

Laughing It Off: Neo-burlesque striptease and the case of the Sexual Overtones as a theatre of resistance

Para tomarlo a risa: el striptease neo-burlesco y el caso de sexual overtones como teatro de resistencia

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Abstract

This article examines humour expressed through body language within the context of the neo-burlesque theatre group Sexual Overtones. By analyzing various techniques, including the use of parody, exaggeration, costumes and make-up, it considers the ways in which bodily humour operates within counter-hegemonic resistances through the use of pleasure, biopower and performances of new subjectivities. Nonetheless, it argues that neo-burlesque's continued focus on bodily display and objectification set parameters on the types of resistances that can unfold.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el 'humor corporal' en el contexto del grupo teatral neo-burlesco Sexual Overtones. A partir del análisis de sus diferentes técnicas, entre las que se incluyen la parodia, la exageración, los disfraces y el maquillaje, se puede valorar las vías por las el humor corporal opera como expresión de resistencia contrahegemónica mediante el placer, del biopoder y el ejercicio de nuevas subjetividades. Sin embargo, se argumenta que la forma en que el neo-burlesco se centra continuamente en la exhibición y objetivación del cuerpo fragua parámetros sobre los tipos de resistencias que se pueden desplegar.

Keywords

Neo-burlesque, bodily humour, gender and sexuality, resistance, counter-hegemony.

Palabras clave

Neo-burlesco, humor corporal, género y sexualidad, resistencia, contrahegemonía.

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Summary

1. Introduction
2. Burlesque as Historical Resistance
3. Case Study and Methodology: The Sexual Overtones
4. Neo-burlesque Theatre as Counter-hegemony
5. Spirals of Pleasures and Power between Performers and Audience
6. Burlesque Bodies as Biopower
7. New Gender Performances
8. Conclusion: Humorous Resistance?

Sumario

1. *Introducción*
2. *Lo burlesco como expresión de la resistencia histórica*
3. *Caso de estudio y metodología: The Sexual Overtones*
4. *El teatro neo-burlesco como manifestación contrahegemónica*
5. *Espirales de placeres y poder entre los artistas y la audiencia*
6. *Cuerpos burlescos como biopoder*
7. *Nuevas performances de género*
8. *Conclusión: ¿La resistencia humorística?*

1. Introduction

Historically, humour has been used as a discourse of resistance against hegemonic formations within different contexts (see, Douglas, 1975; Jenkins, 1994; Payne, 1986). As a form of resistance, humour is generally not a technique of official channels, but rather is deployed from below by giving a voice to those who are marginalized or excluded from dominant positions. In this sense, it operates as a “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1985): as a means through which subordinate groups can critique the dominant culture by raising a mirror to society that reflects an image different from the one in place (Payne, 1986). Through the use of humour, subordinate groups can create solidarity and forge alliances through disguised and veiled metaphors, which are often tolerated and accommodated by the dominant culture.

This paper examines the discourse of humour as a practice of resistance within the context of neo-burlesque theatre and particularly the contemporary Canadian-based troupe the *Sexual Overtones* in Ottawa, Ontario. Neo-burlesque represents a resurrection and reinterpretation of the burlesque tradition that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries in European and North American (Shteir, 2004). Historically, traditional burlesque engaged in the practice of striptease but used humour, through its application of parody, satire, imitation, and exaggeration, as a technique to critique elements of Victorian culture. Neo-burlesque extends these subversive gestures that have informed burlesque since its inception in new directions. Through what I refer to as “bodily humour”—which encompasses various embodied performances through exaggerated gestures, costumes, a focus on pleasure and playfulness, coupled with striptease and the other attributes of traditional burlesque—neo-burlesque performers challenge normative social conventions of beauty, gender and sexuality.

Through the case study of the *Sexual Overtones*, Ottawa’s largest neo-burlesque troupe, this paper analyzes how neo-burlesque theatre operates as a counter-hegemony that uses public displays of “bodily humour” to contest hegemonic power not through direct opposition, but through building a network of alliances via the cultural sphere. To do so, I develop a non-top down approach to power that builds on Foucauldian and Butlerian concepts including the use of pleasure (Foucault, 1978), biopower (Foucault, 1978) and performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993), all of which are techniques that make use of the body to win the consent of publics⁹⁹. Through this analytic approach, I argue that the neo-burlesque theatre uses striptease and humour as techniques of pleasure in order

⁹⁹ This research is part of a larger study that examines the ways different modes of communication make use of techniques of beauty and the body within counter-hegemonic resistance (Klein, 2014).

to provide alternative and oppositional ideologies and practices of beauty, gender and sexuality that can exert some influence over hegemonic culture. However, at the same time, these performances often produce excessive and normative femininity through bodily objectification and display that in some ways undermines its resistive capacity. In this case, neo-burlesque theatre is therefore janus-faced: both using and transgressing norms of beauty, gender and sexuality and are thus never outside what Foucault calls the “mesh of power”¹⁰⁰ that sets parameters on their resistive capacity.

