

The Body Undressed: Burlesque Persona as Somatic Instrument for Processing Trauma

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Abstract

This paper explores Burlesque as a site where the emotional body and the performing body meet. In Burlesque, undressing becomes a method of inquiry—a way of peeling back the layers of embodied memory, shame, resilience, and becoming. While the form has been widely examined through feminist and cultural lenses, its potential as a trauma-sensitive, somatic methodology remains underexplored. This project investigates the Burlesque persona as a somatic instrument: an embodied, aesthetic construction that enables performers to access, reorganise, and re-author emotional experience. Drawing from affect theory, trauma studies, embodiment, and psychodynamic approaches, the research conceptualises persona-building as a form of emotional architecture—strong enough to hold what has been fragmented, yet flexible enough to allow transformation. The study employs a 24-week mixed-methods pilot design integrating acting methodologies (Stanislavski, psychodrama, embodied improvisation) with qualitative data (interviews, reflective journals, performance analysis) and a light pre/post psychometric battery. Participants, drawn from diverse embodied histories, engage in a structured creative process that traces how identity, vulnerability, and resilience shift within performance-making. By positioning Burlesque as more than spectacle—as an embodied mode of inquiry—this project expands conversations on gender, agency, and affect, and proposes a trauma-informed framework in which the stage becomes a space for emotional negotiation, narrative reframing, and the gentle reconstruction of self.

Keywords: affect; embodiment; persona; burlesque; trauma

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