



link

disability magazine

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PARTY TIME! LINK TURNS THE BIG 3-0

THE VA-VA-VOOM OF BURLESQUE

BLOGGING ABOUT DISABILITY

TRIP-PLANNING FOR ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL



beauty of
BURLESQUE



Sequins, bling and feather boas will be *de rigueur* at a new performance by artists with disabilities in Adelaide, **Carla Caruso** finds.

Dita Von Teese could perhaps be credited with thrusting burlesque into the mainstream in the modern day.

The American star is the epitome of the provocative performance art - featuring striptease and satire - with her dark curls, vampy red lips, milky complexion and racy curves.

But, the glitz and glamour of the burlesque world can, of course, also be sampled closer to home. And, most recently, it's dipped its red-painted toes in the disability arena.

Three local women have been brought together in the name of burlesque by Adelaide's No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability, a contemporary theatre company, which provides creative opportunities and training programs for artists with disabilities.

No Strings artistic associate Maude Davey, as a mentor, is helping performers Rachel High and Emma J. Hawkins devise burlesque pieces for the Feast Festival - Adelaide's lesbian and gay culture fest - in November. Some will recognise Hawkins, who performed as a stilt-walking ballerina of short stature in Circus Oz at the Adelaide Fringe. High, who has Down syndrome, has performed in major productions for Restless Dance Theatre, as well as No Strings.

On the collaboration, Davey says: "No Strings is about making connections with artists with disabilities and the broader artistic community and also just about making great work. These pieces will feature as part of (the intimate stage show) Salon de Dance... It's kind of this massive, beautiful, mad variety show that happens in this kind of demented space. It's sexy and

it's outrageous and it's experimental and it's weird - and it's just really delightful!"

For High, all she knew about burlesque before trying her hand at it was that the performers did tricks and there was "something called pasties" involved (as in, nipple covers). "I was a little bit nervous, but since working with Maude, I've been more open to it. I feel really good and have fun with the moves!"

Hawkins, a freelance artist, says while she's been "around the traps" performance-wise, attempting burlesque was also daunting for her at first. "I thought, 'Oh my god. Am I going to be able to do it? Will I have to get my clothes off?'" (But) meeting

Maude, I've found it's not all about taking your clothes off. It's really quite an interesting art-form. I'm quite excited about (our performance) - it's going to be completely out there for burlesque!"

Davey has worked in theatre, film and TV as an actor, director and writer (including starring in the movie, *My Year Without Sex*) and dabbled in burlesque in the early 90s. After a brief hiatus, she now regularly performs as a guest artist in stage show *The Burlesque Hour*, led by Jackie Smith and Moira Finucane. (Davey recently travelled to Slovenia with the show.)

Teaching others the art of burlesque has been something new for her. But, it's a challenge she's relishing. When *Link* spoke to her during High and Hawkins' first week in creative development, the pair appeared to have come out of their shells quite easily. "This afternoon, we're going to look at 'pasties.' It's been pretty uninhibited," Davey says, laughing. →



Top: Rachel High (left) and Emma J. Hawkins share a giggle in between practice sessions. **Bottom L-R:** Emma J. Hawkins preens before practise, while Rachel High tries her hand at feather boa work. Photography by James Elsby.

Still, she quickly adds: "I don't do the 'bumps and grinds.' I'm not interested in that. The 'bump and grind' is great as a reference point, but what can you do beyond that? How can you use the conventions of burlesque to say something, explore something that is interesting, or that is a grander metaphor? That's what I'm interested in. Although, we've had some fun with feather boas and we've done a bit of strutting and preening and pouting, I'm not the sort of person that goes, 'Let's learn the shimmy.'"

"We've done a bit of strutting and preening and pouting."

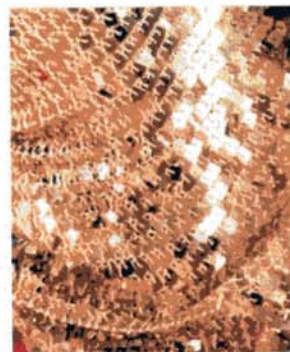
For Davey, burlesque acts always have to have a "political undercurrent and be about something." "There's always an idea at the base of it. (A lot of) burlesque these days is about getting your gear off, down to your pasties and twirl. But, to me, getting your gear off is the least important part of the act. It's what happens then that's the most important thing."

