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A Voice of Her Own

BY ALLISON HART

In the midst of the chaos and joy surrounding this year's Fall Fest, Megan Brandenburg, authoritative despite her pixie-esque demeanor, guarded the entrance to The Stood. As she directed students in and turned away those without wristbands, the excitement she held was infectious. Students raced into the pit after she gave them the "OK," jumping and yelling with joy. Her energy remained constant throughout the night and her smile only faltered when she pushed back against the occasional PBR-addled bro.

After two and a half years of working at The Stood, 21-year-old Brandenburg has seen more than her fair share of rowdy students, energetic shows, and the messes they leave behind. In her sophomore year she joined the PSGA senate and acted as somewhat of a Stood liaison, making sure the space she loved didn't get left out of the governing body that controls it. At the beginning of the school year, she stepped up to take the job as Student Center Coordinator, only the second woman to do so in the space's 11-year history. Its male-dominated past has given The Stood a reputation as somewhere that girls don't go, reserved only for grungy skateboarding guys in punk bands. Under Brandenburg's lead, however, it's time to rewrite history.

Now, the proud feminist aims to make the space more welcoming to all kinds of people. Commissioning new murals and decor that seem to appear almost every day, Brandenburg is also working to improve the physical condition of The Stood. Whether or not the space can continue on this track once Brandenburg leaves, however, depends entirely on how effective she is at getting students to "think wide open."

With a smile bright enough to rival the neon-painted Stood walls, Brandenburg is up to the challenge. She's willing to do whatever it takes to give everyone the most positive and accepting experience possible and to keep the negatives of the past from repeating themselves.



Q. What are your goals for this year?

A. My main intention in wanting this job—other than thinking that I was the most experienced and would be good at it—is that I wanted to make it an open space. It has historically been a very male-dominated building, and I've felt a lot of weird tension because of that. Last year it was really rough at some points and made me feel like really alienated and not like I was really part of a community. I feel like the representation of the Stood is guys in bands, but that's not how it works. Last year the people who did all the work were the female employees, but that's not what people see; that's not the face of the Stood.

Other than that, I have a bunch of cool things I wanna do, like [the] zine library that we started. I've really been pushing my employees to pick up projects. I'm really good at making sure they do and being really annoying like, "You have to do this." I think that's really important, to keep everyone motivated and to know that no one's wasting time. I can't expect them to do more than the five hours a week, but I expect them to do a lot with it. I think it's a great opportunity to have this space and

money that we can do whatever we want with. That's awesome and that's not gonna happen in the real world... And I want everyone to understand that.

Q. How is "open space" goal going so far?

A. It's been going really well. I don't think people recognize how the Stood is utilized by the entire campus. When you're only going to shows and see the same people, you think that's all there is. But I'm there every day and I don't recognize anyone. There are always people, too. If you go at 6:00 or 7:00 it's packed. People I've never seen before tell me that they love the Stood. We've been working with LGBTQ and FORTH a lot and we're trying to talk a lot with clubs that aren't really associated with the Stood. I've had them tell me that they're really happy about that.

Q. What were some of the tough points last year?

A. People can be very insensitive there. Things that made me feel uncomfortable being in a very male-dominated area where they were just calling girls sexy all the time and making jokes like "I'm only gonna hire girls that are hot." It was stuff like that

where it's really stupid and they might be kidding, but they're really not. Like I said before, I feel like the face of the Stood isn't a girl, it's a white guy in a band. I hate that. I just feel like over the years, the people who've worked there have been guys who take advantage of their job there and don't really do anything. They just use it to do whatever they want and use it to practice and don't add anything to the space.

Q. Last spring The Beat published an essay I wrote that was critical of the male-dominated atmosphere of The Stood. What was the reaction to that amongst Stood employees?

A. It was hard. It's good to have constructive criticism and create a dialogue, but that wasn't happening. I remember the first meeting when it was brought up, [a Stood employee] said, "This fucking feminist is saying this about the Stood," and I was just like, "OK, don't say that. We can talk about what you don't like about it, but it's not an attack on Stood boys. It's bigger than that." After that meeting I walked up to him and another person and was like, "What's up," and they went, "Oh nothing, we're just talking about how feminists

"I feel like the face of the Stood isn't a girl, it's a white guy in a band. I hate that."

