



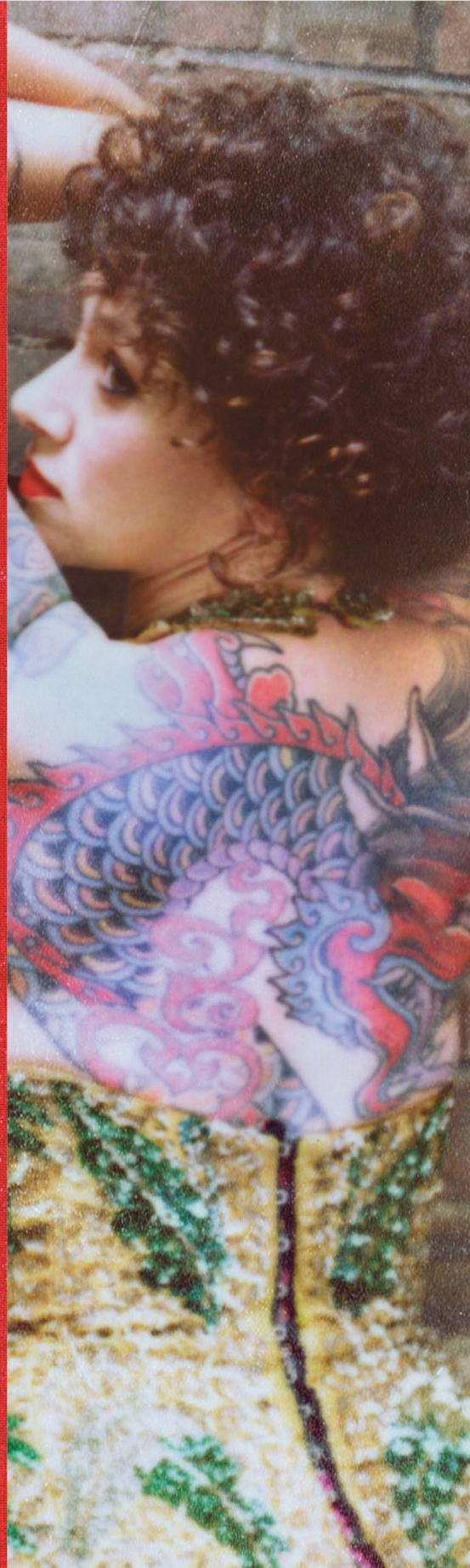
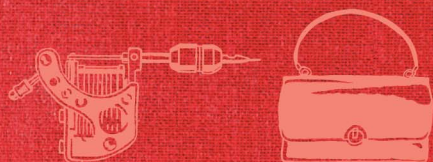
Obsessions of a Showwoman



The Performance Worlds of
Marisa Carnesky



Edited by Eirini Kartsaki



Introduction: Marisa Carnesky – Sorceress, Radical School Mistress, Showwoman

Eirini Kartsaki

Marisa Carnesky is an indomitable sorceress, an eccentric magicienne, a Showwoman. She is a spectacular deviant, a transgressor and an empress, part-deer, part-owl, part-tarot card reader (Figure 49, p.189). Carnesky's significant innovations include her unique style of neo-burlesque in the 1990s or 'grotesque burlesque', which *Time Out* credited her for inventing (Braid in Mock 2022: 46). Through performances, such as *The Grotesque Burlesque Revue* at the Raymond Revue Bar in Soho (1997), or *Lady Muck and her Burlesque Revue* (1995–96), or Carnesky's *Ghost Train* (2004–14), Carnesky innovates and invents form. With the latter, she creates an unprecedented, immersive, all-encompassing experience, which 'haunt[s] the borders of art and entertainment' and makes her one of the pioneers of immersive theatrical spectacle in the United Kingdom (Carnesky Website 2023).

