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Sequins, satin, feathers and fur – collaborative costume and the ageing burlesque body

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the efficacy of costume within the context of new or neo-burlesque performance and examines what costume 'does' on stage for older performers. It brings together scholarship on burlesque performance and female ageing and introduces a third theoretical dimension, that of critical costume. The article investigates the role costume plays in burlesque performances and the extent to which it partners with the bodies of older performers both during the creative process and on stage. Adopting object-oriented storytelling as methodology, interviews with professional and semi-professional performers reveal how the aesthetic, technical and material qualities of burlesque costumes act as a vehicle for the performance of pleasure and provide a platform for flamboyant aging. By examining the materiality and performative potential of burlesque costumes, this article offers insights into the transformative power of costume in the context of creative ageing and wellbeing. Drawing on testimony from performers, burlesque costuming is conceptualised as an active collaborator which is capable of producing alternative narratives around the representation of ageing, female bodies.

KEYWORDS

Neo-burlesque; costume; ageing; performance; intersectionality

Introduction

In recent years there has been increased scholarly interest in the manifestations and applications of new, or neo, burlesque (Collard-Stokes, 2022; Commene, 2020; Nally, 2024; Sally, 2021). Neo-burlesque is a cabaret-style art form that is a contemporary reworking of traditional American burlesque performance and can incorporate wildly different acts that can range from striptease to clowning and from glamour to the grotesque. As a (sub)cultural phenomenon that is gaining appeal both as a professional industry and as a recreational pursuit, it makes a useful yet, at times, ambivalent contribution to discourse on femininity, representation and inclusive practice. In parallel, there has been a slow but important increase in research that explores the experiences of older women and the intersectional discrimination they face in social, cultural and public spaces (Mahler, 2021; Pickard, 2020; Westwood, 2023). This article brings those two areas of research into conversation with each other by amplifying the voices of older burlesque performers and adds a third dimension from the discipline of performance studies, that of critical costume. In this field, inquiry into 'how' costume performs is coupled with questions relating to what

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costume 'does' (Lindgren, 2021). My aim is to examine the efficacy of costume in this context and to ask:

- i. how costume, understood both as verb and noun (Hannah, 2014, p. 15), plays an active and agentic role in burlesquing and
- ii. to what extent costume partners with the bodies of older performers during the creative process and in performance.

Many well-known mainstream professional burlesque performers, such as Dita Von Teese, Dirty Martini and Jo Boobs Weldon, are over the age of 50 while others continue to perform into their 60s, 70s and beyond. Veteran or 'legend' burlesque performers are celebrated as cultural icons and carry their age as a marker of experience, provenance, and artistry within the scene. The prevalent aesthetic register of neo-burlesque involves high octane displays of exaggerated, ribald and unabashed female sexuality that would seem at odds with conventional representations of old age. In a cultural landscape where older women are frequently portrayed as defeminized or desexualised, this article explores the ways in which the costumes worn by contemporary burlesque performers over the age of 50 help negotiate and define what Julia Twigg calls the 'embodied meanings and experiences of later years' (2012, p. 1031).¹ Using object-oriented storytelling, it explores how the sensual materialities and practical technicalities of the costumes – the sequins, the satin, the feathers and the fur – provide a platform for flamboyant aging (Westwood, 2023) and how they work alongside the performers in what scenographer and costume designer Christina Lindgren calls a 'dynamic entity of garment, body, action and context' (2021, p. 205). Drawing on scholarship from the field of critical costume, this article conceptualises burlesque costuming as a playful partner and as an active collaborator capable of producing alternative narratives around the representation of ageing, female bodies.

Background

Narratives of ageing are frequently framed negatively, and the ageing process commonly regarded as something to be resisted, reversed and hidden. Clothing plays its part in concealing the physical manifestations of the ageing process and high street fashion designers adjust the cut of their garments to prevent exposing parts of the body that are deemed to be unattractive, shameful or linked to sexuality (Twigg, 2012). Clothes have always been implicated in the performance of age (Woodward, 2006) and act as a key mediator between the body and its social expression (Twigg, 2012). As such, garments are objects that have the capacity to make and convey meaning, not least in relation to socio-cultural categorisations such as age. Costume operates in a different arena to high street fashion and garments are often designed to draw attention to the body rather than conceal it. Nonetheless, costume and clothing are both intimately connected with the body. Dress and dressing can be read as bodily practices that help challenge and broaden experiences of aging, particularly in relation to the erotic where older people are considered to be 'outside the sphere of sexuality' (Twigg, 2012, p. 1032).

Sexual decline is seen as an inevitable part of the ageing process and the elderly population is socially perceived as being sexually disengaged or asexual (Soares & Meneghel, 2021). Culture reinforces this perception and, unless framed as humour, sexuality and old age are predominantly seen as contradictory, oppositional or incompatible (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Gott, 2005). In

¹As might be expected, research on the participation of older women in burlesque is scarce, not least because any definition of what constitutes 'old' or 'older' is arbitrary and largely contextual. For the purposes of this research, 50 was used as the age by which participants were recruited to the study.