Megan Brandenburg

Megan Brandenburg, the Stood's second female coordinator spends most of her time at the Stood in hopes of improving the atmosphere.

fucking suck," and then they tried to make me feel bad for "not being able to take a joke." That happened a couple more times. At the time, I felt a lot more defeated [than] mad and didn't want to be as involved with the social aspect of working there, which is a huge part of the job. The people who work there usually become really close friends, which is amazing. But when it was like that atmosphere of grossly male-dominated, destructive, anti-feminist bullshit and all about weird offensive humor I felt like I didn't want to fight against it. I didn't have the energy and that was just how it was. It was hard to be the one person going against it. Now I don't care. Those guys are my friends and when I'm around them I don't take their shit anymore. I feel like last year they were perceived as these really cool guys because they were the face of the Stood even though they were destroying it.

That was a huge reason I wanted this job. I kept going back and forth between, "Fuck this place. If this is what it's gonna be like, then I don't want anything to do with it," and "I need this job because I need to change this. I need to fight and that's what's important."

Q. Have you faced any obstacles with making the Stood a more accessible and open space?

A. It's been running very smoothly. I developed a really good relationship with people in the PSGA early on and all those people have higher positions now. Because I'm not a stranger they all trust me and my judgment. No one's looking over my shoulder all the time. It's so much better to have people who trust and support you and are willing to help. I've had a lot of clubs approach me as well with projects and I'm very excited about that because I was never really involved with clubs. This has been a great opportunity to get more involved. Student-to-student there have been a couple obstacles because a lot of people don't know how the system works. There are so many steps to take before you can have an event or do something with us. I can't do everything for every person.

Q. What have been the most difficult and rewarding parts of the job?

A. It's difficult because there's so much to do. Opening before school was especially so because there were no employees and there was a lot that needed to happen. A lot of people didn't have their shit together yet and clubs didn't know what they were doing. I planned a huge event over the summer that I was really excited about. There was supposed to be a lot of club participation but clubs couldn't access their budgets yet and their board members dropped and everything kind of fell apart. It was really disappointing because I was so excited. There has to be a lot of participation in everything, but not everyone is as devoted as you are.

But I love talking to adults and filling out paperwork. All the bureaucratic stuff is great. It's been really rewarding to have this experience of having a real job.

My relationship with the Stood has always been closely linked to the PSGA, which has never really happened before. Though the Stood is part of the PSGA, it's always been pretty separate. None of the employees knew about it or interacted with any of the executives. They just did not coexist well together. That's why I did Senate, to know more about the PSGA side and help the Stood from within. I've always been really active with them both, which has helped so much this year.

Q. Have you faced any disrespect or opposition now that you're in charge?

A. All the bureaucratic parts and everything with the PSGA has been really easy,

and I haven't faced any opposition from them whatsoever. It's actually been the most rewarding part of the job. Working with students, though, has been difficult. The Stood has always been related to whatever boys occupy it, no matter how many girls work there or are just in there. That's huge and that's something that I've been trying to combat. It's been really hurtful at times because I'm there every day and I'm doing so much, but people don't look at me and assume that I'm the one in charge, even if they see me there every day. That's been one of my biggest problems, trying to make sure the girls aren't just supporting characters to the Stood guys.

The other day I met with someone in a completely professional scenario and while he shook the hands of all the guys, he hugged me. I didn't know him. I put my hand out to shake his and he hugged me. It made me really mad because it wasn't sexual harassment but it was very objectifying. Things like that happen all the time; people getting my attention by grabbing my hand and putting their hands on my shoulders to move me. It's very hurtful and it's not specific to my job, but I still have to deal with it when past Stood coordinators haven't.

When I work on the space I do [physical] things that my body isn't really capable of because I don't want to look weak. I don't want anyone to think I'm less capable than the guys who came before me.

Q. What's your hope for the future of the Stood?

A. I'm trying to put the Stood on a path of production and growth. It's so easy for nothing to get done. But if I have an idea I'll just make sure it gets done even if I have to do it myself. I want my employees to do that, too. If one of them comes to me with an idea, I make sure that they have what they need to do it. People love projects and having responsibility. I want to make sure that keeps happening because part of what makes the Stood great is that it's always changing.

