“Burlesque through a brown lens”

‘Brown Girls Burlesque’ is an all-women-of-colour burlesque troupe. Founder AuroraBoobRealis talks to Charlotte Wainwright about the empowerment, sensuality and joy that burlesque has given her

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Meet AuroraBoobRealis, aka DawN Crandell, co-founder of ‘Brown Girls Burlesque’, an all women of colour burlesque troupe that is dedicated to showcasing the empowerment women can feel through the performance of this art form. Based in New York City, BGB is a troupe that aims to provide more diversity within burlesque, describing itself as a group that is committed to presenting the unique viewpoint of “burlesque through a brown lens”.

Burlesque is a type of performance that has its roots in satire, and involves elements of striptease throughout. Because of this, it is an art form that has faced much controversy, both praised and condemned for empowering and objectifying women. For Aurora and the women of BGB, however, burlesque is simply “a fun and sexy way to tell a story with your full body, a striptease that is also storytelling, humour, theatre, character, dance and performance art”.

Aurora first became a fan of burlesque during her time at college. Despite attending numerous shows, however, she was shocked to find that women of colour were not being represented. “I was a burlesque fan first. I was inspired by the women onstage of all shapes and sizes, expressing and owning their own sensuality and using their bodies to tell stories. But as a woman of colour I found my reflection lacking.”

Miss AuroraBoobRealis
“In two years of seeing shows in NYC I saw only one brown body on stage. I wanted to know why; this was New York City, one of the most diverse cities on the planet! Was I going to the wrong venues? Did women of colour just not get booked as often? I knew they must exist in this art form, but where? Burlesque was something I wanted to do, but I didn’t want to be that one brown body on stage.”

Chicava HoneyChild

It was this experience that prompted Aurora to create BGB. “I got the idea to create an all women of colour troupe. I was in graduate school at the time, though, so this idea promptly occupied the back of my mind for a few years, until my graduation party in February 2007, which I held at the Slipper Room, one of NYC’s main burlesque venues. I told one of my closest friends, Maya Haynes, and, being a Taurus and a go-getter, she immediately said “let’s do it”, and so BGB was born.”

Aurora studied at Sarah Lawrence, a liberal arts college based in New York, graduating with a B.A. that focused predominately on Performing Arts. She also received an M.F.A. in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College, which focused strongly on 20th Century Black Radical Artists, alongside the intersections of dance, poetry and theatre. Today she describes herself as an “interdisciplinary performing artist and educator”, creating work within numerous fields in the arts.

It is burlesque however, that remains Aurora’s true passion. “When Maya and I founded BGB, burlesque became another art form in my toolbox. Over the years, though, it has moved centre stage. It feels like I was always destined for burlesque. After one of BGBs first shows, a close friend and fellow artist told me that, although he had always enjoyed my performances before, burlesque was my true calling, because I could fold in all of my other artistic disciplines into this art form, and create magic”.

“Miss AuroraBoobRealis is DawN Crandell. The only difference is Aurora tends to wear a bit more glitter”

She tells me that it is through burlesque that she is best able to explore important and often serious issues that both she herself and other women have faced within their lifetimes. “BGB is dedicated to creating our own reflections in an art form that, historically, has primarily used us as exotified objects, or often denied our very presence. For the past six years, through theatrical, neo-burlesque, and classical striptease, we have been storming centre-stage with our voices and stories, in over thirty self produced shows, that range from topical exposes of politics, culture and the complexities of brown women’s
experiences in society, to celebrations of musical icons and so much more.”

It is for this reason that Aurora strongly believes that burlesque is a tool through which women can feel utterly empowered. “I feel empowered by the burlesque that I make and that of the others in BGB. I feel empowered watching many of our colleagues’ work. I feel empowered experiencing and creating burlesque, where the performers are telling our truths and sharing our own sensuality, defining ourselves completely. I feel empowered by burlesque that doesn’t simply cater to the heteronormative male gaze. I feel empowered by burlesque that says and communicates something to me. We have agency in the directing of our art and business, because we have made the decision to produce and promote our own events. I think some would expect burlesque performers to simply be hired for events and maybe not to have control of their work. But we of BGB are independent and innovative artists, powerful, creative, sassy and intelligent women.”

BGB performed its first show on the 12th October, 2007, at a small rock club in the Financial District of Manhattan. The initial response was something that Aurora had never anticipated. “An hour before the doors opened we were all hoping that eighty people would turn up. An hour and a half later, two hundred and fifty people were jammed into the club, with more getting turned away downstairs. We were blown away and realized that people were ready and hungry for what we were bringing to the form.”

Since its opening debut, BGB has grown expansively. After the success of their first show, BGB was invited to perform its own off-Broadway residency, where it successfully sold out the two hundred and twenty five seat theatre, for six shows. The dancers also performed at the New York Burlesque Festival, a four day event filled with performers from the US, UK, Japan, Australia and many more. “With every show we gain a wider audience. Depending on the size of the venue, BGB performs for audiences of seventy at a bar show, or audiences of two hundred and fifty at a main-stage show. We perform at venues around NYC and beyond. We are constantly receiving messages of support and thanks from people around the world that are excited we exist.”