Western culture where ‘the body beautiful’ is associated with youth and vitality, the female ageing body becomes stigmatised, marginalised and incapacitated. As Soares and Meneghel argue:

The cult of the young body idealized by contemporary society perpetuates the conviction that sexuality is linked to youth and beauty, which results in prejudice against sexuality in old age, de-eroticising the body and treating it as incapable of producing desire (2021, p. 130).

As Vakimo suggests, for women ‘the visible signs of ageing on the body are viewed with abhorrence, as signs of decay that need to be prevented, hidden and corrected; like the disabled or handicapped body, the aged body is seen as abnormal and thus becomes a culturally repudiated and, in a sense, “rejected body”’ (2015, p. 109). The female ageing body is interpreted and experienced as a ‘prison of concealment’ (Vakimo, 2015, p. 109) where the natural processes of ageing are to be masked, made invisible or hidden from view. This masking, erasure and concealment is also reflected in cultural practice where ageing sexuality is not only absent but taboo, particularly in mainstream culture where it is considered to possess an intrinsic ‘unwatchability’ (Williams et al., 2007, p. 2). As Margaret Cruikshank points out, ‘the shame of ageing is perpetuated when old bodies are hidden from view’ (2009, p. 149) and, in mainstream Western culture, it is the absence of older female bodies that is prevalent. According to Vares, it is only through the visibility of ageing women’s bodies that ageing will be seen and experienced as less shameful even though this increased visibility is not always seen as necessarily positive or empowering for women of a corresponding age when they see themselves represented in this way in film or television (2009, p. 520). The celebratory atmosphere of neo-burlesque offers an alternative to what Kathleen Woodward describes as an erasure of the older female body from view (2006, p. 163). It is an artform and subcultural practice where the norms of age are resisted, challenged and reconfigured and where older bodies are made visible. The spectacular display achieved through dress, undress and an unapologetic refusal to lower the gaze, offers a tactical way of countering the shame of ageing experienced in daily life by placing the ageing female body front and centre and ready to receive applause.

Although there has been something of a cultural-scientific shift in the way ageing and sexuality are represented in mainstream media (Ross et al., 2021), the ageing, naked, female body remains virtually absent in much cultural practice. The world of contemporary burlesque, however, offers a context in which the ageing female body is not only made visible through the ‘peel and reveal’ of the strip tease but is celebrated as a site of strength, power and desirability alongside other bodies (queer, disabled, non-binary, brown and black) that find, and take up, cultural space with pride. As such, it offers a useful place for the investigation of how women who perform burlesque feel about their ageing bodies and how they use costume with intentionality to augment, exaggerate and celebrate their physicality, their sexuality and their identity through what Willson calls a ‘spectacle of dissent’ (2008, p. 156). In burlesque, making visible that which has been rendered invisible or taboo is an act of resistance and rebellion. It is the spectacular nature of being seen and the transgressive politics of pleasure that accompany the *process of being seen* as an older, female performer that is the focus of this study. It examines how the materiality of costume enables exploration, dialogue and negotiation about female ageing and representation. It identifies the ways in which costume operates as an agentic object working in partnership with the performer, offering a holistic bodily experience that produces new readings of the ageing female body that challenges conventional narratives of decline.

Burlesque and ‘older women’

Gemma Collard-Stokes (2022) provides the first investigation into the positive impact of recreational burlesque for older female participants. Her article rejects the association between ageing and asexuality that persists in the UK’s cultural representation of the female ageing body and

reveals the important role that sensuality and physical agency play in the lives of older women. She argues that burlesque classes offer a space and the means to counter the negative representations of female ageing that include social invisibility, denial of femininity and a diminished sense of identity (2022, p. 157). Through close analysis of interviews and participant-observation, she demonstrates that through regular participation in recreational community-based burlesque dance classes older women can 'experience improvements to their sense of identity, agency and sensuality' (2022, p. 166). For Collard-Stokes, burlesque affords the opportunity to denounce the threat implied by the limiting phrase 'act your age'.