Q. What would you say to someone with the view that the Stood is all just guys in bands who don't care about making the space accessible?

A. I don't think the Stood is like that anymore. Getting involved and being active is the best way to change what you don't like. Even before I started noticing sexist things, I was getting involved. I wanted this job so that I could change the atmosphere of the Stood. It would be so easy to roll over and die, but it's so much more effective to do something about it. ●



A Look Back

BY ALLISON HART

TO THE START

Purchase alumni remember the college as a sanctuary of tolerance, a place that set them up for success in the arts.

ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT):
Amy Greenan, Jeffrey
Schwartz, and Rebecca
Haviland.

BELOW: "Swan Street"
by Amy Greenan
Acrylic on canvas. 2012.



Spring 1989 was the first time Amy Greenan laid eyes on the Purchase College campus. To most outsiders, the brick buildings don't hold much appeal, and the school often skyrockets to the top of "ugliest colleges" listicles online. But the opposite of this was true for Greenan, who immediately felt a connection to the bricks and all that they housed, particularly the Visual Arts Conservatory. She took one look at all the studio space and work on the walls and her decision was made.

"I rushed to get my portfolio ready in time" she remembers now. "I had to find a photography student I knew to take photos of my work for me."

A transfer from the University at Buffalo (UB), Greenan found a home within the conservatory. "As an artist it felt really validating to be among my own kind," she said, "and that there were a lot of people who were really into what they were doing."

In the years since then, Greenan has returned home to Buffalo and continued her artistic career. Her paintings were recently shown for the first time in Manhattan at Susan Eley Fine Art, an Upper East Side gallery. The show, called "Elements of Domesticity," opened up many an opportunity for her to reach new audiences, not only in the New York scene, but also through art fairs like Art SV/SF in San Francisco, where her paintings appeared in the Susan Eley booth.

The influx of exposure comes as a welcome change after many years of struggling to find her way as an independent artist. "I spent a long time working at dead-end office jobs," she said with some remorse. "It's still a struggle, even though I work full time as a graphic designer. But you should do what you want to do and work hard at it."

This struggle is familiar to many of those who graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Purchase grad or not. Dubbed "a useless degree" by many a visiting relative or Internet commenter, a fine arts degree can be a heavy financial burden with almost no guarantee of success. However, Greenan sees no need for artists to go get business degrees instead. "Do what you're passionate about," she expressed. "Do it and work hard because a lot of other people want the same thing."

A Purchase education seems to be a big help to grads, from real-world experience to finding one's niche. Filmmaker Jeffrey Schwarz, whose documentary "I Am Divine" was recently released to rave reviews, says that without Purchase, he would've been lost.

At Purchase, Schwarz felt free to delve into the subject matter in which he had previously only had a cursory interest. On such an artistic campus, it's much easier to read about queer revolutionaries or trash films. "Everything I'm making movies about now is stuff I got really into at Purchase: Divine, Tab Hunter, Vito Russo—they're all people I first got into there."

But even beyond subject matter, Schwarz was able to figure out just how he wanted to pursue those interests. "I started out as a narrative film student, but over time the classes I took in documentary showed me that I should be working within that genre. It was where I could best tell these stories."

One consistent factor in the stories of successful alums is comfort in pursuing what they're interested in and expressing who they are. The campus becomes a haven for those who felt different in any way during adolescence. Several of those interviewed expressed a sense of relief at the queer-friendly nature of those around them.

"My freshman year at UB I remember knowing I had feelings for women, but Purchase is where I felt comfortable expressing them," said Greenan. "That was a major part of [Purchase] for me, just feeling comfortable in the person that I was."

Schwarz recounted a similar story, citing a freshman year roommate as the first openly queer person he ever met. "I waited until my senior year to come out, but even so, having people like that around helped me to be honest with myself about it."

Without this kind of support, they believe it could've potentially taken much longer for them to come out, or to admit their queerness to themselves. This kind of honesty is not only instrumental to self-preservation, but can help break down any barriers that stand between the artist and honest expression.

To this day the queer community is one fostered at Purchase. The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Union (LGBTQU), reigns as the biggest club

on campus, hosting events like annual drag show "Fall Ball," which has been named the biggest college drag show in the country, and music showcase "Women Out Loud."

