

BRASS-POLE BABYLON

Over the past generation, feminism has made tremendous headway in excusing the most inexcusable female behavior. Whether a woman is killing her husband or drowning her children, there's always someone else to blame, almost without exception a man.

But it hasn't been until very recently that feminist scribes have assayed to redeem that perennially maligned female archetype—the whore. And whether that whore be the literal type who spreads her legs and gives up the pootie for cash, or the more subtle type who merely displays her pootie for cash in a strip club, fem-power apologists find ingenious ways to blame everything that's wrong with whores on someone else.

Much of the literature which seeks to justify the existence of "erotic dancers"—i.e., whores who strip—bends over backwards and does a triple somersault trying to discount the negative stereotypes attendant to the profession. And when the ugly facts are too stark, too unavoidable to dismiss them as myths, they'll take the easy path and blame it on a piggish patriarchal society. For all the blibbity-blah about "empowerment," the last thing that feminists want women to do is take responsibility for their own actions.

Portland, OR, is said to host more strip clubs per capita than anywhere else on the planet. Portland is also perhaps the most politically correct burg in the galaxy. In a collision of these two ugly realities, the literature that justifies the sex industry is wont to describe strippers as sassy, empowered, capable, functional "sex workers"...even "Goddesses."

"It's not unusual for people involved in the adult industry, particularly women, to be condemned," writes Theresa "Darklady" Reed, who, to my knowledge, has never been a stripper and yet for some reason feels qualified to speak for them. "For instance, drug or alcohol addicted women who use their work to maintain their addictions are depicted as the standard....It doesn't take a great deal of effort, however, to disprove these people..." writes Reed before I tire of her delusional cant and abruptly cut her off.

"I wanna talk about how great you are," writes Teresa Dulce, editor of *Danzine*, a now-defunct Portland publication targeted to sex workers and based on the assumption that they can read. "About how you're making things happen for yourself....About how you're providing for your kids....About you going back to school, quitting school, learning a skill, switching careers," etc., etc., etc., about how you're anything but a victim of childhood sexual abuse who's doing table dances to work out your psychodrama.

"Sex-positive" stripper apologists such as Reed and Dulce would have you believe that the negative stereotypes are inaccurate, that most strippers are actually the well-educated, empowered, spoiled, pretentious, don't-really-represent-more-than-two-percent-of-all-sex-workers harridans that these girls are.

Is it really true that the average stripper is a nonviolent, sober, motivated woman who takes care of her family's needs before all else?

Suspicious that what these girls write might actually be

a wheelbarrow full of happy horse shit, I decided to ask some people who are actually CURRENTLY WORKING in Portland's sex industry...rather than wistfully writing about it...to see whether these sex-positive ogres are right.

What I uncovered shocked even me, and I quickly realized that my worst suspicions about Portland strippers were far too tame.

DAVE, 32, works for Big Dog Entertainment, an agency which books strippers for clubs throughout Portland. He's been toiling in the sex industry for much of his adult life. He says that over the years, he's had to pick up a "plethora of disembodied fingernails" from strip-club floors after stripper-on-stripper catfights. He relates another story where a stripper left in the middle of her shift due to a "family emergency." When he found her drinking at another club later that night and confronted her about it, she threw a pint glass at him, hitting him "square in the face." He tells of one stripper mom whose daughter came into the

club to audition while mom was dancing, and both women finished the shift together.

One of Dave's particularly harrowing tales doesn't do much to dispel the "myth" of drug-addled strippers. "About three years ago," he tells me, "I came in one night to a club I was managing and found one of the girls DEAD from an overdose in the main part of the bar. Her friends just thought she was asleep, and they were trying to wake her up, but I could tell that she was more than just unconscious. When I said she was dead, her friends started going through her pockets, stealing all her stuff, and then they took off."

"I took her to the hospital in a taxicab. I mean, she was just dead weight, just flopping around, but at one point during the cab ride I attempted CPR, and she took like three breaths, then just went limp again."

"When we got to the hospital...this tiny little female doctor who weighed about 100 pounds finally came out. The stripper girl was about 140 pounds, so when the doctor tried to pull her out of the taxi, the dead stripper fell right on top of her."

"They were able to revive the stripper with those electrical zappers....The next day, the girl showed up in the bar in overalls. From the side, you could see the patches under her tits that they used to apply the zappers. It was the next day, and she hadn't even removed the patches! Unbelievable! She came back to see if she had left any of her drugs in the club."

BRENDAN, 28, books girls to dance at eight or nine local strip joints. He has been working in Portland's sex industry since he was 22.

Like Dave, Brendan doesn't do much to buttress the notion of

drug-free, pro-family strippers. "I had a girl whose dancer name was 'Stormy' working for me," he says. "She had done some really bad meth in the back room. It came time for her to go up onstage. Normally, the girls wipe the pole down. She was really sweaty from the meth, and while she was wiping the pole down, the towel found itself up her butt cheeks. Somehow, she left a turd nugget on the towel big enough to smear about two feet down the pole—she didn't do this on purpose, but she was so high that she was oblivious."

"That was the most fucked-up stripper story I experienced."

"Number two was at the same place a couple of weeks later. We were really hurting for girls. This girl came in who was butt-ass ugly, but it was a Tuesday, so I decided to give her a shot. She wasn't up there for five minutes when I started to get complaints. It turns out she has Band-Aids all over her body—I'm talking like 25 or 30 of them—on her stomach, arms, everything."