As a dance-researcher, Collard-Stokes' study concentrates on the physical attributes of participation in recreational burlesque classes and how this contributes to enhanced feelings of well-being for the amateur attendees. In contrast, this article is focussed on the experiences of burlesque performers over the age of 50 who work in a professional or semi-professional capacity within the industry. It pays particular attention to the role costume plays in the process of making visible the ageing female body. It takes as its starting point Christina Lindgren's view that costume has agency, that it 'does' things (2021). Knowing what costume does for older women in the context of neo-burlesque, both on and beyond the stage, is what drives this research. For Hann and Bech, costuming is an 'event'. They argue that costume is both an act of revelation and concealment (2014:4). It shapes action, influencing how the body moves through space, and hides the form and contours of the body while doing so. In their modelling, the 'eventness' of costuming is also intended 'to emphasise the reciprocal interactions that occur between performer and costume, spectator and action, fabric and movement' (2014:4). The interplay between the conceal and the reveal mentioned here, and the reciprocal nature of costuming, takes on new meaning when applied to the world of burlesque where the process of putting on and taking off costume is at the very heart of the genre. Another key point emerging from this field is that costume is no longer seen as being in the service of performance but regarded as a central contributor to it (Pantouvaki & McNeil, 2021). As Lindgren explains, costume does not merely dress actors but can function as the starting point for performance (2021, p. 204), providing both the route to and the vehicle for artistic expression. In neo-burlesque, the aesthetic concept, idea or story often begins with costume and the act emerges directly from it. The centrality of the costume to the creative process is key to understanding how it works in partnership with the women who perform in it and how they feel about the role it plays. How a costume moves, how it floats, how it catches the light, how it holds, supports and lifts the body, how it is constructed and deconstructed, how it is attached and how it becomes detached, how it speaks, how it plays, how it is read – these are all critical components to the costume's efficacy and helps us understand more about what Lindgren calls 'the performative potential of garments' (Lindgren, 2021, p. 205). With its commitment to radical inclusion where diverse bodies are seen moving in carefully constructed partnership with costume, the world of neo-burlesque provides a unique opportunity to examine the intersections of this complex system in detail.

With an aesthetic register that is innately spectacular, burlesque revels in hyper-visibility. The materiality of burlesque costumes appeal to the senses. They are tactile and sensuous. The performer feels the feathers, the fur, the satin, the silk against their skin and revels in that sensation. The audience sees that pleasurable experience, what Willson calls the 'sensuous joie de vivre' (2008, p. 45), and witnesses the activation of sensuality achieved through the very fabric of the costume which is then peeled off, layer by layer, to reveal the desiring object beneath. It is the female performer who is desiring and the costume that becomes the object of desire for her and the audience members who are there to witness this display. It is not uncommon for moments of costume dexterity or technicality to gain as much applause as the performer themselves. The way a piece of costume transforms into something else, the way a fan expands to fill the space, the way a corset lights up, the way a piece of costume literally *performs* on the stage and in partnership with the performer, becomes the centre of attention and generates applause, cheers and

shouts of appreciation from the audience. The interplay between performer and costume becomes the focus of the act. In this way, the burlesque costume brings the body into presence and helps re-establish the lost connection between the performer's sense of self and her body. This process is made visible through performance and enacted by the costume, inviting us to consider how costume displays agency in relation to identity, politics, materiality, collaboration and co-creation (Pantouvaki & Prihodova, 2021, p. 147). Being seen (applauded, encouraged, nurtured within the burlesque community) provides a counterbalance to the experience many older women have of 'disappearing' in everyday life (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 164). Burlesque provides opportunities for hyper-visibility by deploying big, flamboyant, sparkly, outrageous, extravagant, unapologetic modes of dress that bring attention to the female body and, ultimately, reveals it entirely. Collard-Stokes' study suggests sensuality and agency can be affirmed through (re)inhabitation of the body 'as a site of kinesthetic pleasure, power and knowledge' (2022, p. 164). According to Hinchliff and Gott (2008), older women experience a destructive separation between their sense of self and their bodies which society dictates as being in decline. What the testimonies of performers gathered for this article reveal is that the material qualities of costume help heal that separation. Rather than being in decline due their age, these women speak of themselves as being liberated, empowered, in the ascendent and, most importantly, being able to challenge or cast off any limiting beliefs about age through their choice of costuming.

Method

The study was conducted as part of *Fabulous Femininities*², a three-year AHRC funded research project that aimed to explore the transformative potential of costume within burlesque. This dimension of the project focussed on the experiences of professional and semi-professional burlesque performers who are over the age of 50 and developed an approach the research team called *object-oriented storytelling* to gather insights into the materiality, functionality and performativity of costume within the burlesque context. As well as attending multiple burlesque performances as an audience member and producing thick description after each event which was then coded into themes and sub-themes, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews (conducted and recorded using Zoom) with eight performers who responded to an invitation to participate in the study via social media channels and burlesque networks set up over the course of the wider project.³ The criteria for inclusion in the study required participants to be a) over 50 and b) working in a professional or semi-professional capacity as a burlesque performer. All genders were welcome to participate and out of the eight interviewees, one identified as a man while all the others identified as women, with the oldest interviewee being 61. Interviews were conducted online, recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Recordings of the interviews were watched multiple times, significant phrases and insights noted and then organised into codes, themes and sub-themes. Observations relating to how participants moved and interacted with their chosen pieces of costume were also noted during each viewing and assigned to the relevant theme or sub-theme to support the analysis. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the article to maintain anonymity and some details relating to specific burlesque acts or items of clothing have been excluded to prevent participants being identified.

At this stage, it is useful to reflect on the nature of the sample as this does have bearing on the analysis that comes later. First, although the invitation to participate in the study was inclusive and well-publicised, response was limited and, therefore, the sample is small. There may be

²For more information see <https://fabulousfemininities.co.uk/>.