To proceed with my argument, first, I situate contemporary neo-burlesque within its historical context of subversion; second, I provide an overview and methodological framework for analysis of the neo-burlesque troupe, the *Sexual Overtones*; and lastly, I examine the use of bodily humour at play in performances of the *Sexual Overtones* through three techniques of power: the use of pleasure (Foucault, 1978), biopower (Foucault, 1978) and gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993). Through this analysis, neo-burlesque is revealed as a site of contestation in which the body is deployed as a technique that both reproduces as well as resists dominant cultural norms and standards of gender and sexuality.

2. Burlesque as Historical Resistance

In the broadest sense of the term, ‘burlesque’ is a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing serious works as well as their subject matter (Shteir, 2004). Victorian burlesque, more specifically, which was popularized in London and Paris in the 19th century, took the form of a broad comic parody that mocked the theatrical conventions of the original work. Towards the end of the 19th century, burlesque lost its appeal within European contexts but gained increased prominence in North America with a new focus on striptease and female nudity combined with satirical humour (Ferreday, 2008; Nally, 2009)¹⁰¹.

100 Foucault’s concept of ‘les mailles de pouvoir’ has not been included in any of the English-language editions of Foucault’s collected works. Originally delivered in two installments at the Federal University of Bahia in Brazil in 1976, Foucault’s words were recorded on cassette tapes, transcribed and published as a text, first appearing in Portuguese, and translated back into French for publication in *Dits et écrits*. Specifically, Foucault uses the symbol of the size of the holes in a mesh net to suggest that different degrees of resistances are possible within different contexts. A net with small holes suggests that there is very limited space for resistances to pass through, however, a net with larger holes provides an instance in which increased elements, practices and conducts can penetrate the net, all the while suggesting that these resistances are never completely outside of existing structures.

101 The American counterpart of burlesque was popularized in the late 1860s by Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes, an all female cast who came over from Britain who performed stripteases and sometimes cross-dressed as men (Nally, 2009; Shteir, 2004).

Burke (1937) differentiates between comedy and satire by arguing that the former uses a positive frame that accepts the prevailing notion of social hierarchy which includes a fool or clown who embodies the problems of the social order and seeks to correct its failing. In contrast, the latter has a more subversive edge by adopting a rejection frame, which requires the actor to disassociate at some level with the social order while trying to overcome it, thereby suggesting a shift in alliance away from the symbols of authority (Carlson, 1988). From this perspective, burlesque used presentations of the body as a form of satire as a discourse of resistance against dominant culture in order to mock elite cultural standards and social roles i.e. of theatrical conventions, and tastes of the upper classes and so on.

As Douglas Gilbert (1968) observed in the European context, burlesque theatre abandoned social mores through its inclusion of the 'grotesque body' (Bakhtin, 1941/1993) that focused on the apertures of the human body offering a counterpoint to the smooth surfaces of the classical Victorian ones. Traditionally, burlesque was concerned with the satirizing of Victorian bourgeois social mores and sensibilities wherein costumes of over-sized fans, comically large ruffles, bustles, corsets and bows were used to critique upper-class fashion and beauty standards¹⁰² (Allen, 1991; Ferreday, 2008; Nally, 2009). Performers further critiqued Victorian gender roles by destabilizing the existing binary of the bourgeois 'true woman' and the low class 'prostitute' by representing an alternative, unstable and powerful role for white women through transgressive identities that were made visible and celebrated in the theatre (Buszek, 1999)¹⁰³.

As self-aware sexual beings and through public displays of humour and striptease, burlesque performers challenged the female subject within the patriarchal order by troubling conventions about how women were 'allowed' to act on stage and about how femininity and sexuality could be represented (Buszek, 1999). Furthermore, in the American context, burlesque performers often dressed in drag –cross-dressing as men– which further confounded normative expectations of gender roles and identities (Shteir, 2004). Moreover, burlesque provided a route to stardom for female performers who were often responsible for not only their own acts, but also as writers and producers of their entire performances (Buszek, 1999). Consequently, through burlesque theatre,

102 Although burlesque featured many of the same elements of vaudeville, it was differentiated in that it was aimed at working class men to satirize upper class tastes and markers of distinction.

103 It is important to note that burlesque was tangled up with the economic, cultural and political privileges of a white body (Ross, 2000) and when white producers began to cast black women in burlesque performances, they were exoticized as 'other' in order to reassure white audiences of their own normalcy and cultural dominance.

women advanced to more prominent positions of power in the labour market with increased economic and cultural agency and autonomy.