But it's not just the students that motivate each other to success; it's the professors as well.

"It was really cool for me to see that [my professors] were all working outside the college," says Rebecca Haviland, Class of '04, who is now teaching in the studio composition program as a part-time lecturer. "They were still all doing studio sessions and working as professional musicians when they weren't teaching classes."

She herself plays regularly with her band, Rebecca Haviland and Whiskey Heart, the other members of which are also Purchase graduates. The rock band tours, records albums, and writes new music all through the school year. If she has to occasionally take a couple days off during tours, her students don't seem to mind.

"All of my professors were successful New York-based artists," said Greenan on the same issue. She even found the teachers to be more diverse than those she'd previously studied under. "I feel like the core of my painting professors were women, which was fantastic. And they were all showing in New York. It was amazing."

The prevalence of diverse, successful authority figures is yet another contributing factor in the confidence built up over the course of an education at Purchase. If people in minority groups have role models they identify with, they're much more likely to feel comfortable exhibiting their own work and demanding more from the world than simple discrimination.

For many Purchase students, no matter when they graduate, success is something they've been told will be elusive and almost impossible to obtain. Working as an artist may indeed be a struggle, but all interviewed agree that one doesn't need rock-star status to be content.

Haviland says she hopes to inspire this sense in her own students. She wants to give her students a taste of what it means to work in "the real world," and what that'll actually mean for them. "We're not all going to be Rihanna and that's OK," she said. "We can still focus on music and we can still make a living at it."

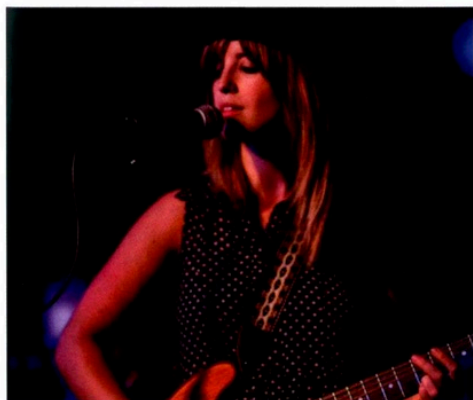
While no one's saying it's easy to go out and make a living in one's artistic field, this particular kind of realism can be extremely useful to students. If they know how to get market themselves and their work, find gigs, and create their own opportunities, as Haviland hopes to teach them, it will be far easier for them to make their way in the world once they graduate.

"It's amazing now how successful these people are," said Greenan of her old classmates. "That's really exciting for me and I feel a genuine pride for them and ownership in a way, like 'those are my people.'" 🍀



ABOVE: Jeffrey Schwarz and friends back in the day. (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Schwarz.)

BELOW: Rebecca Haviland performing with her band, Rebecca Haviland and Whiskey Heart, at Arlene's Grocery. (Photo courtesy of Rebecca Haviland.)



JUAN PEÑA

BY ALLISON HART

From a home studio in Binghamton, New York, to a professional recording studio in midtown, recording engineer and Purchase student Juan Peña has had quite the journey to success. What started out as just a way to help friends and fellow musicians has become a career in a very short amount of time.

In addition to studying studio production at Purchase, Peña has spent the past two years working at Daddy's House Recording Studio in Manhattan. Owned by Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs, the studio caters primarily to hip hop and R&B artists like French Montana, Travis Scott, and Wyclef Jean.

What is your musical background?

I started playing instruments when I was in elementary school, just like basic marching and stuff. Started with trombone. That was kinda my first interaction with music. I picked up the bass guitar in high school because I was very interested in playing in bands and played in jazz, marching, and concert band.

I started playing in a rock band then called "Freaks of the Forest" that I've been playing with for eight years. Recording was something I started doing this as a way to save us money. I figured if I could learn we could put out our own records and stuff. I got very deep into it and that's how I got to where I am now.

How did you get started at Daddy's House?

I got hooked up with this job through one of the teachers here, the chief engineer

Andrew Cardenas. He mentioned an old friend of his, Tony Drootin, who was the manager of Sony Studios up until 2007. Andy suggested I give him a call and mention his name to see if they had anything going on. He owns a separate studio in the city called Area 51. So I was going to that studio when I went for the interview. He wasn't there so I called him and he was like "Oh come down to Daddy's House." At the time I didn't know what it even was. I thought it was a restaurant or something.