Carnesky experiments with scale, form, genre. She marries experimental body art with high-end illusions, live art with alternative cabaret. She is interested in disrupting, disturbing, and shedding light. As a sorceress, she examines the symptoms of our diseased time and investigates a cure. She performs comical stripteases that sexually transgress, and that open a dialogue about sex and body positivity. She invites us to encounter the monster within ourselves in the bizarre, grotesque, overly sexual, hybrid creatures she performs; hers is an invitation to meet our weirdness with reverence and wonder. Her unique approach comprises a fearlessness that is evident in bringing together modes and practices that are often worlds apart. Carnesky makes accessible to wider audiences niche performance and body art practices such as body modification or live tattooing. She daringly blends different styles to create a spectacular elixir that entices and seduces. From her early work with *The Dragon Ladies* in the 1990s, her one-to-one performance *Penny Slot Somnambulist* (2000–03), to the full-scale solo *Jewess Tattooes* (1999–2002), *The Girl From Nowhere* (2003) or the multisensory *Tarot Drome*

(2012), Carnesky's performances function like a pharmakon, a potion or concoction whose aim is to help us see ourselves more clearly: as devilish beasts, the receivers of our foretold, inescapable future, as outsiders far from home, displaced, uprooted, wondering what it would mean to belong. Ultimately, seeing ourselves in this way, in the provisional community of an audience, participating in menstrual rituals, understanding our place in the world, as individuals, outsiders or those who do not fit in, is part of the sorcery of Carnesky and our cure. Our cure in fact has to do with community itself, the community of being part of Carnesky's bold and multifaceted experiential performance experiments. From this place, we look with wonder at what we have learnt in this journey. And it has been rich, and fulsome, and its gifts abundant.

When reading this book, you will experience the sorceress conjuring the spirits of historical women artists whose influence has been overshadowed. You may sense her divination in identifying compelling questions about marginalized experiences, bodies in perpetual transformation, bodies that are faltering, failing, but not apologizing; desiring bodies, wanting to exist in transformation and in loss; bodies that hold the weight of others that preceded them; that are in perpetual state of conflict: a tattooed Jewish woman, a body that menstruates but does not reproduce, a body that does not menstruate but follows the cycles of the sun and the moon. This conjure's gifts include seductiveness, generosity, and an ability to hold space for difficult questions and painful experiences. In essence, this sorceress' elixir shows us that transformation is not only an illusion; it takes effort, but when it happens, we can finally see clearly who we have become.

In recent years, Carnesky's work has been preoccupied with accounting for marginalized experiences of women artists with extraordinary skills who have been written out of the historical canon. These are women who appeared in the 1930s and 1940s within the contexts of the entertainment industry, such as Lulu Adams, one of the earliest female clowns, who topped the bill at Bertram Mills Circus; or Marjorie Dare, who rode the Wall of Death, accompanied by one of her many big cats who took their place in the side car; or Koringa, the legendary alligator hypnotist, who climbed ladders of swords, wore the mark of the French Resistance on her forehead and used her mesmeric skills to support the British army behind enemy lines, once drawing huge audiences, now all but invisible to history. In her most recent show *Showwomen* (2022), alongside other women with extraordinary skills, Carnesky speaks clearly about her own identity as an artist, maker, and collaborator:

I am not the greatest showman because I am not a man. I am not a showgirl and I am not a showboy. My name is Marisa Carnesky and I am a Showwoman, with two WWs in the middle, one for the show and one for the woman. [...] Traditionally the proprietress of working-class popular entertainments, she is the boss. She runs the show. Her showwomanly spectacle is different to the showman's, because as a former showgirl she really knows how to collaborate. Most importantly her vision is not about exploiting difference. Because she is different. She is showing herself. Because she wants to. [...] Her perspective might be the immigrant, the witch, the daredevil, the activist [...]. She has always been here, sometimes she is obscured – she often appears in wartime, she is subversive, she is spectacular and she makes covert actions for radical change using her incredible talents in circus and variety. She makes herstory, she makes new visions of spectacular matriarchal utopias. She is the Showwoman, the Showwoman, the Showwoman.