These subversive elements became contained as burlesque was increasingly subsumed under patriarchal market interests in which the female performer became merely an object of male “scopic desire” (Friedman, 1996). Specifically, in the 1930s burlesque was increasingly associated with deviant and dangerous male sexuality and by the mid 20th century, burlesque was largely co-opted and replaced by ‘exotic dancing’ where its satirical elements were abandoned and women shifted from active agents to objectified bodies¹⁰⁴. Neo-burlesque is an attempt to recover the subversive elements of burlesque in order to wrest the act of stripping from more patriarchal interests through a re-focalization on humour, sexual agency and pleasure. These performances involve a nostalgic retro (re)-appropriation in which performers utilize and update burlesque constructions of femininity as a political reaction to 21st century forces of reform seeking to foil female expression. Its revival originated in the mid 1990s in the nightclubs of New York and London and continues to thrive in North America as evidenced by Tease-O-Rama, an annual festival of neo-burlesque retro-striptease and the popular Burlesque Museum in Helendale, California (Ferreday, 2008).

Often featuring red lips, dark hair, corsets and extravagant feathered or sequined costumes, neo-burlesque exemplifies a version of femininity as a dramatic counterpoint to the general look of thin, waif-like models that characterize dominant versions of beauty foisted on the public via the mass media (Ferreday, 2008). The neo-burlesque movement as a whole encourages individuality in size, shape, height and appearance as well as the inclusion of a range of genders and sexual orientations by men and women who sometimes dress in drag. It is therefore concerned with shifting the patriarchal male gaze by having women and men strip teasing in front of largely female and queer audiences (Ferreday, 2008).

Yet, neo-burlesque has increasingly been subsumed into mainstream culture, as it continues to expand across metropolitan cities across America and Europe including popular groups like *the Hole* in Spain, which involves a combination of cabaret, circus and variety acts, humour and striptease. Its most famous North American representative is Dita Von Teese, known for her 1940s pin up style and fetish acts where she frolics in a giant champagne or martini glass, reproducing a pleasurable attachment to excessive femininity (Ferreday, 2008). Moreover, performers engage in striptease practices and

¹⁰⁴ Although outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to highlight that some scholars argue that exotic dancers do have some degree of agency (see Wesley, 2003).

bodily objectification- the very instruments of patriarchal domination - calling into question whether neo-burlesque theatre is counter-hegemonic or has been incorporated into the hegemonic culture, asserting a comedic rather than satirical frame.

3. Case Study and Methodology: The Sexual Overtones

In Ottawa, the *Sexual Overtones* are just one neo-burlesque troupe amidst a cacophony of others including Browncoats Burlesque, Rockabilly Burlesque, Ottawa Burlesque Collective and Capital Tease Burlesque, not to mention a yearly Ottawa burlesque festival. The *Sexual Overtones* has been selected for analysis because its mission is to “provide entertainment that is playful and fun and at the same time that is body, female and sex positive and all inclusive” (Cream Puff, Personal Communication April 15, 2013). The troupe therefore has an overtly feminist and queer agenda and would provide a suitable site to test the ways in which neo-burlesque theatre can operate as a counter-hegemonic movement. As their name suggests, the group is concerned with “sexual overtones” (as opposed to sexual undertones) through the presentation of over-the-top sexual acts, which seam between “burlesque striptease, sexual satire, physical humour, dance routines, musical numbers and vaudeville entertainment” (Cream Puff, Personal Communication April 15, 2013), making it an appropriate corpus of analysis to examine how bodily humour is deployed as a technique of resistance.

The *Sexual Overtones* has further been selected due to its local influence and reputation. Founded in 2008 and located in Ottawa, Ontario, the neo-burlesque troupe is the largest, most diverse troupe in Ottawa, boasting thirty core members as well as various invited guests from other troupes for specific shows. The group has gained measurable popularity and prominence in Ottawa performing to audiences of over six hundred people, suggesting a potentiality to exert some influence over audience members. Since its inception the group has participated in ten burlesque performances, including *Winternude* (2013), the *Big Top (less) Circus* (2010), *A Valentine Teaser* (2010), *Tales from the Strypt* (2009), the *Great Indiscretion* (2009), and *Indecent Exposure* (2008) and *Get SprUNG* (2008) averaging approximately two productions per year. They have also received widespread local and national media attention including more mainstream sources such as *the Ottawa Citizen*, *CBC Ottawa*, *The Ottawa Magazine*, as well as alternative sites

such as *Capital Xtra Coverage*, a local queer newspaper, *Apt613*, an online source for local culture and entertainment, *24 Hours* and *Ottawa Xpress*.