What was it like there that made it different from working in a school studio?

The pressure honestly. What they expect from you. Even [in Studio A] it's a much more laid back atmosphere. I can be like "oh hold on something's going on let me just figure it out." Whereas in a bigger commercial studio you have less than 10 seconds to fix it and if you don't, everybody looks at you like you don't know what you're doing. It's a very professional atmosphere. It was that and the crazy hours that you work. There was a week where there were producers coming in making beats and it was pretty much five days straight and I couldn't leave so I had to sleep in the studio.

You started as an intern. How did you get to be a full-time engineer?

I worked my way up, which was another game in itself. Starting from the bottom and playing the politics within that place. There are a lot of interns and each one has their own thing. Some of



Juan Peña in Daddy's House Recording Studio. (Photo by Eve Comperlati)

them wanna be producers, others wanna be A&R industry people. But if you're an engineer it's the perfect place to be because your main goal is to get in good with the engineers and get in the rooms.

Opportunities come up where the engineer will call out sick or he's gotta do three other things. If they trust you enough and they see that you know what you're doing, they'll give you the shot. I remember the first time I got thrown in the hot seat. I failed miserably but I came out of it ok. I was not expecting the quickness and the pressure. I had the mindset of like "oh everything's good let me just set up your session" and once I got to see how they work I was like "ok I gotta prepare better." Everybody messes up. It's just a matter of making sure they're not major.

Who are some of your favorite artists that you've worked with?

My favorite by far as far as talent and personality was [R&B artist] Faith Evans. She was such a down to earth person. The first time I met her she came right up to me, shook my hand, and asked for my name. Usually when you work with like people who've been around for that long and have been that big at one point in their career sometimes their ego gets to their head but she was very down to earth, very cool.

Is there a big difference in how you have to work from genre to genre?

When you engineer, yeah. I have templates that I set up in the recording program. So if it's hip hop I have certain plug-ins and settings that make the shaping of the sound easier for me instead of starting from scratch. The programs I have set up on the tracks coincide with that genre. The mixing with rock is not as low end heavy as edm or hip hop music so you kinda have to adjust and learn as you go. That's why I like listening to everything. You never know what gig is gonna come your way. It's better to be prepared than to be surprised.

What advice would you give to a high school student before they come into a conservatory setting like this?

You can learn how to run the rig at school and they can tell you about it but being there seeing it and experiencing is the best way to learn.

Coming here helped me a lot. I networked and I found the connection that led me to the studio. A lot of it is going out and meeting the right person. Make sure your music is good and you know how to use the programs but also get out there and spend a lot of time meeting the people who're gonna take you to the right place. 🍀

CAT FELIZ & SYNSORAE EUTSAY

BY ALLISON HART



"Hey I thought of a good answer for the question about advice to GPCs," Cat Feliz messages me one night over Facebook. "DON'T BE A VISUAL ARTS MAJOR!"

FFeliz, one of the General Programming Coordinators for this year, had been a little unsure of what advice to give to those interested in applying next year at the time of our interview, and insisted that this—along with "Be totally open to change"—was the right answer. She and Synsora Eutsay share the task of booking artists to play the Stood every weekend, from rappers to punk bands to electronic acts, all paid for by your Mandatory Student Activity Fee.

What are your overall goals for the year?

SE: We're focusing on the audience experience. We're really looking to book shows where students can have fun and dance and enjoy themselves.

We made a big deal about us running and with this position, we wanted a lot of people who don't necessarily go to the Stood and who aren't familiar with Whitson's shows to be able to have fun. Whenever I say, "Come to the Stood" I mean, "Come to the Stood and hang out with

me. Come into my world and into the events." I'm a junior now and I'm trying to create the experiences and events that I wanted to have with my friends.

CF: There's this stigma of what a Stood kid is and it really keeps the majority of our community away from this community space that we're all a part of—SE: -and that we all pay for. CF: So we just want that to be a thing of the past.

What do you feel has been missing from GPC-organized events in the past?

