

LILY BURANA comments in the Atlantic Monthly:

To locate the ethos of San Francisco's just-shuttered Lusty Lady peep show, one must look for a sign. Not some mystical "message from the universe" sign, as one might expect in this city of hippie roots, but an actual marquee sign.

On the peep show's Kearney Street façade, among the enticements for "Live Nudes and Movies" and "Private Booths" curling out in Olde Tyme script, is a telling graphic flourish: Two hands pointing to a banner stating "Free Admission." Upon close observation, you realize that the fingers pointing to the banner are middle fingers. That, to me, is the Lusty Lady encapsulated: Come one! Come all! F. you!

The nation's only unionized (SEIU since 1997) and dancer-run adult entertainment business closes September 2 after almost forty years in business. Landlord Roger Forbes, a Nevada-based real estate magnate who bought the building in 2001, declined to negotiate with the cooperative when they weren't able to make the May rent. The Lusty fighting spirit was vanquished, and as a former Lusty, I find myself unexpectedly sad. It's not so much the passing of a phase in my life, and in the life of the many friends I made there, but rather, the end of a means to an end in a city that historically always found a way to support its freaks.

My entry to the Lusty Lady began in curiosity. New to San Francisco in the 1990s and looking for a flexible dancing job that wouldn't leave me feeling like a casualty of my own envelope-pushing, I stopped in to see the show upon the recommendation of a friend—a Central American labor activist who had worked there before decamping to Nicaragua. When the opaque window slid up, I was oddly charmed—four nude girls behind the glass were twirling in

this tiny mirrored room, like some pervert's idea of a music box. Some of them had tattoos, one of them had piercings, none of them were tan. It seemed, as these things go, almost demure—as if Riot Grrls had infiltrated Madonna's "Open Your Heart" video. Fairly confident I wasn't destined to run for public office, and therefore fairly insulated from future scandal, I decided to give it a whirl. As I waited to audition in the manager's office, I inspected the schedule, noting that the dancers' stage names fell well outside the "Brandy/Candy" norm. You could call yourself Jinxxx or Quasar or Cruella or Petite Fromage or Amnesia or Lil' Chaos or Theremin Blue Thunder—no one would mind. For my audition, which was five minutes with the girls on stage dancing in nothing but dirty white high-top Nikes, I spontaneously picked the stage name "Tawdry." After I was hired, I bought a terrifying wig of long synthetic auburn curls that made me look as if I were electrocuted on the set of an 80s hair metal video. I found an old white button down and plaid schoolgirl skirt at a Mission thrift shop, and the persona was complete.

Over the course of two years, three days a week, sometimes four, I would work a three-and-a-half to six-hour shift. One of the Lusty's more humane practices was giving each dancer a ten-minute break for every hour she worked. I'd often punch out on break, change into my street clothes, race down the steep slope of Kearney Street, cross at the intersection Columbus Avenue right in front of City Lights Books, and bomb into Winchell's Donuts. I'd pay for my wax paper-wrapped snack with a fistful of change, fight my way back up the hill, then drop down into the Lusty's basement dressing room while wrestling out of my street clothes and into my Catholic schoolgirl uniform with an apple fritter clenched between my teeth. On the nine, I'd be ready to punch back in on the reliable old Lusty time clock, and set the next dancer

free on reprieve. Not wanting to leave a sister hanging, efficiency became my strong suit.

The Lusty had many distinguishing characteristics—a cocky feminist underpinning that couldn't be found in any other strip club or peep show in the country, a dynamic, punky-queer dancer corps, and a sense of humor about its onanistic mission objective—in later years, they had an unofficial alligator mascot named "the Master Gator". On a more pragmatic level, management accepted that dancers had lives beyond their jobs, and that, in fact, dancing wasn't even the central point around which their lives were organized. (I met more than one of the alleged mythical "PhD candidate stripper" working here. They are real, if rare.)

The flouting of strip club convention was evident in the main stage jukebox, as well. Rather than the standard Top Forty metal/classic Nine Inch Nails/R&B ballad-of-the-moment fare, the musical selection was wide-ranging. In one dizzying shift, I recall dancing to "My Uzi Weighs a Ton" by Public Enemy, Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back," "My Lucretia" by Sisters of Mercy, the eight-minute version of Flipper's "Sex Bomb," and Annette Funicello's "Pineapple Princess."

Customers weren't allowed to dictate the show in any way, but that didn't stop some of them from pantomiming stage direction through the glass. A "whoop de doo" finger spiraling in the air meant "turn around." Fingers together and flapping out like fish fins meant "spread 'em." Poor lambs, to each motioned command, the answer was the same: No.

If this seems an insignificant detail, it is anything but. That the terms of interaction were non-negotiable underscored for many dancers a valuable aspect of sexual self-awareness: This is mine. In private or shown for hire, clothed or bare,

it's mine. After a few weeks at the Lusty, when I walked down the street, I felt less threatened by men talking shit to me. My posture changed. If it wasn't liberating, it was certainly uplifting. Who would have expected such from a peep show? Not me. Then again, to dismiss the idea that vulgarity and uplift can coexist side-by-side is to deny the degenerate magic of San Francisco.

For all its positive attributes, the Lusty hardly wanted for shortcomings. For starters, it was—and I say this affectionately—a dump. The endlessly cheerful support staff made sure that the stage and Private Pleasures booth were tidy, and the dressing room as neat as could be, but the public areas resembled a dimly lit Dionysian hellscape in which one could almost hear the carpet squish. The business's feminist philosophy didn't do much to protect you when, as a dancer, you reached the inevitable burnout of physical and psychological overexposure that comes from [TMI](#) being your day job. And while the hourly wage meant a girl didn't have to exhaust herself hustling for tips, the pay was quite low by industry standards—typically from the low-teens to low-twenties per hour. Still, for an enterprising artist, social reformer, or student who was willing to dive into the sex industry but didn't want to feed her soul to it, the Lusty was reliable, companionable choice.

But cities change, people change, tastes change. In 2003, the unionized dancers purchased the business for \$400,000 and established a workers' cooperative. By then, though, Forbes had already acquired virtually all of the North Beach topless joints, turning them into strobe light-and-spandex McStripclubs. The Lusty Lady informally rebranded itself as a holdout, parked somewhere between revolutionary and quaint—a bit of third-wave feminist insurgency dancing as fast as it could to survive in the brutal 21st-century

marketplace. But nostalgia is no life raft and business at the Lusty dwindled. After years of suffering declining revenue due to competition from the Internet, as well as several rent hikes, it was announced in late August that the club would shut down. That the closing date falls during Labor Day weekend seems especially poignant for this unique union shop.

To many of us, dancers, patrons, and support staff alike, the closing of the Lusty Lady means not just the demise of a singular San Francisco institution, but another nail in the coffin of the Bay Area's Bohemian class—a triumph of capitalism over native culture. The way of all things in this town, it appears, at least for now. So, Lusty Lady, as we must, we surrender you to the ages and to the clutches of big business. Oh, sweet Lady, you dive, you dreambox, you were something special. You will be missed.