To answer my questions about how bodily humour can operate as techniques of power and resistance, my methodological approach is based on participant observation at a neo-burlesque performance, supplemented with performer interviews. As a participant observer, I attended the 'Winternude' show performed at St. Brigid's Centre for the Arts¹⁰⁵, in Ottawa, Canada, on January 19, 2013, their most recent performance at the time of this research. Attending as a spectator allowed me to observe performances first-hand and to observe audience behaviour and responses to live performances. In addition, I interviewed the founder and creative director of the *Sexual Overtones* and five troupe members (in total 4 women and 2 men). My questions focused on the origins of skits, costume selection, music, choreography, and other techniques used in performances to produce meaning. I also asked about political intentions, audience impact and the ways it reproduces and/or challenges normative codes of beauty, sexuality and gender. In keeping with the troupe's mandate for anonymity, no real names are used, but rather their stage names are included¹⁰⁶.

The acts are comprised of singular performers or groups, in which skits often take the shape of dance routines where performers lip sync and act out a storyline on stage, culminating in a striptease down to their underwear, often with pasties and tassels on their nipples. The skits are what the founder of the troupe, Cream Puff calls "politics light" blending humour and playfulness to confound normative gender and sexuality codes. For example, in the opening skit of the Winternude show, titled "In Flight Sexy" two women and two men dressed as airline stewards act out the inflight safety features in a sexually suggestive manner, but with a queer twist where the men gesture at sex with each other. Another act features a woman dressed as a hyper-masculine lumberjack stripping to Bon Jovi's *Pour Some Sugar on Me* as she pours maple syrup on herself; in yet another performance, two men dance a tango—a dance traditionally reserved for a male lead and female follower. The following section situates neo-burlesque theatre within a context of cultural counter-hegemony before turning to techniques of bodily humour involving the use of pleasure, biopower and the performance of new subjectivities.

105 St. Brigid's is an old church that has been converted into an art centre, which adds an element of satire with 'sexual deviants' performing at a holy institution.

106 Interviews were conducted with Cream Puff (the Founder of the troupe), the Brain, Kinky, Randy Enhancement, Xposé and Ambrosia who have given written consent to be included in this research.

4. Neo-burlesque Theatre as Counter-hegemony

Chalcraft and Noorani (2007) contend that counter-hegemonic movements contest the exercise of hegemony as commonsense not through a direct assault on state power, but through ideological struggle and a war of position via the cultural sphere. In this type of resistance, subordinate groups attempt to win the consent of other groups and forge alliances through leadership practices in order to create an alternative political and ethical movement that poses a challenge to the hegemonic culture (Caroll, 2007). In order for a subaltern group to forge alliances they must move beyond their own group's outlook and coordinate the broader demands of other groups. These processes of counter-hegemony occur on the same terrain and in conjunction to hegemony, whereby the dominant culture must tolerate and incorporate some alternative and oppositional ideologies into its fold in order to renew and secure its alliances. Yet, as dynamic processes, at the same time, the hegemonic order can also deploy mechanisms of enculturation where elements of the elite culture are introduced into the counter-hegemonic one in order to subdue oppositional forces (Martin-Barbero, 1987/1993) and renew its authority.

As a communication practice in the cultural sphere, neo-burlesque theatre can operate as a site of counter-hegemonic struggle wherein performers use their stage presence to forge alliances and win the consent of other groups. Specifically, members of the *Sexual Overtones* can act as “organic intellectuals” –the leaders of subordinate groups that liaison between their class interests and those of dominant classes (Gramsci, 1927/1971: 5-23)¹⁰⁷ – in order to advance feminist and queer ideologies and practices. As mentioned above, audiences at these performances according to troupe members is often in the hundreds, suggesting that the *Sexual Overtones* have the capacity to reach a large number of people and forge alliances across different groups. According to anecdotal evidence from the performers, audiences are generally comprised of more women than men and tend to be supportive of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LBGTQ) community. The performers further note that when they invite their families and co-workers to shows, this often includes members of parliament and lawyers. Although these invitations are most likely personally motivated rather than a proactive political initiative, in so doing, the troupe has some capacity to reach and influence elite members of the hegemonic culture.

¹⁰⁷ Gramsci discerns between ‘traditional intellectuals’ who are defined by their profession and ‘organic intellectuals’ who perform the mediating function in the struggle for solidifying class alliances. These organic intellectuals on the one hand, act as the dominant classes’ deputies often exercising the subaltern functions of hegemony and on the other hand, simultaneously direct their own class aspirations, which can exert some influences on the ruling groups.

Performers use bodily humour as a counter-hegemonic technique to win the consent of their diverse spectators to adopt alternative and sometimes, oppositional ideologies and practices. In general, humour operates as a means for subordinate groups to create solidarity and build alliances through disguised and veiled metaphors, which are more palatable and therefore more tolerated and accommodated by the dominant culture. In his classic text Bergson (1900) figures the body as an essential element of humour arguing that there is a comic effect when our attention diverts from our minds to our physical limitations.