CF: It's hard for me to say because I transferred here last semester but I was coming here a lot in the past five years, so I was familiar with the Stood culture and that was super polarized white male punk kids [who were all] about aggression and not being aware of your personal space.

SE: There was a lot of entitlement. A lot of people felt entitled to the space. Like yeah you pay for it, but they felt like [the Stood] was only their space. My freshman year, I didn't come to the Stood. I maybe went to the parties because those were the events that seemed accessible to all. Everyone can relate to a 90's throwback.

CF: We think that our predecessors Jack Tomascak and Janet Katsnelson did a great job. We ended up coming here a lot last year and had fun and enjoyed ourselves. But something we definitely want to bring more of to this position is more diversity in the music itself.

Have Purchase audiences been receptive to your efforts?

CF: It's weird; we've been getting mixed feedback. So many people have been coming up to me and thanking me and saying that they've never come to the Stood before, but we also get formal and informal complaints being sent to our boss. They say there isn't enough "diversity of shows," which is so vague. I wish that whoever has an issue with what we're doing would talk to us directly so we can really have a conversation about it. We're approachable people and we're here for you. We're here to make this a fun experience for you.

How are you hoping that students engage with you?

CF: I'm hoping that students realize that this is an open process and we can be more proactive about campus life. You have this power and these resources available. People complain about not seeing what they

want on campus but they could be doing this, too.

SE: If you come up to us or email us like "This group is poppin'" we'll look into it. Before we took the position, we didn't even know that that was possible. If I had known what I know now last year, I would've tried to do this even earlier.

What's been the biggest challenge of the job so far?

SE: Dealing with the bureaucracy. We started booking shows in the summer but weren't allowed to send out contracts or anything until we were financially trained. These acts are really busy. They don't have time to print out the papers, sign them, scan them, and send them back to us if they're on tour. There are expectations that aren't practical for the artists and the environment we're trying to create.

Anything else you'd like to add?

CF: I think we're the first people of color, definitely the first women of color to have this position. And we're both openly queer and best friends! 🍌

Photo by Erin Southwick

BEWITCHED &

BURLEXED



THE ART OF DE-GLAMOURIZING BURLESQUE

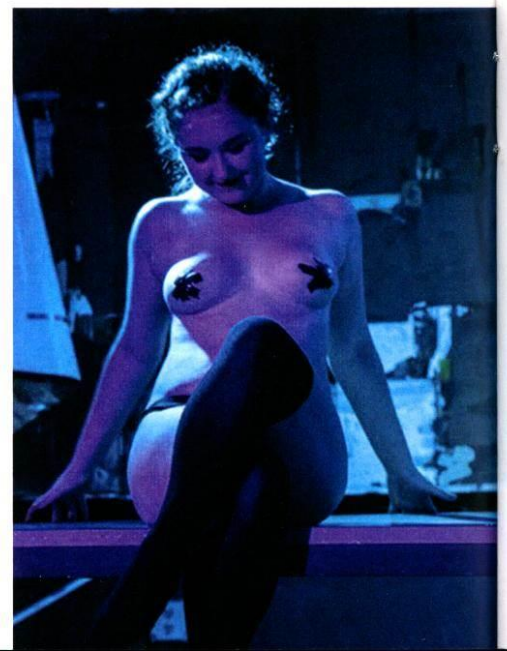
BY ALLISON HART

The scene: Purchase, after dark. You walk through campus, unable to sleep, past dim streetlights and through the quiet of the mall. You've heard tales of ghosts lurking here before, but you're not the superstitious type. You enter the dance building for a vending machine snack, but suddenly, you hear voices. Following them, you peer into the window of a rehearsal room. Is it a group of witches? Some kind of gang? Drunken VA kids out for a midnight romp? No, it's the Co-Conspirators, and they're plotting something.

The Co-Conspirators are a DIY burlesque troupe founded at Purchase, made up of both alumni and current students. Founded by performers Heart Crimson (whose name is a loose pun on "Bart Simpson") and Frankie Hentai Muniz, the troupe is part of the "neo-burlesque" movement, which seeks to not only diversify the kinds of performers onstage, but to allow for more exploration of social and cultural phenomena than the previous "classical" style, which prioritizes glamour and innuendo.