“when you are in the moment and connecting with the audience, it is transcendent”

For Aurora though, there is one performance in particular that continues to stand out to her as her
personal favourite. For both herself and the girls of BGB, the performances are about much more than a simple striptease, and this one is no exception. “I have a piece called ‘Death of the Myth of the Tragic Mulatto’, which is a very American piece dealing with the complexities of the constructions of race and the imagined “tragedy” of being born mixed. I strip out of layers of veils that start with black to dark brown and then to lighter browns, until it matches my complexion. Underneath I’m wearing a brown paper bag dress, which is in reference to the horrid brown paper bag tests of the early twentieth century in the U.S., which were indicative of internalized racism. After stripping out of the dress, the music shifts and I become free, with some incredible house music and movement, having shed the stereotype. I strive to make every time I go on stage magic.”

This “magic”, she explains, comes from finding a strong connection with the audience. “There is a unique experience, I’ve found, to sharing and exploring your sensual nature on stage. Each dancer creates their own persona and name which draws from their personal experience, mythology, and a wide range of artistic influences. Through this you are connected to the audience and together you go on a journey. It is an incredible feeling. When you are in the moment and connecting with the audience, it is transcendent.”

As with any art form, though, there are moments when things can go wrong. “As a performer, any kind of performer, you have moments onstage where things don’t go right, a dropped glove, a stuck zipper, a missed cue; but you just have to move through it, because as clichéd as it is, the show must go on”.

Fortunately for Aurora, she has a strong support network to help her through any difficult or challenging periods, including those in which both herself and the other dancers in BGB, have been judged for their racy performances. “People judge. It’s a human trait, but I personally have a supportive family that is inspired by my burlesque career. My mom is a visual artist and sews, so she has made some of my best costumes. Last time BGB performed in Washington D.C. I stayed with my dad and step-mother, and they watched my toddler while I was performing, and then picked me up from the gig.”

For Aurora, her burlesque persona is now simply a part of her everyday life. “Miss AuroraBoobRealis is DawN Crandell. The only difference is Aurora tends to wear a bit more glitter. I strive for holistic integration of my artist/performer self and my everyday person self. It’s not that I think of myself as always onstage, rather I strive to tell my truth on and offstage. And no-one is surprised that I’m a burlesque artist. If anything, when folks I’ve known when I was younger learn that I’m a burlesque artist, I see a look of understanding spread across their face, like ahhh, that makes total sense!”
Because of this, her inspiration for new routines comes from all facets of life. “Inspiration is all around. Sometimes it’s a song that I can’t get out of my head, other times it’s a response to something happening in the world of politics or pop culture, or a photograph or painting or some other art form. Often once we pick a theme for a show, then a concept will materialize. The trick is to always have your creative brain on, because inspiration can come at any moment.” She has many role models, including “Katherine Dunham, a Voodoun Priestess, activist, educator and dancer”, “Audrey Lorde, a black, lesbian, mother, warrior and poet”, and Tina Turner.

Today BGB also offers classes in burlesque, something which, Aurora explains, received an overwhelming reaction. “The response to our foundation course, ‘Peeling into Burlesque’, has been amazing”. A. Duskie Magdeline, an alumnus of the course, stated that she “got swagger for days! To be semi-nude and playful about it got me even more comfortable in my skin. Participating in the class boosted my self-confidence considerably”.

Aurora sees a positive future for BGB. “In the future I see BGB touring internationally, spreading our glitter around the world.” As for burlesque as a whole, the future seems a lot less certain, although, it must be said, none the less bright. “Burlesque is heading in a lot of different directions. Some performers and groups are traditional or have mainstream showbiz aspirations, others have a punk aesthetic. Our group is creating its own pathway and learning from the various traditions to create new audiences and contexts. As a burlesque performer I place myself and the work that BGB does in the art form of burlesque. There is a global community composed of numerous performers who all define burlesque differently. I personally don’t feel I’m a part of a “burlesque industry” though. I am an artist creating work out of the necessity to communicate truths with the world at large. I am interested in the process and beauty and function and the mess of life, seeing the edges, and breaking the fourth wall.”

What is certain, though, is that the burlesque scene has been transformed for good. “BGB began in 2007. Almost seven years later, I see that there are definitely more women of colour performing in this art form. I won’t give BGB sole credit for that, but I do think we have helped create more space for women of colour to take the stage.” The troupe has certainly achieved all it set out do since its formation, and has ultimately, as Aurora states, managed to change the face of burlesque, “one bump n’ grind at a time”.

All photos courtesy of MissAuroraBoobRealis

One comment
susan

Hi,
We host a Burlesque Drink and Draw every Wednesday from 7-9pm at Bar Chord in Ditmas Park and are seeking models.
Please contact me if you know anyone who would be interested in modeling...
We can pay $50 plus tips.

Thanks so much.
Susan Siegel
Brooklyn ARTery

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