

On turning your passions into career



Performer Dita Von Teese discusses celebrating the talents of your peers, how a lack of influences helped her develop her style, understanding the history of your art form, and the importance of joy in the creative process.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 4437 words.

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I know you are currently in Paris rehearsing for Dancing with the Stars. Does having so much experience with being on stage give you a leg up, so to speak?

I think that it does in some ways, but I think I'm not coming in like Jennifer Grey or Nicole Scherzinger or Zendaya, all these people that do these shows that really are dancers, like *great* dancers. I'm a failed ballerina, and that's why I decided to look to burlesque for my form of dance. Dancing doesn't come easy to me, but I do love it. I love the challenge, and it's about overcoming all the fear I had from trying to learn choreography. That's why I'm a solo performer, because I'm a good freestyle dancer and I developed my own style of burlesque dancing based on what I thought it was supposed to look like.

Your new special, *Night of the Teese*, manages to capture the feeling of what it's like to see an old-fashioned burlesque show in an actual theater. That's a hard thing to get across on film. So much of the joy of what you do is about seeing it live in a room surrounded by other people.

Yeah, I'm always reluctant to film the show because if you don't have the right director and all the right "showbiz" elements, it's really hard to capture the feel of a live performance. I never really wanted to do it, but then when I met [director] Quinn [Wilson] and talked to her and saw her enthusiasm for all of it, that really got me going. It was just such a great experience to film.

Also, I don't know about you, but during the pandemic I was watching a lot of people try to do shows from home, not necessarily just burlesque shows, but whatever—talk show, variety shows. I just thought, "God, wow, everybody needs a little bit of Hollywood to make this work, or you need to be in the room." There's just something about the energy. It's really hard to get it right. I didn't want to do something that would make me or any of us not look our best and not capture the energy. I didn't want it to feel like, "Oh, *that's* what burlesque is." I want people to watch it and think, "I need to see this show live now."

Are there certain things for you that were formative texts or things that would be the blueprint for your aesthetic?

Well, interestingly, when I started, of course, there was no YouTube. I was literally getting my burlesque inspiration from still photographs that I looked at, and I had a VHS tape of Sally Rand performing her bubble dance and feather fan dance. That was really it. Then scouring places for movies. I had all my little burlesque movies on VHS, like *Gypsy* and like *Ball of Fire* and all these '40s and '50s musicals that had little glimpses of

burlesque. I would just pour over those for any famous striptease scenes, and that was really how I developed my own style. I had to kind of imagine what I thought it would be like, based on those things, which I feel like, in hindsight, did me a service because by the time I actually got my hands on some real bump and grind burlesque footage, I was like, "Oh, that's different than what I thought it was going to be." Not that it's bad, it's just very different than what I ultimately decided to do. The absence of too many influences allowed me to develop my own style.

Your creative work encompasses a lot of different things now—performer, producer, writer, designer—but this special is a good example of being able to show your work and your world in its most pure form. It's a nice window into what makes burlesque such a unique art form and one that a lot of people probably don't necessarily understand.

Yes. Maybe some people are only vaguely familiar with what I do, and they're like, "It's like a pin-up girl in a big martini glass." I'm trying to make people understand what it was and what it is now and why, for example, there are so many women and folks from the LGBTQIA community who are interested in seeing a burlesque show, which is essentially a striptease show. What is it about burlesque that is so relevant in this era? Why I'm so glad that I'm a burlesque star in this era and not the 1940s, when it was all underneath the male gaze and it was just simply a girly show. I just really want people to understand it more.

My mission statement for the past few years has really just been to have a world tour where I can present various kinds of talent that I love and change people's minds about what a burlesque show is. I'm glad I get to be the ringleader of the whole thing, but now it's been more about I can showcase these other great performers. That's what I'd like to continue to do. People ask me, "When are you going to retire? I mean, aren't you getting a little old for this?" I'm just like, "But this is what I want to do!" I want to have the biggest touring burlesque show in history and show the evolution of what it is compared to what it was. So that's my goal now.

For this first Teese special, we could only have so many people involved due to time constraints and the fact that it was during the pandemic. We could only do so much. It's hard to tick every box, especially in the first foray of filming something like this and given our parameters on who could be flown in and who couldn't. So I don't claim that this special ticks every single box for people, but that my ultimate dream would be to make this a success so it can become a series and I can really get into all the different facets of what makes a great burlesque performance.

Obviously, it's beautiful and it's sexual and sensual, but it's also like watching a kind of very pure performance art. It's not just about sex or nudity. Since you've started doing this and this has become your career, has that been the struggle, trying to get people to understand what this is and who it's for?