More specifically, gestures and movements of the human body are subject to laughter in instances that people see the effect of the automatization of the human body as machine. He further puts forth that repetition, imitation and gestures can produce laughter because they highlight mechanistic elements of the body. Bergson also discusses that fashion and clothing on the body can be utilized to produce laughter, particularly when they seem out of historical and cultural context. The *Sexual Overtones* engage in bodily humour through various techniques such as exaggerated gestures, parody, costuming, practices of clowning and playfulness to invoke laughter and pleasure in their audience members in order to make oppositional ideologies and practices lighter and funnier, thereby softening their oppositional force and appearing more tolerable to the dominant culture.

5. Spirals of Pleasures and Power between Performers and Audience

As Bergson notes laughter is necessarily a social phenomena and thus the interaction between performer and audience is integral to neo-burlesque theatre. In this complex, reciprocal relationship the production and use of pleasure operates as a technique of power. Foucault explains that there exists “spirals of power and pleasure”(1978) where observer and observed come into intimate contact through the scrutiny of bodies and in which the observer exercises power through the production of pleasure and the observed finds pleasure in its obedience. Neo-burlesque spectators and performers —observers and observed— are engaged in these “spirals of pleasure and power”.

By tantalizing their spectators through striptease and bodily humour as well as costumes, song and dance they use some of the same technique of dominant culture—the objectification and display of bodies—to influence audience members to accept alternative and queer practices. For instance, queer men flaunt their bodies in shiny gold lamé shorts, young women walk around

selling candy to the audience while wearing nipple tassels and performers throw sparkly confetti out of their underwear as they strip to further arouse and titillate audience members. Furthermore, the use of bodily humour through clowning, which adopts exaggerated gestures and costumes, parody and physical humour draws attention to the body to invoke laughter and amusement as a technique of pleasure. The skit “Wanna Taste My...” exemplifies the conjoining of striptease with bodily humour as a technique of pleasure.

In the performance, troupe members Cream Puff and Powder Puff cover Xposé’s body with ingredients such as chocolate sauce, banana and whipped cream as they are using her body to make an ice cream sundae as they all strip to “Popped my Cherry” by Fiona Apple. The simple storyline is all about pleasure, playfulness, decadence and indulgence with sweet candy dripping off of a woman. The use of pleasure at first glance reinforces existing tropes of women as sex objects to be consumed. Nonetheless, in this context, they flip the male gaze insofar as women are pleasing women, thereby challenging hetero-normative correlations between pleasure, femininity and women’s bodies. Throughout the skit, Cream Puff and Powder Puff engage in over-the-top gestures culminating in pulling chocolate syrup out of their panties referencing ‘playing with poop’ as a form of pleasure, in a playful way. This blurring of humour and pleasure with a sexually subversive act operates as a technique of power to push the boundaries of sexually appropriate and pleasurable behavior. As Cream Puff explains:

We want to entertain our audience and make them laugh. By doing so, we want to use sexual satire, playfulness and humour to show how different body types and different sexual practices can be sexual and beautiful. People came up to me after the performance and said ‘I never thought I would find that act [of playing with poop] sexy—but you made it so fun, playful and erotic’ (Cream Puff, Personal Communication April 15, 2013).

At the same time, there exists a complex two-way-flow concerning pleasure between performers and spectators. Specifically, the spectators are not merely passive dupes that are injected with the performers’ ideologies. Rather they have some capacity to influence the production of the performance. For instance, through practices such as cheering, clapping and laughter spectators produce pleasure in the performers. In fact, every performer that I interviewed underscored that they gained pleasure through exhibitionism in front of an audience and in celebrating their own bodies publically. Randy Enhancement expressed: “The thrill is taking off your clothes in front of people as they are fully clothed. You get such

a surge of energy. You feel totally pumped!” (Personal Communication, June 5, 2013). Troupe member, Xposé explains the ways in which stripping combined with humour is a technique to overcome her body shame:

As a woman in my forties and a mother of two children, I am not beautiful by conventional standards and my body is not typically the type of body that is celebrated publically. I didn't even like standing in front of a mirror in the nude. The act of shedding my clothes coupled with entertaining an audience in a light-hearted manner is teaching me something I never thought I would be able to do—shed my inhibitions and take off my clothes in front of a crowd! Hearing that crowd cheer me on has taught me to accept my body and even see it as sexy and fun (Xposé, Personal Communication, March 21, 2013).

Taking her clothes off in front of an audience and making them laugh produces pleasure in the performer, which operates as technique of power to publically accept and celebrate her own body by not taking it too seriously. In this way, there is a complex interplay of power relations between audience and performer.

