera, poetry, aerialists, ballet, modern dance, fire, social commentary, and dazzling sets.

Squires: How did the students taking Miss Indigo Blue’s class change over the course of the film?

Timmons: At first it was all fun and glamour. Then, as the work really began, reality began to set in. They were going to expose their bodies to perfect strangers. Would they be funny and relevant? Would they be beautiful? They didn't know and they began to break down. You have to fully accept yourself in order to perform for an audience. How many of us in life have done that? After they conquered that hurdle, excitement began to replace fear. Backstage, before the show, the air hung with calm, focus and elation.

Squires: Is this "art form" just another way of objectifying the female body?

Timmons: Well, it is objectification. But the negative connotation is a little tiresome. We all objectify ourselves the minute we walk out the door and present ourselves as a homemaker in matching sweats or as a businessman in a suit.

Burlesque performers are intelligent adults and professional performers who are making the choice to get up on stage and share their bodies as the centerpiece of their performance.

Squires: Boobs are a big part of burlesque. Why do you think a tassel-twirling mound of flesh wields such great power over an audience?

Timmons: Maybe it's for the same reason that breast-feeding in public is illegal in many places throughout the U.S. The fundamental function of a breast is to help keep our species alive, and so they're a very powerful and intimidating part of the human anatomy. Celebrating the breast in an act's finale is, well, like celebrating our mere existence. What's more powerful than that?

Squires: What are you uncovering in your next project?

Timmons: I'm working on another documentary called "Pretty Funny Women." Similar to "A Wink and a Smile," it's the story of a group of women struggling to become stand-up comedienne in L.A. It's very funny and surprisingly touching.

Elisabeth Squires is also known as The bOOB Lady. She is the author of bOObs: A Guide to Your Girls, a humorous and informative book about breasts.

"A Wink and a Smile" will be playing in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, Seattle and Portland.



DigiBitch blog post by Mandy Van Deven, April 16, 2009

An opera singer with stage fright, a stay-at home mother who's tired of seeking societal approval, a dark and twisty virgin, and a young woman who has struggled with body hatred and bulimia are among the ten women who seek out Miss Indigo Blue's Academy of Burlesque for

an opportunity to change their lives in just six weeks—and first-time filmmaker Deirdre Allen Timmons' *A Wink and a Smile* captures that transition on film.

The first movie to explore the process of becoming a burlesque dancer, this musical documentary shows that Burlesque is more than just a campy striptease. It's about embodying a powerful persona, mocking traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, exploring sexuality through a teasing playfulness, and having a wicked sense of humor. *A Wink and a Smile* is full of delightful surprises that uncover both the history of the art form and its modern day incarnation through a handful of today's popular performers. Burlesque is about the creativity of the reveal, not the reveal itself, so here's a brief interview with Timmons to whet your desire to [see this film](#).

When did you decide to make a film about Burlesque?

In February of 2007. I was looking for an edgy and musical documentary subject when I met a woman who was studying burlesque. As she explained her surprising journey of sexuality and self-acceptance through striptease, I knew immediately that this was a topic audiences would find compelling. Then I went to my first show and it was love at first sight. Seeing the women and men in these incredible costumes performing these beautiful and hilarious acts practically knocked me to the ground. I attended more than 50 burlesque shows and met with performers and producers around town as I settled on an angle for the film.

How did you go about hooking up with Miss Indigo Blue's Academy?

So I needed an angle. What's interesting about stripping? Well, lots of things, but for a mainstream audience I figured the escapism and imaginative elements of, "What would it be like if I became a striptease artist?" would be universally fascinating. I approached the headmistress of Seattle's Academy of Burlesque, Miss Indigo Blue, and asked if she'd let me cover her 101 class. Eventually she agreed to let me bring my cameras and crew in and start chronicling the journey of ten women learning the art of peeling and revealing.

You have a lot of enthusiasm for the subject matter, which I can only assume means you've participated in Burlesque yourself. What do you get out of it personally?