Throwing disability into the mix, Davey says, is about challenging audience perceptions. "The very best theatre that is made with artists, who have a disability or who are differently abled, reveals the world in a different way. You look at it and you think, 'I've never thought that before; I've never seen that before, but I understand it differently (now).'"

Such work celebrates the performers and allows them to be unique and extraordinary, she says. "If I just watch something and I go, 'Geez, they can talk well or move well, that, for me, has failed. What I want is to be engaged with the performer to such an extent that I empathise with them in the same way as I would with anyone else; that I recognise myself in them. That's what I want. In some ways, (disability) is completely beside the point, but in other ways - because it's a physical thing and we're looking at people, who look different - then it's absolutely the point, because in burlesque your body is your instrument. That's what you've got. That's the expressive tool."

(Another company to challenge audience perceptions in a similar way recently was Adelaide's Restless Dance Theatre, which features young, disabled and non-disabled artists. It created a new dance work about female beauty, aptly entitled *Beauty*, in July.)

Taking burlesque to the masses, Davey also led a workshop in Adelaide in June, especially for women with disabilities, co-sponsored by No Strings and the Disability and Arts Transition Team. Getting participants in the "sexy zone" wasn't too hard. Davey explains: "If you say to a performer, 'OK now, I want you to be sexy', it's awkward. You get really self-conscious. What you need to do is unlock ways of being or moving in the space... (and you can) unlock stuff that you would never, ever find if you said, 'Be sexy.'" Indeed. Let the preening begin! 🌀



Burlesque fast facts

- In Europe in the early 18th century, burlesque was known as a form of musical and theatrical parody, in which a piece of opera or classical theatre was adapted in a broad, often risqué style. In late 19th century - in the UK particularly - such colourful productions became hugely popular.
- It was in America during the 20th century that burlesque became associated with a variety show, in which striptease was at the helm.
- Burlesque moves include the shimmy, the quiver, and the bump-and-grind.
- Despite her dark, sultry looks today, US burlesque star Dita Von Teese, in her school days, had long, blonde hair and sunny girl-next-door looks.

August 1980. Lindy Chamberlain was the name on everyone's lips after her baby, Azaria, disappeared at Uluru, reportedly taken by a dingo.

The nation grooved to US band Lipps Inc's track, *Funkytown*, which nabbed the number one spot on the Aussie music charts that month. (The hit was later covered by Oz group Pseudo Echo.) The bold glitz of 80s fashion had just begun to trickle through.

And, Adelaide disability advocate Jeff Heath and his wife, Yvonne Baillie, began *Link* Magazine from their home, with a mission to "examine issues from a cross-disability perspective". (Heath used a wheelchair after a tumour on his spine caused paralysis.) *Link* has since gone from strength to strength, becoming a successful national publication – and its beginnings are the very reason you hold it in your hands today!

Thirty years on, there's still much to celebrate in the disability world – including artists with disabilities dabbling in burlesque, creative, people-centred day programs catering for those with intellectual disabilities, disability bloggers actively speaking out, and athletes with disabilities doing us proud on an international level – all of which are covered in this issue. Enjoy!

Carla

Carla Caruso, *Link* editor



At the No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability AGM: (Top) No Strings artistic director PJ Rose & performer Duncan Luke. (Centre) Dignity for Disability MLC Kelly Vincent & Victoria Marcellis. (Bottom) No Strings community ambassador Kym Mackenzie & patron/filmmaker Rolf de Heer.

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From *Link's* Facebook fan page...

Such a great mag, keep up the good work – Robert

Estelle (Shields') letter (to the magazine) was just great and, as Robbi (Williams) says, every politician, bureaucrat, CEO and citizen needs to read it. - James

(Enjoyed) the latest Link edition. Out with the political stuff and in with the reality. Bring it on Link! - Jacy



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inside link

Cover Story

12 Rachel High and Emma J. Hawkins have joined forces to devise burlesque acts for Adelaide's Feast Festival, with help from No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability



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Cover: Burlesque performers Rachel High and Emma J. Hawkins from No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability. **Photographer:** James Elsby.
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