³The study was approved by the University of Leeds Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee [Ethics Reference FAHC-19-055].

several reasons for limited participation in the study but it is worth noting that the burlesque world is, by necessity, protective of itself and the edges of its community are well-guarded. Participating in research is a form of exposure that not all burlesque performers are comfortable with, particularly if their burlesque identities are not known by colleagues or family members which is often the case. While a small sample could be deemed to be a limitation of the study, in practice this meant that interviews were sustained, in depth and allowed time for participants to engage closely with specific items of costume that had meaning to them. The age range of the study is relatively narrow (50-61) and so the sample represents participants in midlife who are still at an early stage of the aging process. Despite some minor physical complaints due to advancing years, participants were all healthy and in what has been described as the “good old” stage of aging (Dillaway, 2005) rather than in the latter stages of aging where physical decline might be more keenly felt. Finally, none of the performers interviewed were entirely dependent on burlesque as their main source of income, even though they described themselves as ‘professional’ or ‘semi-professional’. While all participants earned money from burlesque, they did not rely on it financially and this afforded them a degree of freedom that influenced some of their creative decisions and subsequent reflections on their practice.

Adopting an object-oriented approach was an intentional strategy to foreground the material quality of costume (e.g. the feel, weight, colour and movement of fabric), to give it physical space within the interview and to allow stories to emerge from its presence. Interviewees were asked to bring a piece of costume that they particularly liked or had a strong attachment to and reference to this was woven into the interview schedule. Specific questions were asked about the piece of costume (e.g. what it was, how it worked in performance, how it had been made, who had made it) and why it had been chosen for the study (e.g. why it was special, what meaning it had, what associations it had). Interviewees were encouraged to hold, and even move with, their chosen item as they talked so that connections between the objects and the feelings they elicited could be drawn out. This object-oriented storytelling technique was developed as a participatory methodology in online focus groups throughout the *Fabulous Femininities* project and has been a useful way of revealing the social, cultural, political and symbolic meaning performers attach to various items of costume and how this manifests in performance. The method is similar to that described by Woodward (2023) who uses objects as a method for understanding social worlds through the stories people tell about them. Our approach differs insofar as it acknowledges an item of costume has an intimate, physical connection to the body and personhood of the individual who wears it and so telling a story about an item of clothing provides an accessible and tangible route to talking about identity, self and the body that may otherwise be elusive.

For professional and semi-professional burlesque performers, costume plays a central role in establishing a burlesque persona and helps identify the specific sub-genre of burlesque associated with each performer’s act, for example, cheesecake, vintage, neo, gothic and so on. Burlesque costumes are typically extravagant, luxurious, elaborate, inventive, highly decorated and often intricately technical pieces that require time, money and skill to create. Most burlesque performers are understandably proud of their costumes and the histories attached to each one and, as such, interviewees were happy to share their stories, views and experiences of specific items of costume, often demonstrating to camera how the fabric moved, or a particular item was constructed or decorated in detail. Providing interviewees with the opportunity to talk about their chosen item of costume whilst handling it, demonstrating how it works or moves on and with the body, was an integral part of the methodology and helped draw out the emphasis on materiality and the relational interplay between costume, action and performer. The sensual pleasure and obvious pride interviewees demonstrated when holding, touching or stroking their chosen items of costume added an additional layer of meaning to the interviews which has, in turn, informed the theoretical arguments arising from the methodology.

A note about the respondents

Before turning to the analysis, it is interesting to note that, except for Joanna who became involved in burlesque at the age of 60 having had a former career as a professional performer, all the participants in the study came to burlesque in their mid to late 40s. As late starters in the burlesque scene, they all spoke of their involvement as a tactical response to ageing, an opportunity to shrug off expectations and to express themselves in ways that were not afforded to them in their younger years. All but one of them described enjoying dance classes in their teenage years but explained this was an interest that had taken a backseat in later life due to work and family commitments. Initial engagement with burlesque tended to be through taking lessons run by local burlesque houses and were approached as something to do as ‘enrichment’ or ‘fun’. Nina, Layla, Lana and Carole all talked of having no intention of taking burlesque further but soon found themselves performing in local shows with other members of the class, before graduating to performing in solo shows in front of bigger audiences. Carole, Lana and Tanya mentioned having no prior knowledge of burlesque before joining the classes but explained ‘falling in love’ and becoming ‘hooked’ as soon they joined the community. With the exception of Joanna who has a performing background, all respondents were reluctant to describe themselves as being ‘professional’, despite most being paid for their performances. Frequency of performing varied between respondents. Most performed sporadically throughout the year while Lana, the most prolific performer of those interviewed, stated she was performing nationally every month on the ‘newbie circuit’ before the pandemic closed venues in the UK. Layla described burlesque as her ‘side hustle’ while Nina and Carole described it as being a ‘hobby’. None of the respondents relied on burlesque as their main source of income and talked about needing to fit performing in around work and other commitments.

