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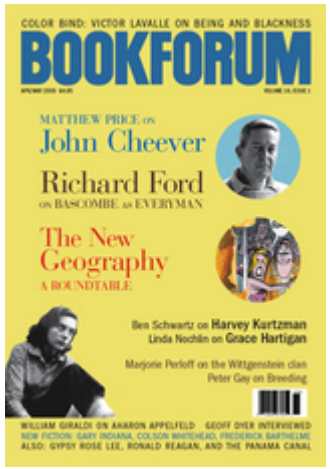

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APR/MAY 2009

Not So Dirty Dancing

The real story of the girlie show's most famous girlie

LAURA FROST

In her memoir, *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, Diablo Cody recounts her first strip at an amateur contest in a Minneapolis topless bar. In a feather boa and "five-inch, clit-pink Lucite platform stilettos" purchased for the occasion, she finds herself surrounded by seasoned pros and amplifies her performance accordingly: "I was concerned about my balance in the pink death-stilts, so I clung to the pole and gyrated like Gypsy." While Gypsy Rose Lee would probably have been tickled by the homage, the reference demonstrates how much we've needed a biography of the patron saint of striptease. There are two myths that should be dispelled. The first is that Gypsy was a conventional stripper. Far from being a gyrating pole dancer, she was dubbed the "Striptease Intellectual" for her idiosyncratic act, in which she delivered a sly lecture on art, literature, classical music, or the practice of striptease itself, with lines quoted from the likes of Algonquin Round Table wit

by Thomas Metzinger and *Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves* by James Le Fanu

Noah Isenberg on *Shadow and Light* by Jonathan Rabb

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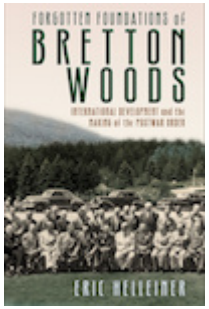
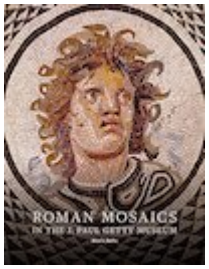
Dwight Fiske, all while peeling off her clothes. Or not, depending on her mood: One observer summed her up as "a stripper who doesn't strip." Gypsy also wrote pulp noir novels, plays, occasional essays for the *New Yorker*, and a sparkling memoir. The second Gypsy myth, cultivated by the Broadway musical *Gypsy*, which was based on that memoir, is that her mother was responsible for her rise to fame.

Rachel Shteir's *Gypsy: The Art of the Tease* and Noralee Frankel's *Stripping Gypsy: The Life of Gypsy Rose Lee*, the first full-length biographies of the stripper (née Rose Louise Hovick), set the record straight—mostly. They recount her vaudeville childhood, arguing that her mother's "mental illness, emotional brutality, and overt bisexuality were not the stuff of a 1950s musical," as Frankel puts it, and that Gypsy became successful despite, rather than because of, her mother's machinations. The real story wasn't easy to get. Gypsy was a protean self-fashioner who constantly revised her life story. In the most extreme case, she lied about the identity of her son's father, Otto Preminger, until the boy was seventeen. Outfoxed by their subject, Shteir and Frankel equivocate about Gypsy's birth date, the circumstances of her first strip, the identity of her lovers, her relationship with her ghostwriters, and, ultimately, her act.

Both biographies narrate a life populated by personalities such as Baby Snooks, Waxy Gordon, and Rags Ragland (a Fanny Brice character, a bootlegger, and a comedian, respectively). Gypsy became a burlesque sensation in the early '30s and moved on to classier gigs like the Ziegfeld Follies later that decade, as moral crusaders tightened their grip on the city. In 1941, she published the detective novel *The G-String Murders*, which initially outsold every thriller except Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man*. After a disappointing period in Hollywood and three failed marriages, she spent her last years (she died in 1970) hosting a television talk show and making cameo appearances on *Hollywood Squares*. Both Shteir and Frankel make a strong case for the importance of Gypsy's lifelong proletariat solidarity and her activism representing labor unions and denouncing Spanish Fascism. Throughout her career, Gypsy was spectacularly successful at manipulating the boundaries of class and the perceived divide between high and low culture.

Shteir comes to her project as a scholar of theater and the author of *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (2004), as well as an afterword to *The G-String Murders*. Writing snappily, but not always fleshing out her ideas, she molds Gypsy's tale to fit Yale University





Press's Icons of America series. Sometimes it works: Brief comparisons of Gypsy to P. T. Barnum and Houdini are highly suggestive. However, there's little substance to other iconic-American analogies—Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, Horatio Alger, the Marx Brothers, and even the Statue of Liberty (who is technically French)—and Gypsy starts to become a floating signifier for Americanness rather than a unique persona.