(Showwomen Script 2022)

Carnesky is a Showwoman. She has abandoned her earlier title of showgirl and argues that we should finally allow the showgirl to graduate into adulthood. This is Carnesky's most vital, recent contribution to the worlds between entertainment, theatre, and performance. Carnesky's forceful and spirited presence advocates for an existence of independence, collaboration, and care. This book is an urgent gesture to introduce 'Showwoman' into the theatrical vernacular, and to let go of the limitations of the showgirl and the oppressive conditions of working under the showman.

Carnesky has aspired to be the tattooed avant-garde and queer version of Jewish grand dames such as Sylvia Young or Anna Scher who have led renowned London schools and influenced generations of actors and theatre-makers (Carnesky in Patey-Ferguson, in this volume). Alongside her full-scale productions, rigorous research and development periods and alternative cabaret acts, Carnesky is a Radical School Mistress, as she has been educating future generations of artists with her Finishing School since 2008. As Phoebe Patey-Ferguson and Alex Lyons attest in this book, Carnesky's key principles include doing everything together (an expansion of the more often encountered DIY), constructing moments of wonder, being truthful to oneself, pushing boundaries, and finding power in pathos. This Radical School Mistress has encouraged her students to draw on political and personal beliefs and convictions, confront issues with openness and vulnerability in order to find within the context of cabaret or spectacle what feels

truthful and authentic. Ultimately, she has empowered her students to discover that their voice is loud and that it matters. Carnesky has done the same for many of the artists she has collaborated with over the years. This book is another such collaboration with a vibrant group of artists, including Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Empress Stah, Veronica Thompson, Rhyannon Styles, and others. The book gives a platform to artists to recount their remarkable journeys and Carnesky's part in who they are today. For instance, Paloma Faith and Tai Shani, who met Carnesky in the early stages of their career, explain the compelling role that their participation in *Carnesky's Ghost Train* has played in their lives and work.

Obsessions of a Showwoman is structured around these three themes: sorcery; performance as a radical school; and showwomanry. The book offers contrasting textures and counterpoints in the form of different types of writing: short memory pieces by Liz Aggiss, Marawa, Vanessa Toulmin, and Amy Ridler, who give accounts of their first encounters with Carnesky; conversations with artists who have participated in Carnesky's work over the years (such as Livia Kojo Alour, Lucifire, H Plewis, Nao Nagai, Lalla Morte, Miss Behave, Geneva Foster Gluck), chapters by theorists and historians of theatre and performance, which rigorously frame the key preoccupations in Carnesky's work (Roberta Mock, Josephine Machon, Eirini Kartsaki), and shorter texts that account for single performance instances (Daniel Oliver, Rachel Zerihan). The Department of Feminist Conversations (Maddy Costa and Mary Paterson in this instance) opens a dialogue with Carnesky's *Live Archive* on disappearance and remains. Finally, the book is exquisitely enveloped by the words of Dominic Johnson and Giulia Palladini. Mostly, this book opens the floor for a dialogue with and about Showwomen around the globe, whose existence and contributions confirm the urgent need to reconsider and radically change the language we currently use. Showwomen are women who take the lead, work for themselves, collaborate with others, women who have come into their own power and own the show; women who lead strange dance troupes or pop bands, who do weird shows about menstrual rituals and occult magick; women that ultimately rejoice at the thought of a world that resembles a feminist, matriarchal utopia.

In this book, this fairground ride, you will encounter fabulous aerial dancers, curious hair hangers, and spectacular sword swallows. You will come across dangerous acts of fire, peculiar ghosts, menstruating rivers, and tattooed dragons that come alive in their contact with your skin. You will encounter the Whore of Babylon, Lilith the Demon, the Tattooess, and the disgraced Jewess. You will also see *mezuzahs* in places

where *mezuzahs* should not go, gravity being defied and women covered in blood in esoteric rituals. Ghosts and spirits will accompany you on this ride. You will be kept relatively safe.

Bibliography

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