Burlesquing over 50: four overarching themes

Before looking more closely at some of the individual perspectives, it is useful to draw out some of the common themes that emerged from the interview data. The first of these is the overwhelming **resistance to age as being a defining characteristic**. To begin, nearly all the interviewees were keen to point out that they felt age was irrelevant in terms of their involvement in the burlesque scene. They did not want their identity as a performer to be defined by their age and were keen to point out that they had not received any negative comments because of their age. As relatively fit and healthy individuals in their 50s and 60s who appeared to be aging “successfully”, there was a general feeling that age was not a barrier to participation. Furthermore, they felt that age was largely irrelevant because burlesque is a strong inclusive community that embraces diversity. Despite being adamant that age was insignificant, there were some concerns about the possibility of not being booked for gigs as an older performer. More than one interviewee had experienced the feeling of being the ‘odd one out’ in an industry that they perceived as being predominantly young but, collectively, the performers felt that the burlesque community was inter-generational, that there was a sense of ‘family’ which provided them with an opportunity to play the role of ‘Burley Mum’ (Mona), and that being the older person within a group of performers of different ages was a ‘privilege’ (Carole). Despite this largely positive position, performers did talk about the physical toll on the body that increased with age – aching joints, tiredness, sore knees – and the adjustments they had been forced to make to their act to accommodate this. Many explained that while they did not actively hide their age, neither did they advertise it and believed that most other performers would not be aware they were over 50. The effects of the menopause were discussed by three performers. They expressed concerns about how their looks, weight, body image and flexibility (Nina) had been impacted, that ‘parts start to droop’ (Mona) and that ‘anxiety levels go up’ (Lana). Despite these challenges, the overwhelming feeling was that

the performers would keep going until 'my aching bones tell me I can't' (Lana). Any limiting factors were expressed as being physical rather than cultural.

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was that there are key **advantages to being an older performer**, including having more time, lack of pressure, access to community and increased confidence. As most of the interviewees had taken up burlesque in later life and were not reliant on it as a main source of income, they felt that they had time to develop their artistry and skill at their own pace, that there was no need to compete with younger performers and that they had developed a strong connection to the burlesque community that had given them access to 'an underground world' (Nina) which was accepting, diverse and inclusive. The biggest advantage to being an older performer related to the increased confidence that had come with age. As two interviewees put it:

I wouldn't have had the guts to do burlesque in my 20s and 30s (Nina).

I can't imagine I would have done burlesque when I was 20 or 23 whatever. There's no way I would have got my kit off in public, not a chance (Tanya).

For at least one interviewee, performing in burlesque led to an increased confidence at home and in 'real life' (Mona). As someone with no prior experience of performing, participating in burlesque gave her permission to change her personal style and experiment with a new sense of identity.

The third theme relates to how **costume acts as a vehicle for self-expression**. Each interviewee gave this perspective and spoke passionately about the pleasure, pride and sense of achievement they got from customising and personalising the costumes they wear. They described the act of making, decorating and performing in a costume designed for burlesque as a creative act where ideas take shape in fabric and form. This sense of self-expression was closely linked to identity formation and creation. They felt the link between the performing self and the non-performing self (the onstage and offstage persona) could be expressed through costume and, for some, served as 'an antidote to being invisibilised' (Joanna) by the ageing process. While increased invisibility may be freeing for some women as they become liberated from the male gaze, burlesque offered the interviewees what Westwood calls a "third way" where 'aging flamboyantly but without the veil of contrived youthfulness' (2023, p. 568) was possible.

The fourth theme revealed older burlesque performers were clear about their ability and intention to **challenge, defy and subvert expectations** and this was expressed in three main ways – physical, aesthetic, cultural. First, older performers felt they were able to defy the conventional narratives of decline by performing routines that demonstrated physical strength, agility and flexibility. They enjoyed surprising audiences with their physical prowess and technical skill that challenges assumptions about what an older body can accomplish.

One of the things I'm really proud of is being sixty-one and beating the twenty-year-olds at their own game, with their rules (Joanna).

Second, they felt their costume choices could be harnessed to subvert aesthetic representations of female ageing by creating highly sensual, sexualised, feminine personae that might be seen to be at odds with the limiting and negative stereotype of the 'little old lady'. There was broad recognition that within burlesque, older performers were often encouraged to develop comedic burlesque routines because there was the assumption that 'no one wants to look at saggy boobs' (Tanya). Challenging this stereotype through the aesthetic of specific costume choices (for example, fabrics such as leather, latex and structural pieces such as corsets, headdresses and harnesses) was adopted as a way of resisting normative and limiting constructions of age and female sexuality. Conversely, adopting the parodic register of burlesque, other performers chose to play with the image of the frail, asexual and unglamorous little old lady, incorporating zimmer frames,

grey wigs, dressing gowns and wrinkled stockings into their acts, drawing attention to the trope in order to subvert it through humour.