The spectators are further able to express displeasure as a feedback mechanism to exert some influence over the performance. For example, during the Winternude show, the host, Geoffo Marx dressed as Tony 5 Balls—an Ottawa comedian dressed as a snow man with the carrot placed as genitals rather than a nose—engaged the audience in an interactive game which was meant to be comedic relief during intermission. Specifically, the audience was encouraged to stand up while the host asked a series of personal questions about the spectators' sexual orientation, experiences and practices such as if we “had ever had a threesome”, “ever engaged in same sex relations”, or “ever had sex with an animal”.

Those who had not participated in these practices were asked to sit down, leaving members of the LGBTQ community exposed at some instances. Although many audience members laughed at his delivery, sense of timing and element of surprise of asking such intimate questions in a public venue, the game was not well received by all audience members. As a result, some audience members expressed through the troupe's facebook page that they found it offensive by publicly focusing on gender identities and sexual proclivities. As a consequence, the *Sexual Overtones* issued an apology through their facebook page and have prohibited the host from returning to future performances. They wrote:

To all our fabulous fans who attended Winternude: We realize we didn't deliver the funnies as best we could at Winternude—and in fact there were things said that made people feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. We regret this and will do our best to make sure it doesn't happen again (February 4, 2013).

In this instance, the use of social media acted as a mechanism of enculturation through which the hegemonic culture could re-assert and re-integrate neo-burlesque theatre into its fold through setting the limits of what is deemed appropriate. Thus, although performers have power to influence the audience, through the production of pleasure and humour, the spectators do have some capacity to influence the content through feedback mechanisms of pleasure and displeasure, pointing to a complex struggle of power relations at play.

6. Burlesque Bodies as Biopower

The Sexual Overtones further use bodily humour as techniques of biopower to challenge conventional correlations between healthy and beautiful bodies. As Foucault conceived it, biopower is a productive type of power technique deployed by the state that involves taking charge of bodies to help them (or if necessary contain them) to ensure their own good health, wellbeing and optimal longevity. For instance, the government may advocate and sponsor health and exercise programs to regulate the body and keep the population in shape. From this perspective, beauty and health are often conflated where thin, sculpted bodies are often considered the normative markers of ideal health towards which individuals should work. These bodies are often those held up on a pedestal and the types that are publically displayed and celebrated through the mass media and in line with capitalist objectives where individuals are encouraged to work on their bodies in order to attain a state of 'perfection'.

Although Foucault conceptualizes biopower as a technique of the state, it includes a capacity for individuals to resist these practices. Insofar as it is a productive type of power that targets bodies, individuals can utilize their bodies in ways that were not intended. For instance, by not sculpting their bodies, by exaggerating certain features or by publicly showcasing 'unhealthy' bodies as beautiful, the *Sexual Overtones* subvert existing norms about beautiful bodies through 'making fun'. For example, the troupe includes the subgroup the Muffin Tops—a humorous culturally slang term that references 'love handles' and more specifically the bulge that forms above a pair of pants that are too tight adopt

the motto “shake what the bakery gave us” as a way of celebrating larger sized women. They particularly engage in techniques of playfulness and pleasure (further evinced by their names Ambrosia, Pound Cake and Cherry Pie) to convince audience members that larger women who are conventionally considered unhealthy and therefore deemed unworthy can be considered sexy and invoke pleasure in their audience. Ambrosia further explains:

As a culture, we look at bodies everyday, but there is very little representation of heavier women as sexy. The Muffin Tops are all over 6 feet tall ranging from size 14 to 18 and we strip down to our panties. We want to show people that bodies of all different shapes and sizes are beautiful. So we get up there and we don't take ourselves too seriously and we have a lot of fun. I cannot tell you how many times audience members have thanked me and told me how taking off my clothes has helped them accept their own bodies as healthy, beautiful and worthy (Personal Communication April 1, 2013).

Through the use of costumes they exaggerate areas of their bodies that they are generally expected to cover up. Randy Enhancement further explicates that the Muffin Top's neo-burlesque combination of exaggeration and striptease challenges the audience normative correlations between beauty and health:

They weren't just tattooed fat girls, they were sexy and knew how to titillate a crowd. It changed the way I thought about being big. Aggressively shaking their asses which are covered in cellulite challenges that being fit is the only way to be beautiful and sexy (Randy Enhancement, Personal Communication, June 5, 2013).

Other performances further engage in techniques of biopower to subvert conventions that some bodies count more than others. For example, the Vintage Vixens include guest performers Prairie Fire, Naughty Marlena, Insatiable Isabelle and Gypsy Larose, who all range between the ages of 45 and 60 years. In their performance, they stripped to Ruth Brown's “If I can't sell it, I'll sit on it,” a satirical song that advocates women's sexual power and agency through prostitution. Attired in old-fashioned panties and bloomers, corsets they re-appropriate elements of traditional burlesque including a can-can leg show to reclaim their older bodies as sexy. By stripping on stage, these women reaffirm the desirability of older women's

bodies and push the limits of the types of bodies invested with value. Although this performance does not include any obvious humour quality, it is more serious in its nod to the radical origins of burlesque, in which their troupe is situated.