Absolutely. That's not that easy to do if you don't have back-up. Yes, I've been able to make bigger shows and tour bigger venues and go to more countries and whatnot, but it's not easy to get a production company to fund this kind of production. It's not. It's not really proven that it can always be a money-maker. As of now, maybe the biggest budget "burlesque" thing in recent memory was the movie *Burlesque*, which didn't actually have any burlesque in it at all, it was really just cabaret. Most people don't really have a contemporary understanding of what burlesque actually is, which makes it challenging to do something like fund a big tour.

One thing that is interesting about the burlesque community is that most of the performers who take it seriously also seem to have an understanding of its roots and history. It has a very unique culture and history unto itself, even though it has changed a lot over the years.

Yes. I suppose the biggest problem I have with a lot of the modern burlesque, or the modern non-burlesque stuff, is that they often want to strip the actual striptease out of it, which...why? Aren't we living in a time where we can embrace striptease instead of just trying to remove it from burlesque and saying, "Let's just have the cute song and dance part, but we shouldn't be stripping" I'm sorry, what? Then it just becomes singing and dancing.

Then it sort of denies the importance of the actual body, which is what it's all about.

Why do we have to apologize for the striptease? It's not doing service to the great burlesque queens of the past that paved the way for all of us. Also, I always just thought the challenge is really to change people's minds about striptease and what it means to be a stripper and liberate eroticism and sensuality. Then we get to take it even a step further by having just as many men in the show as women and different types of bodies and ages and ethnicities. It's amazing what it's evolved into, and I can't wait to see it go even further.

I like that it's so body positive, that you're seeing a lot of different kinds of bodies and shapes. There's a certain amount of nudity, but it's not gratuitous because it's not really about that.

Right. You kind of forget. I find this, too—people come to the show, even the live show, and they kind of forget about the nudity because you're so wrapped up in the energy and the joy and the body positivity. It's really exciting. We don't get to see bodies undressed as often as we should, especially not in mainstream media. Also, my goal, to be honest, was never really, "I'm going to make this big show about diversity." It was really like, "Who are the best people in the world doing burlesque?" That's what I went after, and that's still what I go after in the show. I'm sorry. People can say what they want and have their opinions, but there's not one person that could come to see my live touring show and not agree that Dirty Martini took the house down every single time.

People might, on the page, scroll through and be like, "Eh, I don't get this" But if you witness it, you really can't deny the live experience. I always just wanted to have the best people in the show. I can't put somebody up there just for the sake of them being different. It's not easy to fill a room of 3500 people and to have that power and strength to command an audience like that. People think they can do it, but it's not so easy. There's not that many burlesque dancers that can do it.

Your creative work in relation to burlesque involves so many things. It involves staging, it involves costumes, it involves aesthetics, it involves performance. At the very core of it, do you think of yourself first and foremost as a performer?

Oh yeah. I also love producing. Now, I've come to terms with, "I am actually producing these," because no one's funding the tours. I just have managed to do it myself, not without a lot of blood, sweat, and tears at points. Some people don't realize how much dues-paying I've actually done. But, yeah, I still love performing first and foremost. But when I don't want to perform anymore, I just won't. Also, It's not always easy for me as a performer because almost every interview, except for this one so far, has said, "Wow, how does it feel to be an aging burlesque star?" People have been asking me that since I was 25. It's crazy how often I am asked that. I'm going to be 50 next year and people are already like, "What does it feel like to be turning 50 next year?" I go, "I don't know. I'm not 50 yet. Will you guys stop putting fear into women about their age?"

Ughh. That's so gross.

It's just a strange thing. I kept thinking of how many decades now people have been asking me or telling me to be afraid. I'm glad that I have other examples, other women ahead of me in age that I can look at and say, "Okay, I can do this. If she can do this, I can do this." You know? It's important for me to do it for other younger burlesque stars, to say, "You can have a career as long as you want. You just decide."

You're ostensibly the most famous burlesque performer doing this now. When you were starting out I would imagine that there was no real blueprint for what a career path in this world would look like.

No. It's all a happy accident. I didn't have anybody in front of me to give me permission. I was like, "I want to be the modern Gypsy Rose Lee. I want to be the modern Lili St. Cyr or the modern Bettie Page," when I wanted to be a pin-up model in the '90s. I always looked to the past because there was no modern example. I've realized that not everyone in the burlesque community thinks that I'm great, but I think you got to give me one thing. For all the people that have to try to explain to their mom and dad what they're going to do as their hobby on the side, it's like at least they could cite me as an example. I used to have my family telling me that I was wasting my time and that it wasn't possible or I'd hear things like "Oh, this is pornography." I'm like, "No, it's striptease, like the movie Gypsy." I had to say, "I think it could be like that again."