Finally, challenging cultural expectations of 'age appropriate' behaviour was discussed in detail, particular in relation to what people outside of the burlesque world think of their involvement in it. Some performers revealed they choose not to tell work colleagues and family about what they do (Nina). Others reported they had received negative or disapproving comments but that they believed this came from a 'place of ignorance' (Carole) rather than overt prejudice. Defying other people's limiting attitudes to age was expressed by one as a 'fight' (Lana) and burlesque conceptualised as a platform on which to challenge these assumptions:

My body looks different to how it was when I was twenty-five ... The menopause gives you quite distinct body changes ... It's part of getting older ... It's other people's attitudes to age, isn't it, and what people of a certain age shouldn't be doing ... We should be at home in our cardigans and slippers watching Coronation Street. What we *shouldn't* be doing is taking our clothes off in public [laughs] (Lana).

Costume was seen as both a tool for liberating the older performer from the constraints of limiting assumptions about ageing and as a way of critiquing and confronting those perspectives in a way that one performer described as an intentional 'queering [of] age and generational expectation ... I want people to be slightly challenged by what they see and what they think they see' (Joanna). Here costume was intentionally being deployed as a form of provocative and unsettling 'visual dramaturgy' (Arntzen, 1990 cited by Pantouvaki & Prihodova, 2021:150) that, according to Joanna, deliberately 'plays with images and metaphors' in order to 'reinvent' what an 'old lady' can do and what she can be.

Analysis: the efficacy of costume

When the premise of most burlesque acts is to play with and execute the stages of getting undressed, the way costume 'works' on stage is of paramount importance. As well as being spectacular and flamboyant, a burlesque costume must be functional. Interviewees talked about dresses coming off in two pieces, skirts being detached from corsets, sleeves coming away from bodices and gowns transforming into wings. The technical efficiency of the costume is not a concern that is necessarily age specific. However, for older performers, the efficacy of burlesque costume is tied up with how they feel about themselves and how age is displayed, parodied or critiqued on stage. Despite the rhetorics of body positivity and non-normativity that accompanies neo-burlesque, the 'unabashed celebration of the body politic on display' can provoke backlash (Sally 2021:10). Performers can be conflicted about how their bodies, in this instance older bodies, are perceived on stage and they enlist costume to help. As Mona explained:

I like to wear body harnesses that go under your bottom or around your breasts, and it doesn't always get removed, you know they're sometimes there just to enhance items that you want the audience to perhaps look at more and draws it away from other areas, you know [laughs].

Lana talked about the way her body has changed with age, describing the 'quite distinct body changes' and weight gain caused by menopause. Despite admitting to feeling 'self-conscious' about her ageing body in performance, later, when talking about the way the costume works, she adopted a more positive stance:

the elasticated waist actually brings my waist in, and then makes, the whole costume makes my boobs more pronounced. It just pronounces all my curves which have come through menopause, and I quite like that, because I find that, it's obviously feminine'.

As well as covering or enhancing physical changes caused by age, interviewees described the ways in which costume had a positive impact on their posture, movement or stance which, in turn, helped bring character to life:

It changes the way I stand... It moves in a very stately way. It allows me to move very gracefully (Joanna).

You're just more aware of your posture. Keeping your shoulders up, your shoulders straight. I find myself putting my hands on my hips more often, which can be a very assertive, sexy pose (Nina).

Both these comments allude to the costume having a degree of influence on the body that is not entirely within their control but, rather, generates performance independently of the performer (Pantouvaki, 2014). While not exclusive to older performers, the physical support provided by the costumes, in this instance, translated into feelings of empowerment, sexiness and control that resists some of the systematic patterning of cultural expression commonly associated with ageing (Twigg 2012). The scaffolding and support offered by the corsetry and the psychological shift prompted by the change in bodily expression, worked in tandem to produce new narratives that felt at once more positive, powerful and confident.

In describing the process of getting into their favourite costume, interviewees regarded this as a way of transitioning between the everyday self and the burlesque self. This moment of **transformation** could often be pinpointed to one garment – a pair of fishnet stockings, a wig, a corset and is described by one interviewee as 'the defining moment' (Lana) of becoming other.

Getting changed into your costume is part of the switch between your normal life and your performer life. Your personality changes just before you go on stage. Getting dressed in your costume is part of that process (Lana).

All of them spoke about how wearing burlesque costume produced positive feelings and emotions, indicating there was a **psychological efficacy** at play. Simply putting the costumes on in the dressing room made them feel like an elevated version of self, an impact felt long before the performers reached the stage. They described this feeling in various ways including being beautiful, amazing, sexy, brave, attractive, feminine, assertive, powerful, and exquisite. Carole talked in detail about 'the cinching of the corset' as being, for her, the epitome of burlesque. The moment the corset is put on and the laces are tightened, regardless of how big or small the performer happens to be, the hourglass shape is achieved and, as she explained:

It just makes you feel sexy, more feminine... It just makes me want to get on stage because I feel like I look the best I'm gonna look for any act... it's just a kind of sexy, powerful, 'I'm going to nail this' kind of feeling and it does give you confidence (Carole).