As a state technique, biopower nonetheless sets limits on these types of resistances that can take form. Insofar as biopower makes use of bodies, their bodies become the only means available through which to enact these resistances. Simply put, although performers use their bodies as means of resistance, they remain entrapped within the display and objectification of female bodies. Moreover, performers still engage in dominant beautification practices thereby reproducing techniques of biopower deployed by the dominant culture. For instance, the Muffin Tops often construct themselves as the 1950s housewives and strip teasing to doo-wop style songs thereby constructing themselves as 'girly' through expressions of exaggerated femininity.

This re-appropriation of normative constructions of femininity suggests that in order to validate their bodies, they still must conform to feminine ideals by using aspects of femininity in order to make their bodies more acceptable to their audiences. In other words, overweight bodies are celebrated as worthy as long as they conform to displays of femininity. Ambrosia further concedes that she adopts normative beauty practices such as "not eating salty things", engages in shaving and exfoliating beauty rituals before the show as well as picks costumes that flatter her body so she could look and feel her most beautiful on stage. Thus, the use of bodily humour through exaggeration offers a counterpoint to the traditional correlation between beauty and wellbeing, she engages in beautification practices that reproduce beauty norms of dominant culture.

Furthermore these techniques of biopower do not just influence women's practices insofar as male performers increasingly concentrate on their physical appearance in order to attain a state of perfection. For instance, Kinky admits that he goes to the gym every day for weeks leading up to the show, despite the troupe's supposed emphasis on body acceptance and in spite of his recognition that his body fits the dominant culture's ideal. Kinky explains:

Sexuality is defined in our culture as shared between hyper fit people...I have the sort of body that is celebrated and I still want to look my best before a show. Taking my clothes off in front of a lot of people looking at me in my tiny boxer shorts is intimidating, so leading up to the show I go to the gym everyday. I want to look jacked! I want to look awesome (Kinky, Personal communication, January 19, 2013).

In this way, biopower continues to set the parameters on how the body can mobilized as a technique of resistance.

7. New Gender Performances

Through the use of bodily humour, the *Sexual Overtones* construct new feminine and masculine gender performances that move beyond dominant constructions. As Butler (1990, 1993) explains, gender is not an *a priori*, essentialized category but rather is performed through repeated gestures, postures and stylizations of the body that congeal around hetero-normative codes of masculinity and femininity. She turns to drag as a subversive act that exposes the artifices of gender by playing upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. By re-stylizing the body in new ways she argues, individuals can resist normative gender codes.

Like drag, neo-burlesque also destabilizes dominant gender norms through the incorporation of parody, exaggeration and mimicking practices, further drawing attention to the constructed-nature of gender. Through re-stylizations of the body, that make use of exaggerated gestures, costumes and make-up applied in new ways, neo-burlesque performers can construct new gender performances that move beyond normative constructions of masculinity and femininity. The intersection between gender performativity and bodily humour becomes manifest insofar as both involve imitation, parody and repetitions of bodily gestures and movements, even the use of costuming in order to make automatized aspects of the body strange, further underscoring bodily humour's resistive aspects.

The *Sexual Overtones* blur bodily-based humour with gender performances as a technique to resist conventional gender norms. Cream Puff explains that her characters are a “form of fun, play and an outlet for creativity and expression” where she re-assembles normative constructions of femininity and masculinity to construct a new gender performance. In her act, “Much time for men” she dresses up as a ballerina and dances to the lyrics “I like to have a man for breakfast each day.” Although she is dressed as a feminine ballerina—she engages in “slapstick humour” by “too desperately and too eagerly running after the boys” as she clumsily falls. Her performance thus acts as a parody of ‘high culture’ and the fine arts of ballet where she subverts appropriate femininity as docile, disciplined and submissive. As such, she uses bodily humour to reorder the instruments of femininity in new ways that confound gender expectations. Cream Puff further explicates that uses costumes and makeup in funny ways to highlight the artifices of gender and sex and obscure normative boundaries:

Cream Puff is someone I would never be in real life. It's an alter ego. I never wear makeup in public and I identify as a butch dyke so wearing it on stage and being feminine becomes the transgressive act. I feel like I am in drag if I dress like a woman. But I like to make my makeup weird and smear it all over my face (Cream Puff, Personal Communication, April 15, 2013).