I don't know anything about your family at all, but was there a point when they were finally like, "Okay, we get it now"

Oh, yeah. When I was on the cover of *Playboy* in 2002, when *Playboy* was still a big thing. Everybody knew who was on the cover of *Playboy*. They did big publicity pitches on the celebrities around the cover. I think that was the moment that legitimized me to my family, particularly my father.

You've done all these other things that have been off-shoots of your career-books, fashion design, producing, etc. They're all these things that flow off of this one central thing that feels very organic and, again, like the sort of thing you can't plan.

Since I was 14, I've been working various jobs. When I first started performing burlesque shows, I was working in Robinsons-May in their lingerie department, and I was working in the LA rave scene as a go-go dancer, and I was doing burlesque shows in a shitty strip club in Orange County, and then I was modeling. I was like, "I'm going to be a bondage model like Bettie Page." So I kind of always wanted to do all these different things because I felt like they all had relativity. I always felt like, "Okay, you have to have options. Don't put all your eggs in one basket." I also wanted to be able to turn down jobs I didn't want to do, like, "I don't want to do that modeling job. I'd rather just go dance in the strip club tonight and do my feather fan dance because it'll be fun and no one's going to take my picture."

So I think I just always felt this drive to have lots of different jobs and not only be independent, but also be financially independent, from my family or boyfriends or whatever. I just loved thinking of what else I could do. I was a pin-up entrepreneur. I had the first vintage pin-up website that ever existed and one of the very first, one out of the first 10, glamor girl pin-up nudie girl websites back when you could have one page on the worldwide web. People could send me \$20, and I'd send them back signed pictures of myself. So I've always been like, "What else can I do that takes it to the next level?"

I know a lot of people for whom some version of this is true, where it's by sheer force of will that you figure out a way to take your interests and the things that you love and love doing and make that into your work. You make your identity into a career.

Yes. When you're doing that, your reward is already there. I never imagined I was going to be famous. I was just having fun. I was doing all these different fun things and thought it was my 15 minutes of fame, even back in the '90s. I don't know. I was always having fun. I was never sitting there waiting. You get a lot of people that are just like, "I want to be the best in the world at that," and they don't really care about the process. I hate using the word process, but I guess my process was just enjoying all of it instead of being like, "I'm going to be famous one day." I didn't have any of that kind of thing. I just was always in the moment and thinking it was just fun. It was just a moment I was having—and it just kept extending and extending.

You have handled that side of it really well. If you're a woman in any facet of the entertainment industry, it's going to be complicated and difficult. But if you're also doing something that involves showing your body and deals with sexuality and performance and presentation, the kind of intense criticism and scrutiny that invites can be nearly impossible to navigate.

I just learned to ignore all of it as best I can, you know? That's the only way I knew how to survive it. Don't read the comments. I hate saying that because I love communicating with my fans, but as soon as you look, there will always be something.

I did a post yesterday and someone wrote about Dirty Martini like, "You've just got a token big girl in here for diversity," and I wanted to say, "Bitch, Dirty Martini is *the best* in the world. She's better than I am!" I wanted to rip that person a new one because Dirty Martini is the fucking best. She should have her own touring show. But I can't. I'm not going to engage. I'd rather engage with the other people who are kind and positive and ignore the people who are awful. A couple of weeks ago someone was coming for me because they said I was anti-vax and I was so confused. Then more people started to come for me because of it. It turns out that they thought I was Kat Von D. I'm like, "I'm not the same person." It was like, "Oh, there's a whole war on Dita Von Teese, but

they've got the wrong person."

That's so crazy.

No, so in general I have to be like, "Don't step into the shit." I'll see things like that, and I'm like, "Oh my god, these people hate me, and it's not me they hate. It's somebody else. They're just confused." So I just have to stay out of that. It's got to be like water off a duck's back. But it's hard. It's hard for everybody, I think.

As a burlesque performer, what is the ideal for you? Is it touring, or is it having a home theater show that you can do all the time?

I love touring, but it's also kind of a hard business. The financials of touring with a show like mine are not amazing for me. But I do it because I love it. Also, there was a time there where I was just doing all these fancy fashion parties or billionaire birthday parties and things like that, and it was great. It was fun. It was really wild going around the world and being at some Russian billionaire's birthday party and stuff. But then I really started to miss actually performing for my fans, for real audiences. So I started touring, and it took a long time for me to make it profitable. But I love touring and I could feel myself becoming a better performer with every show and every tour. I could see everything continuing to evolve.

What are some of the other challenges of touring a burlesque show?