The troupe itself has been called "the garage band of burlesque" for their in-your-face acts and emphasis on emotional openness. "What the Co-Conspirators have done a lot so far is prioritize work on vulnerability and realness," said Crimson. "A lot of it has to do with being able to find empowerment in ways that aren't necessarily sexy or beautiful."

That much is clear from their most recent showcase, "Burlexes: An Ode to the Post-Relationship," which centered around the feelings that arise when ending a romantic partnership. There, Crimson shot-gunned two beers and vomited into a bag while stripping. Another performer, Mistress Mercy, used scissors to remove a too-tight dress from her body. "I took everything that happened to me and made it into something tangible," she said. "I can talk about it as much as I want, but to create a piece of art around something that I went through is so different... it's a physical expression."



*The Co-Conspirators in rehearsal.
(Photo by Julia Meslener)*



The comfort needed to be able to showcase these extreme emotions didn't happen right off the bat. When the troupe was formed in 2013, Crimson, then the most experienced member, held weekly classes for the troupe, where they worked with each other on who and what they wanted to be.

"It was a mixture of practical things and sit down conversations, where Heart would ask us questions like 'What does intersectional feminism mean to you?'" said member Rosé Rage. "As a group we would all get to give our opinions where we felt comfortable."

The group built their strong family dynamic this way, by picking apart all the theoretical aspects of what it meant to be a burlesque performer and applying it to their own lives. They got to know each other through conversations about body image and gender identity, as well as mirror exercises and lessons about how to best remove a sock.

After months of preparation, the troupe had their first show: "Alfred Hitchcock Undressed." While the original members performed acts that paid homage to the master of horror, soon-to-be members Tigris Lilac and Mistress Mercy watched, spellbound from the audience. "Seeing people my age doing it definitely made me think, 'This is something that I could do,'" said Mercy, whose own debut came at the next show, an ode to the "bad babes" of pop culture. She played Olivia Benson from *Law and Order: Special Victim's Unit*.

Although the first two shows largely played on pop culture, the troupe remains adamant that the following "Burlexes" were in no way a one-off

experiment. Crimson is particularly passionate about the emotional aspect of the performances. "We want to present power through vulnerability, and through heartbreak, and through quiet, as much as sexiness and ownership of the body."

This strong emphasis on highly expressive art is precisely the reason that each group meeting is so personal. In fact, when asked their favorite memory with the troupe, three members smiled and recounted times when the troupe helped them through nerves or breakdowns.

"We want to present power through vulnerability and through heartbreak, and through quiet, as much as sexiness and ownership of the body."

Another large part of the group's vision is audience interaction. The performers aim to create a bond with those watching, but are careful to set ground rules beforehand. At the top of each show, Muniz gives a speech to all those in attendance. "If you think that the performers are doing this for you," they say, "then you're very wrong. They're doing this for themselves."

At a Co-Conspirators show, it's fine to yell and whoop when enjoying an act, but not to do so in a demeaning or hypersexualized manner. They want friendly feedback from people who are there to support the art, not just those who want to ogle at naked twenty-somethings. "We've had to remove people from our

shows for being distinctly perverse instead of appreciative," said Crimson on the issue. However, they added, most of their fans have done it right and been genuinely appreciative of the performers in front of them. "It's a safe space to take off your clothes and have people be like, 'You look good and I like what you're doing,'" said Mercy with a laugh. "It gives you a good form of validation."

These days, the troupe is making decisions about their future. With Heart Crimson in Chicago and so many of the other members ready to graduate, it's time for them to decide what being a Co-Conspirator means, practically speaking. They're hard at work developing a mission statement that encompasses their eclectic nature: something that allows for silliness and serious conversations alike.

In the future, they aim to put on shows in multiple cities, develop a web presence, and diversify the makeup of the troupe. But for now, they're quietly working away on their routines, or, as Rosé Rage would put it, "stealing away into dance rooms to take off our clothes and be with people we care about." 🍷

TOP LEFT: From left to right: Kitty Cummings, Naughty Hypnotic, Bram Stroker, Heart Crimson, Mistress Mercy, Tigris Lilac. (Photo by Julia Meslener)

BOTTOM LEFT: Rosé Rage in action. (Photo by Vinny Carnevale)