Interviewees were able to attribute that sensation of personal elevation to the materiality of the costume – specifically the fabric, colour, structure and feel of the costume on the skin and on the body. Describing the heightened sensations that are associated with certain items of costume, Tanya talked in detail about the significance of feeling 'held' by what she calls a 'substantial bra' and how that intersected with the aesthetic and political dimensions of her act:

I like a bra that really holds and really gives that kind of feeling of 'umph'... I tend to like substantial bras... and it's not because of the way my boobs *look*, it's because of the way they feel *held* and kind of out there and strong – it's that strength again... if I wore a looser, lighter bra they wouldn't have that feeling of 'in your face-ness' that I think a lot of my acts have' (Tanya).

In this instance, the performer wanted to convey strength and used enhancement of the breasts through a structured bra not only to communicate that to an audience but also to experience it in and on her own body. It was not simply the wearing of the garment that was important but the act of being seen wearing it and receiving applause from the audience as a result. At a technical level, performers described using costume to control audience response, in Lana's words 'geeing them up', teasing them by peeling off layer after layer and eliciting cheers and whoops with each stage of the reveal. Here, costume is being used as both technology and tool to play with the audience in a way that feels empowering, playful and impactful.

Costume and the creative process

As Christina Lindgren suggests, costume can act as the starting point for performance (2021), providing the impetus for the creative process from the beginning. In line with this, interviewees described how costume was often the genesis of their act, with ideas emerging from the look, the feel or the register of the garment and developing around the interplay between fabric, music and performer. Subscribing to the strong DiY aesthetic within neo-burlesque that continues to prevail in much of the UK scene, many spoke of the enjoyment derived from adapting and customising costumes or creating, often quite technical, pieces from scratch. As Layla explained:

There's so much of me in it. You know, it's me that developed the act, the costume reflects the act, that's my act. I developed it. It's my story that I decided I wanted to tell... It's all my own creation. That's a big part of why it makes me feel great. It's something I've created (Layla).

Where Layla seemed to enjoy driving and owning the creative process, Tanya offered a different perspective. In her vivid description of an act involving a fur coat that she had bought over a decade ago but hardly worn, she said:

I bought it on a spur of the moment, Christmas market, loved it, wore it twice, and felt really self-conscious wearing it. It was, it was just too, too... ostentatious, too out there. I just didn't feel comfortable wearing it at all. So that was me, kind of aged thirty-eight, fortyish, not happy at all wearing it. [Years later] I put it on and the act literally choreographed itself in about fifteen minutes from the second I put the coat on.

In this account, she saw the coat as playing a pivotal role in guiding the choreography, seemingly with little conscious intervention from her as the performer. In performance, the coat figured as 'an integral part of the act' which Tanya described as being powerful and intimidating. Although at the time of purchase, she felt the coat was too ostentatious or showy for her everyday self, the coat found new performative potential when transferred into the context of burlesque and placed on a body that was both 12 years older and less self-conscious:

I love the fact that it's bringing me such power now, whereas before I was just scared to wear it... People asked me about the persona of [burlesque name], and I say she is, she's me, but she's more than me... so more confident, more assertive, more cheeky... you put the costume on, and you step into that very power.

The special qualities of the coat took on an agency that gave this performer a way to step into power in a very tangible way. From her perspective, the coat was imbued with a powerful quality that existed beyond her physical self but which she could draw from for the purposes of performance. In this way it became her talisman and her collaborator.

Play and playfulness were seen as critical components of the creative process. Interviewees talked at length and with great delight about the way they played with costume on stage, moving, dancing and gliding with the fabric or using it to tease, excite or surprise the audience. Interestingly, this was rarely described as part of a striptease but was more about the playful possibilities of fabric moving dynamically through air. As Joanna said, 'I knew this fabric was going to dance on its own.' She talked about a skirt that had more than 360 degrees of fabric in it so that when she spins with it, the fabric flies out, encircling her and appearing to be almost 'dancing on stage' as an entity somewhat separate from themselves. Talking about the fabric, Joanna said, 'it moves, it ripples and I can fling it up... I bring the hem to life'. They liken the relationship between performer and skirt as that of a puppeteer. The dramatic construct here is that the performer/puppeteer gives life to the costume and, in turn, the costume plays its own role in the execution of the performance but always under the control of the performer:

I almost puppeteer the costume... I've got a direct relationship to the costume because I've kind of worked out how they're going to be' (Joanna).

The significance of fabric as having a key role in supporting the performer was a recurring theme. Tanya talked about a chiffon skirt and the importance of seeing the fabric move:

I couldn't do that act without the skirt. It's an integral part of the whole feel of the act, the flowing movement that the skirt gives. (Tanya).

In a similar way, Nina talked about her favourite gown made of very sheer, black material that is described as luxurious, and beautiful, making her feel 'sexy', 'powerful' and 'assertive'. When probed on why the costume produces these feelings, she identified the importance of play:

There's so much fabric that there's so much to play with... So all the different parts that I can play with. I can play with each sleeve [demonstrates], then I can play with each side... I've got the ribbon I can play with... I can have it tight into my body or I can have it far out... one thing that I like to do is kind of like wings – lift it up and twirl around. Although it's just a gown, there's a lot that you can actually do with it. (Nina)

Play provided her with an opportunity to experiment, to improvise, to explore the possibilities of the costume. It supported her performance by providing her with a lot to 'do' on stage and it is this 'doing', this dynamic conversation between costume, performer and context that elicited the greatest applause.