Funny you should ask, but there are still a lot of cities where I still can't bring the show. For example, I've been trying to bring the show to Nashville for years, if you can believe that, and I can't because of their parameters around female nudity. I had a call with one of the big theaters there that puts the Drag Race shows through, and they gave me all these rules about what can be shown or not shown with women's bodies. So I said, "Well, can we wear tights and a bikini and cover any underboob?" Nope. They also said, "What we cannot see is this crease between the buttock and the leg." They go, "You'd need to wear something like a biking short to cover that." For a burlesque show? It was insane.

Then I said, "What about the men in the show?" Because we had just as many men in the show as women. "What about their bodies?" They said, "Oh, that's fine.. There's no rules for them." I was like, "Great." I wish that I had recorded the conversation.

That is truly crazy. And somehow, not totally surprising.

I keep trying. But that's the other reason I loved making the *Night of the Teese* film—for the people that maybe can't come to see the show in person for whatever reason. And also just for the legacy. I want to capture this footage of not just my shows, but of all these other great performances that really have moved me so much over the years.

The thing I find surprising about that whole Nashville thing is that, compares to so much other stuff in the culture right now—in which sex and nudity are often commingling with violence or exploitation—your show feels very innocent in some ways. Joyful. Liberating. And not at all vulgar. This whole thing says so much about the prevailing notions about sex and nudity, even in the year 2021.

Yes. Also, our show is really playful and has a sense of humor, and there's really not anything in there that feels super sexual. I guess I've always tried to balance the nudity with a sense of fun and playfulness and that sort of thing. For me, doing things that are overtly sexual has just never been my thing. I like putting humor with nudity. I think that's where it becomes more magical and fun.

It's about the intention. It feels really joyful and very celebratory, and it isn't for the express purposes of turning on a male audience.

No. And a lot of the men that are there are surprised by the experience. On the last tour there was a guy who

wrote to me saying, "I had to find your email. My wife wanted to see your show, and I didn't know what I was going to see, but we got the tickets, and we went, and I was still like, 'What are we doing here? This is so strange. Why does she want to see a burlesque show?'" He said he was very confused by the whole situation, like, "Why does she want to see a stripper?" Then he said, "When the curtains opened, she just got so emotional and excited. And then I watched the show, and I understood. I got why she wanted to go to a burlesque show." It is hard to articulate. But when a guy can sit there, a heterosexual guy that's like, "Why am I at a strip show?" and he's saying, "One of my favorite moments was Jett Adore," that's a victory. When you can have somebody like that would normally be like, "I don't want to see that," and then suddenly he's like, "That was hilarious, and I loved it, and I kind of wanted to be like Zorro, the male dancer," that's what I love.

It's also inspiring to see someone fully inhabiting their body in a way that's really joyful and about their own joy and happiness. It's really seeing someone living their best life.

And it's infectious. When you see other people doing it, you're like, "Yeah, I can do this, too." That's the other thing I get told a lot. If you see somebody that kind of reminds you a little bit of yourself, whether that's me—the awkward ballerina that couldn't remember any steps—or whether it's Perle Noire or Dirty Martini or Jett, people leave oftentimes thinking, "I can do that, too." There's a sense of fun and playfulness and permission to embrace your erotic side or your playful, sensual side.

Dita Von Teese Recommends:

I like that on your Instagram you will occasionally shout out specific things for people to do and discover. You posted about "Queens at Heart" — a documentary about drag ball culture in the 1960's — that I had never seen before. For the unschooled, are there any things related to the history of burlesque that you suggest people seek out?

Yes, but it's hard because there is always so much bias involved. You're always getting one person's particular view of what burlesque is. Every documentary has its own agenda. Every book, including my own, has their own agenda and stuff. It's hard. Then there are books that are about the whole politics of burlesque, and then there's burlesque books about modern burlesque that never even mention my name or leave out all these important figures, so it's very. I feel like with burlesque documentaries and books, it's a very strange world. I get it. But it's hard to really recommend, "Here's the end-all, be-all that you should see."

I'm good friends with Gypsy Rose Lee's son, and I watched the documentary he made about his mother, and it was really eye-opening because it's not what you would think it would've been like. I also think the Tempest Storm documentary was really interesting. I think trying to see documentaries about individual burlesque performers is good, but there are just not that many even yet. I hope there will be more. There's a lot of great books about these great burlesque stars, too. I think that's probably the best thing, to learn about some of them. People like Lili St. Cyr and Gypsy, of course. There's lots of them.

Name

Dita Von Teese

Vocation

Vedette, burlesque dancer, model, fashion designer, businesswoman, and author

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Albert Sanchez