Frankel's book is much more expansive and exhaustive, describing every one of Gypsy's film appearances, the plots of her two novels, and the contents of her art collection, as well as drawing on obscure articles about her act, such as *Mechanix Illustrated*'s feature on the design of her sets and props, and details about her tear-away costumes. (She spurned the newly invented zipper in favor of old-fashioned straight pins that she arranged as carefully as an architect.) The author of books on the American Civil War, Frankel was drawn to Gypsy's story by two tantalizing facts: that Gypsy spent time in a writers' colony in Brooklyn Heights in 1940 and that she was blacklisted in the '50s. Details such as her literary aspirations sometimes undermine Gypsy's glib promotion of herself as the "Naked Genius" and show her working hard to achieve something that looked effortless. She appears both more serious and more playful when we discover, for example, that she was one of the few female stars of her time to invest in her own shows or that she maintained her robust five-foot-nine-inch frame through hearty eating habits, claiming that her hobbies were "amateur photography and pork chops." True to her stage act, Gypsy kept some areas of her life strategically covered, and her biographers have not managed to reveal them. Frankel speculates that Gypsy "may have been bisexual" and may have been "more than friends" with *New Yorker* writer Janet Flanner, but she doesn't follow the thread. Shteir raises and dismisses rumors that Gypsy had an affair with Carson McCullers.

However, there's something more important missing. Neither book manages to communicate the energy or the particular pulse Gypsy transmitted to her audience. This is always a challenge for biographers of performers, but one feels it acutely here. Both Shteir and Frankel describe Gypsy's signature acts, but their accounts don't convey whatever was so extraordinary that Gypsy became a household name in her own time and remains one still. Sadly, we don't have much footage of Gypsy performing, and therein lies the problem. She gives a sanitized, comic version of her act in the 1943 film *Stage Door Canteen*. Announced

as a "lady of letters," she waltzes around the stage in a floor-length Victorian-style dress and a massive picture hat and decorously removes her garter belt and crinolines while showing no more than her clavicle, wrist, and a lot of leg. There are no bumps, no grinds: The routine is hardly even saucy. The most remarkable element is Gypsy's clear, strong, and overly enunciated voice, like a transformed Eliza Doolittle. "Have you the faintest idea about the private life of an exotic dancer?" she asks the slack-jawed sailors in the audience. "The things that go on in a fan-dancer's mind would give you no end of surprise. . . . For example, when I lower my gown a fraction and expose a patch of shoulder, I'm not interested in your reaction. . . . I am thinking of some painting by van Gogh or by Cézanne or the charm I found in reading *Lady Windermere's Fan*."

Was Gypsy's act a turn-on, a joke, or a locution lesson? She was at pains to publicize that she read Rabelais, *The Decameron*, and *Das Kapital*. The idea of a "Striptease Intellectual" sounds like nothing so much as Woody Allen's story "The Whore of Mensa," about a brainy brothel run out of the Hunter College bookstore in which one john is busted for "discussing *The Waste Land* and *Styles of Radical Will*, and, well, really getting into some issues." Was Gypsy's gimmick based on this same factor: the essentially misogynistic idea that a simultaneously sexy and intelligent woman is a novelty act? The biographies don't tell. At the end of her book, Shteir quotes Camille Paglia on the idea of the "sex symbol" pre–Marilyn Monroe to suggest that Gypsy's appeal was "the sizzle of outlaw sexuality," but that doesn't jibe with the sense that Gypsy put not sex but sublimation center stage.

While other strippers strutted or shimmied, Gypsy, Shteir notes, "stood still, alone on stage, reciting her lyrics like a schoolgirl at a poetry competition. . . . [H]er most consequential innovation is that she talked while disrobing." Her parodic, self-conscious strategies shifted the emphasis from her body to her words. Frankel argues it was Gypsy's memoir that "ultimately guaranteed her legendary status for decades after her death," but it's more than that—it's Gypsy's witty voice, her wisecracking cultural namedropping, which appears in all of her work, whether onstage or on the page.

Thinking about Gypsy's primary instrument as being her voice (the instrument we least associate with striptease), rather than her body, suggests a comparison both Shteir and Frankel dismiss: Mae West. Shteir concedes that both women played on nostalgia in their acts and that both aroused and deflected sexuality, but she argues that their style and their

verbal moxie were unalike. One wonders, though: When West called Gypsy “Lady Peel,” Gypsy fired back that West was “the weakest link in the Vassar Daisy Chain.” Meow.

Gypsy’s own voice is a better conduit of her story than these biographies, which, while historically informative, don’t convey the Gypsy sensation. Her memoir, novels, essays, and letters, for all their obfuscations—whether it’s net panties, pasties, or lies—are still the best accounts we have of what made her a star.

Laura Frost is associate professor of literary studies at the New School. She is the author of Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism *(Cornell University Press, 2001) and is at work on a book about modernism’s repudiation of pleasure.*

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