Hells yeah! Not too far under the exterior of a responsible mother and longtime journalist is a comedic exhibitionist just waiting to throw it down. I also figured, if I were covering these women's journey, I'd have to know what it was like from the inside. But really, that was just an excuse. I've performed several ridiculous acts as Duchess Moorehead and it was so freeing and so fun. In her tassel twirling class, Miss Indigo Blue even taught me how to spin tassels in several different directions. It's a skill I don't exactly list on my resume, but I'm damn glad I have it.

In your film both the students and performers opened up to you about some very intimate parts of their lives, which creates an interesting juxtaposition of baring one's soul (or secrets) with baring one's body. How challenging was it for you to gain people's trust with a camera was rolling?

The women in the film were very sweet and generous from the get-go. That's not to say that they just bared all right up front; they had to get used to the cameras and the process of being interviewed. But we started out with simple questions, and as the weeks passed, the questions became more intimate. Also, they don't remove clothes in the beginning of the class, so they had time to get used to that notion. It also helped that I have been a reporter for years. I assured them that I would respect their information and the footage we shot, and I did. I wanted this to be a film that they could be proud of—or at least live with—for the rest of their lives. I was not going for reality TV smear. At the end of the day, however, they didn't have to trust me and I thank them for giving me their trust.

There is a distinction made between being a Burlesque dancer and being a stripper. What is this distinction and why is it necessary?

Of course both involve the removal of clothes on stage and voyeuristic entertainment. So it's safe to say that burlesque dancers are strippers. But strippers are not usually burlesque dancers. I think of burlesque as a traditional performance art form that comprises comedy, music, dance, elaborate costumes, clever storytelling, heightened theatricality, and exaggerated sexuality. I think of stripping as entertainment designed solely for sexual titillation. Burlesque shows attract varied crowds of all races, ages and sexual orientations. Stripping tends to attract a specific audience depending on the venue. Burlesque dancers don't tend to make much money. Strippers do.

One of the students ended up dropping out of the class before the final performance, which adds an element of realism to the film, but must have been a curveball in the process. How did you feel when that happened?

It freaked me out in the beginning. I was like, "Oh, here goes the movie." But then I realized that one woman's decision not to take it all the way illustrated how complicated this was, because we may fantasize about stripping, but we have obligations to family, ethics, religions, or ourselves that may—in the end—kill that fantasy. It really pointed out that this is not easy, and if you think you can just take a class and become a burlesque performer, you're wrong. So it actually gave the film more depth in the end.

What reactions have men had to seeing this film?

I'm so glad you asked. Straight men *LOVE* the film. How can they not? There are 18 scantily-clad beautiful women sharing trade secrets about women and nudity. Gay men love it too because it's quite simply fabulous to watch and Waxie Moon and Ultra bring in stunning boylesque performances. And while this film is mostly about the students' journeys, men have shared the most poignant responses to the notions of body image and abandoning fear to chase a dream.

One gentleman wrote me a long impassioned email. He had lost more than 100 pounds and watching these women accept their bodies so they could present them—in all their naked glory—to perfect strangers touched him deeply. Other men have said they're relieved and excited to see real women on screen, not hyper-produced, skeleton-thin girls who are on their 15th plastic

surgery “improvement” at the age of 20. I’ve had only two men say they prefer old-school stripping for the trench-coat crowd. They specifically did not like the idea of women being funny while being sexual. Maybe they fear we’re ultimately laughing at their penises, which of course we’re not.

Since *Burlesque* is all about the element of surprise, what surprised you during the making of *A Wink and a Smile*?

This was my first film, so I was learning how to make a film as the students were learning how to become burlesque performers. The process was grueling for all of us, together and independently. As we were all dragging through the glittery trenches, I found myself becoming very protective and maternal toward them. The love that infiltrated the making of the movie actually reads onscreen. And that was a beautiful surprise!