Other performers engage more explicitly in tongue and cheek cross-dressing practices to denaturalize categories of male and female. For example, in the skit "It's gonna be me" a song by the boy band 'N Sync, three performers (Randy Enhancement, Kinky and Ex Factor) engage in the performance, through gestures, posturing and costumes of heterosexual masculinity. As they strip, Ex Factor includes an element of playful surprise by revealing that her anatomy does not match her performance, thereby confounding audience gender expectations. In yet another act, Xposé and the Brain dressed as evil clowns with clown masks, and with suspenders and a tie as well as sexy nylon tights. By dressing as an evil clown that blended various elements in new ways they constructed a new gender performance where funny and sexy are blurred together:

Evil clowns are not often seen as sexy. They are more often aligned with something that we laugh at or are afraid of. Dressing as an evil clown while stripping plays with boundaries of what is considered feminine and who is considered sexy. But we are doing it through play and fun (The Brain, Personal Communication, March 5, 2013).

They are literally playing the clown to challenge society's standards of beauty and sexuality.

Other performances more overtly used parody as a subversive tactic through mimicking and mocking the gender and class norms in the dominant culture. For instance, the skit "Va-Va-Va Broom" parodies a traditional office space where two performers dress as cleaning staff and one character acts as a male boss, thereby reproducing subservient women working within a patriarchal, white hetero-normative structure. Throughout the skit, the maids use clownish gesturing such as prancing around the office the exaggerated movement of their mops in a sexual motion, to invoke laughter in the audience. Through the expression of their queer sexuality, the boss is drawn out of the dominant space and brought into queer subversive pleasure, which escalates into a threesome. As the performance ensues and the three performers strip, the male boss engages in the practices of mopping

and the audience discovers that the male boss is wearing pink frilly panties which further undoes the patriarchal expectations of dominant masculinity. Thus through re-assembling and re-stylization of elements of domination in new ways, the *Sexual Overtones* construct new performances that subvert normative categorizations.

8. Conclusion: Humorous Resistance?

To summarize, the case study of the *Sexual Overtones* demonstrates some of the ways in which neo-burlesque theatre can operate as a site for resistance through discourses and practices of bodily humour. The theatre becomes a platform wherein performers can act as the 'organic intellectuals' that liaison between dominant and popular interests via the cultural sphere. In this way, the *Sexual Overtones* have a degree of influence on audience members and through them the dominant culture. They engage in bodily humour and striptease as techniques of power to invoke pleasure in their audiences to advance their own alternate ideologies and practices. As such, the *Sexual Overtones* include some counter-hegemonic aspects through which the audience can also take delight in some feminist and queer ideologies and practices.

Nonetheless, neo-burlesque theatre involves a complex, reciprocal and sometimes contradictory relationship between performers and audience members. There is in fact no guarantee how audiences will respond to the performance. The hegemonic culture can attempt to insert its own ideologies and practices, as evidenced through the use that some audience members made of social media. Furthermore, unlike the mass media, theatre has a more limited and local scope thereby further diminishing its counter-hegemonic aspects, which is rendered even more complex by the several Ottawa-based publics it does reach. For the most part, as discussed, audience members that attend the show are supporters of feminist and queer politics and therefore have the same attitudes and ideologies as performers. In this way, neo-burlesque theatre may tend to reconfirm existing viewpoints of groups and individuals to which the troupe are already allied, a necessary component in renewing and strengthening existing alliances as part of the counter-hegemonic processes. However, in instances where members of the dominant culture attend the show, such as in the case of invited members of the elite culture, the use of striptease and bodily humour might work as techniques to win their consent and forge new alliances. Through bodily display and objectification, these neo-burlesque performers are utilizing the same techniques utilized by the dominant culture, but through techniques of humour invert the way pleasure has been linked with certain bodies and practices.

For instance, through these techniques conventionally overweight bodies are celebrated and gender inversions are normalized. Through these techniques neo-burlesque performers can further widen their counter-hegemonic reach beyond the limitations of the theatre through a two-step flow process of communication, developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). According to these communication scholars, the impact of the media extends beyond its immediate audience through opinion leaders—experts and people of influence who act as mediators between the media and the masses. They argue that the effect of the media occurs in two steps: first the message makes its impression on opinion leaders, and second on mass audiences through the personal influence of these leaders. As such these elite audience members who attend the performances can act as opinion leaders who are in dominant positions, who in turn can influence the larger public in Ottawa, thereby helping to shift hegemonic relations of power.

Neo-burlesque's re-appropriation of the instruments of domination does, however, relegate its resistive capacities to the body. Moreover, sometimes performers continue to enact beauty standards and practices set by the dominant culture, further undermining their resistive goals. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1997) argue that these bodily performances operate at the individual level and are often tolerated and accommodated by the dominant culture and thus do not counter larger structural and political relations of power. Due to these various contradictions and complex relations, it can be concluded that neo-burlesque theatre encompasses some counter-hegemonic practices at the level of culture, but it operates within a comedic—rather than satirical frame—that does not topple the existing social order. Rather, neo-burlesque theatre operates as a site of discursive struggle where the body is deployed within a complex mesh of power through embodied practices of humour and pleasure.

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