Discussion: object-oriented storytelling and the dynamic relationship between costume and performer

Dorita Hannah reminds us that 'places, objects and atmospheres – including garments – lie in wait for us, replete with multiple, sociocultural implications and performances (2014, p. 18). Rather than the stage being a place where objects are merely regarded as supporting props, supplementary to the main event, a performance design approach considers these objects as equal elements. As she argues, these objects are 'already saturated with their own implications and active qualities' (2014, p. 18) and demand further attention in terms of how they make meaning both on and off the stage. Using object-oriented storytelling to explore the nuanced intersections between garment, performer and identity expression, it is possible to determine the efficacy of costuming within burlesque and to see how it works collaboratively with the ageing performer. The costumes made, created and worn by older burlesque performers produce effects and affects that support the way ageing identities are expressed and how restrictive cultural representations of female ageing might be resisted through intentional choice of garment, fabric and materiality.

It is, of course, essential theatrical costumes have technical functionality and that they support the performer by operating efficiently on stage. While the technical functionality of costume is a concern common to all burlesque performers, irrespective of age, for the older performer there is an added dimension. The construction and design of a burlesque costume work in partnership with the older performing body, helping to enhance what is seen on the outside and support what is felt on the inside. Beyond the practicalities, burlesque costumes have a physical impact on the performer's body, revealing or concealing certain physical attributes that have developed in line with advancing years. In addition, a costume's structure can prompt noticeable changes in posture and physical expression that, in turn, produce positive emotions such as confidence, empowerment and liberation.

For Rachel Hann, costume is a conscious act of 'showing dressing', a deliberate and intentional act by an individual, and is a means of 'getting into' character within a theatrical frame (2014, p. 28) where the performed identity is separate to the 'known' identity of the performer (2014, p. 32). However, the world of burlesque is not always as clearly demarcated and there is significant overlap between the performing self and the daily self, particularly for those women who come to burlesque not as professional performers but as women seeking a reinvention in later life. The intentional bridging, or transitional, quality of costuming is particularly relevant to older burlesque performers where the perceived or real gap between their performing self and daily self can feel significant.

Scholarship in critical costume draws heavily on theoretical frameworks in new materialism which, according to theatre scholar Rebecca Schneider, ‘takes seriously the idea that all matter is agential, and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation’ (2015, p. 1). For Lindgren, exploring how costume can act as a starting point for performance is the litmus test for determining what it can do, its capacity for agency (2021, p. 204). The concept of ‘listening to the costumes’ in order to release and unlock their meaning-making potential (Lindgren, 2021, p. 212) was a thread that ran through the study. Building on the notion that a costume has agency within the creative process, what emerged from the interviews was the performative potential of certain garments and fabrics and how costume might be conceptualised as a playful partner that has the capacity to ‘do things’. What costume ‘does’ varies from performer to performer and from act to act but, what is clear, is that older female performers are harnessing its potential as a way of engaging in flamboyant aging that helps them navigate their lives, create meaning and resist restrictive socio-cultural categorisations of age.

Conclusion: the performative potential of costume and challenging narratives of decline

Establishing the efficacy of burlesque costume and conceptualising costume as collaborator is a helpful way of understanding how costume, garments and fabric operate and function in this context and is applicable to all performers, regardless of age, gender and ethnicity. However, when applying this framework to cultural representations and readings of the ageing female body, it has wider implications. The flamboyant, joyful, celebratory and highly visual nature of burlesque costuming plays an active role in resisting normative cultural representations of ageing and offers a tangible intervention in addressing the intersectional discrimination experienced by older women on and beyond the stage. The performative potential of costume is well understood by older burlesque performers who talk eloquently about how costume supports, enhances and facilitates their creative process and their sense of self in performance. With awareness and intentionality, they understand costume both as a tool and as a technology that can be deployed in a strategic manner to achieve a particular goal or outcome. At one level this might be to achieve dramatic effect for an audience. At another level it might be to achieve a transformation from one state of being to another, enabling a performer to adopt a burlesque persona that is different to that of the daily self. As well as being a technology to be harnessed, costume has an agential quality of its own that is somewhat independent of the performer. It brings its own personality to the process. Costume becomes a dancer, a partner, an associate, an enabler. In essence, having the opportunity to play creatively with costume and to construct alternative representations of ageing female bodies, sensuality and desire makes older women feel good about themselves. It is empowering and liberating and provides an antidote to marginalising cultural norms. As such, how costume functions in the world of neo-burlesque makes an important contribution to the discourse on creative ageing and wellbeing, makes an intervention into the intersectional discrimination older women face and offers a compelling context for the study of the efficacy of costume more widely.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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