

Backwoods Burlesque: Off-the-Grid Tsk Tsk

by Bronwyn Preece



Jenny Vester as Lollipop.
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

In the middle of the Salish Sea, off the west coast of British Columbia, on an entirely off-the-grid island teeming with trees, feral sheep, potholes, and potlucks, and (in)famous for its weed ... on a dark and wet, middle-of-winter night ... corsets are being tightened, garters heightened, cod pieces padded. Sassiness is meeting solar panels, whimsy, windmills, and waterwheels, girls, guys, gossip, and generators.

Listen ... can you hear the stirring in the woods? They say the smaller the place, the greater the politics ... but here, the tinier the place, the more tantalizing the tsk tsk.

The Tsk Tsk Revue has become an annual one-night phenomenon on Lasqueti Island (off the east coast of Vancouver Island), population 350. Drawing a crowd of locals and travellers from the “other side” (what we islanders term the mainland), the show features a series of vignettes, threaded together by the colour commentary of hostess and creator Jenny Vester. Embodying over the years such personas as Super Wet Nurse, Lollipop from the Church of Suck and Lick, Furnice the Fervert, or this year’s Mr. Ms., Vester presides over a night that defies standardization or categorization. Born out of a community need for a safe, age-appropriate venue for expressive raunchiness, what began as a personal fundraiser has

blossomed over seven years into a small, Gulf Islands touring show. Taking bawdy backwoods humour on the road, poking fun at everyone and sparing no one, the Tsk Tsk Revue brings new meaning to localism, while offering a venue (as the only age-restricted event of the year on Lasqueti) where even the schoolteacher can participate and show up for work on Monday morning!

Placing an open call to the community-at-large to conceive and create offerings for the show, Vester assembles independent and eclectic sketches (sometimes just days before the scheduled event), underscoring the whole pastiche with a strong narrative through-line. As an avid yearly spectator, I have witnessed with amazement how Vester manages to make sense—sometimes through the very nonsense of the mix—of what could otherwise end up as a pell-mell of independent skits, creating in the end a show that she terms invariably “funny, irreverent, provocative, strange, sexy, and original” (Interview).

With the aid of the Backwoods Boys (continuously running out of gas in more ways than one!), the Jerry Can-Can Girls (always there when the boys run out of gas!), a team of flirtatious, feral sheep, or the Off-the-Grid New Age Touchy-Feely Dance Workshoppers, the annual Tsk Tsk manages to make cohesive sense of an eclecticism so varied that the audience never knows just what or who to expect each time the curtain opens:

Half-naked synchronized firewood chopping by Hot Stuff; the Kama Sutra enacted in unitards; a religious sermon and a reading of debauchery and rude synonyms from Roger’s Thesaurus; followed by a spellbindingly sensual belly dance or an audience-judged orgasm competition. Then again, the curtain might open to reveal two of the smallest people on the island, cross-dressed in fleshy costumes that triple their size, doing a striptease to the song “Give Me Your Hard White Cum,” followed by a slow-sung love ballad; a glimpse into the activities of the sister-wives and father-husband of the polygamist community of Bountiful; or maybe this time it will be the older women of the island doing a behind-the-sheet number, with only their bare chests and feet revealed, to the lyrics “Do your breasts hang low? Do they wobble to and fro?” Then again, it might be a staged interpretive reenactment of Sir Richard Attenborough’s explanation of the mating rituals of slugs or sperm whales (complete with life-size phallic members as crucial players in the “act”).



The Backwoods Boys being pulled over by the cops.
Photo by Sarah Carruthers



Jenny Vester, centre, with the Jerry Can-Can Girls ... after a hard day of work!
Photo by Sarah Carruthers



Costume elements arriving by sidecar behind the Lasqueti Community Hall.
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

The Tsk Tsk Revue is [about] spinning both the term sexy and the status quo on their heads, highlighting the often absurd moments of choosing to live off-grid and translating the many challenges that face the islanders into comedic fodder. In this context, what's irresistibly arousing and "hot" (although cold is a more appropriate term) are routines by competent and strong island women in gumboots and waterproof survival suits.