"I go up to the rack and ask her what's up with all the Band-Aids. 'Oh,' she says, 'my two kids have ringworms and they gave it to me.' Ringworm is communicable, you know, so if she so much as sits on the stage, all the other strippers are going to get it. So I told her to go home, too."

CLEO, 30, sells ads for a Portland strip-club guide and used to book dancers for local clubs. She tells of a stripper who was at home and locked out her live-in boyfriend, who was nursing a leg injury at the time.

"He was on crutches and he tried to crawl in through her back window because she wouldn't let him in," Cleo says. "So he gets one crutch in through the window, and she grabs it and starts beating him about the head with it. The cops were called, and she went to jail for it."

When I ask Cleo if she believes that strippers enter the business more for attention than money, she says, "Absolutely. I think if you're a stripper, you've been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused some time in the past. There was probably some sort of mental anguish inflicted on you, and they are driven by a need to fill a sort of void. I don't think they'd cut it at a regular job. They've been made to feel they're worthless outside of their sexuality. It's like a needle in a haystack to find one with the ability to grow and do things constructively. But when it comes right down to it, it's all about them. Because they know that they're nothing anywhere outside of the club."

"If I had to sum up strippers in one word: succubus. They use what a person finds pleasurable against them to deplete them."

And once they've been sucked dry, they'll drop 'em and go on to the next one."

I ask Cleo whether, among the estimated 2,000 strippers in Portland, she knows of any sober ones. "Yeah, I do," she replies—"one."

LADY LUX, 22, has worked as a stripper since she was 18. She's a petite girl with a baby face and a tattoo of intertwined serpents running from her chest down to her vagina.

She refers to sex-positive, pro-stripper writers as "trendy hipsters. I think they're try-hards. The way they carry themselves, how they preach—it's all wrong. It's really unbecoming."

Lux tells me of one "fat girl with huge, veiny tits" who'd give blowjobs to customers outside the strip club and would brag that her husband and kid didn't know about it. She mentions another stripper who "would brag about how she would do crystal meth right in front of her kids. She'd just offer up all this degrading information about herself." And she tells of more than one dancer who had a habit of pissing on other people's belongings when she was angry. Along with throwing glass objects, that's a theme that runs through most of my interviews—when Portland strippers are angry, they tend to piss on things.

Lux strikes another blow to the notion that most strippers aren't substance abusers. "I've met only one completely sober girl in four years of dancing," she says. "There was one girl who used to shoot cocaine and heroin in the crevices of her fingers, which were all bloated and ballooned-up and she had these bulbous wounds, these raunchy scabs, and she would touch everything, of course, with her scabbed hands—the pole, the rail, everything in the club. She used to leave blood trails on the bathroom door, the bathroom wall, and the toilet seat....I would beg the owner and the manager to fire her because she would shoot up in front of me in the bathroom on numerous occasions, and she told me she was Hep-C-positive."

Although Lux admits to getting violent with customers on more than one occasion, she says, "I think ALL strippers are fucked-up, except for me. [laughs] They're all pathological exhibitionists that are desperate for approval. And they're quick to judge, but they don't want to be judged. They get into it because of desperation. Or they're attention whores. Or they need the money. But mostly because they're lazy, probably."

"I don't think most of them hate men. I think they hate themselves. [laughs] It's true! [laughs again]...They use these sob stories of sexual abuse to gain sympathy from people and to gain attention. Getting attention, without a doubt, has more to do with them becoming

strippers than the money...I think most strippers will dance until they're in their 40s. They'll keep doing it until they can't. They'll accomplish nothing, they'll become nothing, they are all total wastes of flesh. If I had a license to kill, I'd shoot 'em all point-blank."

JOHN, 37, is an ex-Californian who has labored in Portland's sex industry for seven years. In the past he has sold ads and photographed strippers for the city's major strip-club magazine. He is currently a DJ at a popular Portland strip club. We sit in a patio outside the club and discuss his years in the business.

He says the only Portland stripper he's ever known to be sober is his current girlfriend—"until about a year ago," he adds, when she, too, started drinking.

John describes a previous stripper girlfriend as having been "severely alcoholic. She'd have weekly blackouts. She was arrested for DUIs three times. She'd wake up in unfamiliar places, sometimes naked. One time she woke up laying in a pile of her own feces, surrounded by empty bottles of Black Butte Porter."

He recalls one girl who was "violently dysfunctional. She attacked a bartender with a curling iron, a bouncer with a shoe, an agent with a beer bottle, and finally a DJ—me—with a glass fishbowl, splitting my head open and resulting in four stitches. She did it because I had scolded her for fighting with her equally doped-up stage partner. They were fighting because her partner had thrown up on her during the third song in their set."

"Sometimes the fucked-up behavior isn't only fueled by drugs and alcohol—sometimes it's money. One dancer had drained a repeat customer—make that a repeat trick—down to the point of bankruptcy. Eventually, the trick started to unravel. He began stealing from his boss, lost his job as an auto executive, lost his wife, and on a Christmas morning two years ago, he drove his car through the stripper's parents' house, then put a shotgun to his head and blew his brains out."

"There's a lot of them that aren't dysfunctional," he adds, trying to be fair. "They stick out like a sore thumb, though." For evidence, John points at a serene-looking stripper with long, curly hair. As she listens to our conversation, I search the woman's face for a trace of the craziness endemic to her cohorts but find nothing damning.

"John's right," she says to me with a kind smile. "Being functional makes you dysfunctional within the world of strippers. Like he said—it makes you the weird one."