

## Reviews of *Stripped and Teased: Scandalous Stories with Subversive Subplots*

• Excerpted from the review and interview of a double bill show including Kimberly Dark's *Stripped and Teased* and Jennifer Lanier's *None of the Above*

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What do a European-American poet/sociologist from Southern California and an African-European-Native American actor from North Carolina have in common? Both live on the Big Island and have written humorous one-woman shows that are provocative, poignant and political, and that actively engage their audiences in the experience. Both tell intimate, true-life stories told in the first person. And both are 'out and about' lesbians who have playfully coined the term "deviant theater" to describe their work... This reporter recently had a chance to see both shows performed at other island venues.

"There are so many examples of stories told from men's perspectives that are basically about men's lives, and we are encouraged to see those stories as about the human experience. It's time we see women's stories about women's lives as about the human experience as well," says Dark. "And this evening of theater is a funny way to start doing this. If there's a way to start bridging that gap with humor, I'm very happy to do that. I want men in the audience, I want straight people in the audience."

Dark's *Stripped and Teased* is a wild romp through the issues of gender (in)equity and of (un)fettered sexuality, body image and the social construction of gender, and the economics of being female. Using women who work as strippers as a unifying theme throughout the show, Dark brilliantly illuminates how stereotypical views of femininity are not just ridiculous, but ultimately harmful to us all.

In her piece "Strippers and Waitresses," Dark recites "So, when your waitress asks about your day and whether she can get you anything else, with such an earnest tone, she is doing her job. When a stripper acts like you're sexy and tells you, over that \$15 glass of wine, that she's working her way through the nearest fancy university in order to become a civil engineer, while she heaves her pretty bosom, shifts in her chair and giggles, she might actually be lying to you!"

The show's title, *Stripped and Teased* has a double meaning, referring both to the striptease and to "stripping the concept of femininity and teasing gender. There's something being revealed while we strip away the reality of women's lives," Dark says, adding, "Part of what I'd like to illuminate - through humor, so that folks can have their own ongoing conversations - is that glamorizing (mostly) underpaid sex workers, who must uphold an extreme gender norm, is potentially damaging to all of our humanity."

The show includes thoughtful pieces like "Effort to be Liked," where Dark questions why "niceness" is a major criteria for women's social acceptability; and "Roadside, Perris, California," where Dark watches her female lover fix a truck and questions why men think the attributes they're relegated actually belong to them. Then there are sexy pieces like "I Could Drink a Case of You," the sensual performance poem that closes the show; and "First Girl," a high school story about the first girl to whom Dark was ever attracted.

"What I love in these stories is where personal experience meets social reality; and those are the moments I'm looking for. When we start talking about social circumstances, we are so lost if we don't remember that real people are involved," says Dark. "What does it feel like to be standing on a soiled carpet in a smoky bar at 2 p.m. with the bar owner telling you to take off your shirt?"

Dark, with an M.A. in Sociology and a yen for poetry, didn't start out as a performer. In fact, for quite some time, she kept her life as a social scientist very separate from her life as a poet.

"The whole performance thing was almost accidental," she shares. "I was facilitating a creative writing group in San Diego and we were doing readings of the work, and I became known as the poet who wasn't boring."

During the mid-90s when poetry slams were gaining popularity, Dark's performance poems gradually grew into something more. Her first full-length theater show, *The Butch/Femme Chronicles: Discussions With Women Not Like*

Me (And Some Who Are), consisted of 19 separate poems that when told together had a greater meaning. Next she wrote Public Contact and True Confessions of a Lesbian Diva before her current offering, "Stripped and Teased," which debuted this fall in Hawai'i and San Diego, and tours the U.S. and Europe in 2006.

Since the stories she relates are true and interrelated only thematically, Dark feels they're somewhere between storytelling and theater. "What people are seeing is a theatrical event, not a play; an event in which I expect participation," states Dark, who doesn't consider herself an actor. "So in a way the poetry and social science have merged for me..."

Although the two shows explore similar issues, they do so in vastly different ways. Lanier's is clearly based on her life story. Dark, on the other hand, says that while "every 'I' is me" in her show, the point is not about presenting a retrospective of her life, but rather utilizing her experiences to highlight the topics she chooses to explore, such as women's social roles and beauty standards. "There's an epiphany at the end of Jenny's story," Dark explains, "whereas I feel like I use my story to create the joke, the point, the drama, but it never ends up being about my personal epiphany."

Lanier serves up her writing as a traditional theater piece, with a generous helping of stand-up comedy; while Dark uses the voice and demeanor of a highly trained reader/storyteller to present her work, sometimes even reciting directly from a notebook.

One similarity between the two shows is their reliance on audience reactions. Dark actively engages audience members by encouraging responses to her questions. She asks the audience to raise their hands if they own more than 10, then 20, then 30 pair of shoes. Most men put their hands down after 10. She also asks for a male volunteer to don the prominently displayed 8-inch platform "stripper shoes" and walk across stage.

"The shoes are a fantastic metaphor for me in this show," Dark says. Having a volunteer literally try to walk in someone else's shoes brings home her point that the skills strippers must have - such as dancing in shoes that most people can barely walk in - should be examined and taken seriously. "This is all back to my obsession with the embodied experience," relates Dark. "I'm interested in the fact that anything we witness is changed by the fact that we witness it." And so the audience, merely by witnessing her show, becomes a de facto participant...

Clearly, neither Dark nor Lanier is shy or modest. They lay their stories bare for all to see, in a way that is both refreshing and challenging: refreshing because they deal with issues that are often hidden and get short shrift in the world of entertainment; and challenging because they expose some harsh realities of modern social structures and ask the viewer to find the humor in them.

"Real life contains tragedy and comedy and epiphany. Part of what one does on stage is condense real life down and remove the mundane," says Dark. "Both of these shows have the element of women's' experiences unfolding in ways that are both surprising and funny. The audience has an opportunity for a really deep experience - but also leave and say, 'That was a really funny show.'" Neither Dark, who has a son, nor Lanier, whose life-partner is fair skinned, see their work as divisive or accusatory. Instead, they see it as illuminating the lives of lesbians and other women..."