Wardrobe scene: Sexually suiting up.
Photo by Sarah Carruthers

But is it burlesque? “Yes,” answers Vester adamantly, pointing out that the original sense of burlesque was that it was “funny-sexy” and “culturally relevant.” The Tsk Tsk Revue is both and more: relevant and responsive; making fun of the performers and the spectators; spinning the term sexy and the status quo on their heads; highlighting the often absurd moments of choosing to live off-grid; and translating the many challenges that face the islanders into comedic fodder. In this context, what’s irresistibly arousing and “hot” (although *cold* is a more appropriate term) are routines by competent and strong island women in gumboots and waterproof survival suits (as if they’ve just climbed out of their Zodiac, after having navigated the most treacherous body of water on the coast, and stepped right on stage), and scenes by men that turn the grunt work of remote living into a variety of more exhilarating grunts.

“I wanna play dirty!” Vester realized several years back. Then a Parent Advisory Committee-mama, Vester was one of the main organizers of the local elementary school’s annual Lip Sync fundraiser (an open-community event for people to airband and Milli Vanilli in style). The mid-winter event was progressively becoming more risqué and arguably inappropriate for the younger audiences and beneficiaries of the funds raised. Identifying that dildos did not match with the PAC mandate, but recognizing that eroticism and erogenous zones lurked within the nooks and crannies of many an outdoor local shower, on the trail between the cabin and the outhouse, and within the garden beds growing immensely phallic carrots, Vester in 2006 convened the first ever Tsk Tsk. Over the years, the show has continued to push the edges, extending and interrogating the elasticity of one little island’s limits, balancing silly lewdness with safety and heart. Those who make up the Tsk Tsk are your on-every-other-day-(relatively)-normal-neighbours, in a very literal sense: the butcher, the baker, and even the candlestick maker; the sawmill, the carpenter, and the gardener. The Tsk Tsk is a community (at) play! Playing up and playing into island stereotypes, the Tsk Tsk toys with notions ranging from implied bestiality to being a band of rogue, perverted pirates. Regardless of the year’s offerings, one is guaranteed a pendulum ride, always into the unexpected.

In 2012, the twenty-four members of the Tsk Tsk Revue hit the road, in one stretch limousine and four vans, doing a five-show tour on the “other side.” Epitomizing the make-it-up-and-figure-it-out-as-we-go-along nature of grassroots theatre, the traditional roles of stage manager, director, and stage hands emerged but remained unlabelled within the Tsk Tsk multiple-role-playing, organic-orgasmic organism—a group entirely without any previous theatrical training.

There were concerns that the intensely local, Lasqueti-based humour might not translate off island. This proved to be anything but the case. The show was more than raucously received, with tickets sold out days before the show even rolled into some towns.

Though brazenly backwoods, the Tsk Tsk Revue has an undeniable polish of sorts—a rough-hewn, amateur-rich, and community-fuelled polish—the result of a laidback yet dedicated professionalism on the part of Vester and the show’s participants. The Tsk Tsk not only stages innovative and striking low-tech theatrical tropes and costumes, but equally some of the most pioneering acts in blacklight burlesque, earning the company its rightful place

within the national scene of contemporary Canadian burlesque. Vester set out to create a show where spectators would have to “hold their funnybones.” She has done more than that. She has midwifed into being an alternatively powered assemblage of adult audacity, lending a new sexual hilarity to the growing interest in off-the-grid living—creatively displaying one community’s ethics of erotics.

Work Cited

Vester, Jenny. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2012.

About the Author

Bronwyn Preece is an improvisational performance eARThist, community applied theatre practitioner, and author. She is currently pursuing a PhD through the University of Glasgow, exploring, through performance, the intersection of ecology and disability. She recently did a series of transnational performances for World Stage Design, set within an edible stage, examining local gardening as a metre for climate change. She is the author of *Gulf Islands Alphabet* (2012) and the forthcoming *In the Spirit of Homebirth* (Seven Stories, 2015) and *Off-the-Grid Kid* (Eifrig, 2015). She will have a chapter in *Performing Motherhood* (Demeter Press, 2014). She lives in a solar and waterwheel-powered house on Lasqueti Island, BC. bronwynpreece.com



Blacklight burlesque.
Photo by Sarah Carruthers