


MY WORD



STRIP POLKA

**DANCE LIKE NO-ONE'S WATCHING – TOO CLOSELY! SUE JACKSON
DISCOVERS FREEDOM IN LIBERATING HER WOBBLY BITS.**

A SHARP INTAKE of breath: “That’s amazing. You are so brave/admirable/mad. I could never do that!” That’s the response I almost invariably received from women friends at my decision to join a naked dance troupe.

It had all started last winter when an email from Melbourne’s Arts House dropped unexpectedly into my inbox: “CALLING ALL WOMEN! Women of all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, fitness levels, identities and abilities to participate in Nic Green’s *Trilogy*.”

I became hooked on dancing 12 years ago, when my partner gave me dancing lessons as a birthday present. I have been dancing weekly just for fun ever since, but I had never performed in public. The prospect thrilled, and terrified, me.

But there was one major hitch. Ringing to enquire further, I learned that all participants were required to dance naked. I had certainly never done *that* in public either.

I needed to think about it. Thinking for me often involves running things past my friend, Gabe. His instant reply was: “Do it. Do it. Do it. Do it! If you can’t dance naked when you want, what is the point of life?”

Emboldened, and reassured that I wouldn’t have to take off any clothes at the first session, I turned up for rehearsal number one. Besides, I told myself, I had plenty of time to have fingernails and toenails painted and fake tan applied before the big night.

I walked into a studio full of women who fitted the call-out’s specifications perfectly; we couldn’t have looked more different from one another. Sure, there were some lithe young bodies, but the majority of us were anything but. As we began discussing how we were travelling (for the first of many times), I was surprised and relieved to learn that although we were such a diverse bunch, we were all highly anxious about performing nude.

There were naturalists in the group who were used to being naked in public, but had never been on a stage. There were academics and performance artists who were experienced on stage, but had never appeared naked in public. And although my insecurities – flat bottom, operation scar, lots of me heading south and the fear that I had no sense of rhythm – were unique to me, everybody had their own personal cross to “bare”.

Midway through the second rehearsal with lights dimmed, eyes closed, we were invited by Nic to remove some of our clothes “only if we wanted to”. That presented no problem for me; my Catholic guilt had been the perfect preparation for only ever getting naked in the dark with eyes shut. The rehearsals proceeded and, before I knew it, I was throwing off my top along with the others as we danced our warm-up conga line.

With opening night looming, we moved upstairs to the theatre for our

final “undress” rehearsal. Backstage, awaiting our cue, suspended in silence beneath the blue lights, our excitement built. Though it is cold in Melbourne in June, we radiated warmth.

On opening night, as I leaned against the backstage wall before the performance, contemplating my unpainted toenails and fingernails and natural pallor, I realised that it had been weeks since I had given my bottom or my scar or my sagging bits or even my dancing prowess a second thought.

At last, as one, we seamlessly assumed our positions. With heads high, shoulders back and right arms slashing the air above our heads, 50 seasoned troopers strutted out on to the stage to cheers (and a few gasps) from the audience. And when the call came from on high: “Are you ready?”, we all lifted our left legs in synchrony, poised for the first move of our routine, shouting back en masse: “Ready!” In that moment, glancing over my shoulder, I was struck by the exhilarated expressions, the strength and beauty of the waves of women behind me. All of them stars.

After the show, standing dazed but exultant in the foyer, I was approached by some friends: “Why didn’t we do it?” they deplored.

» Sue Jackson (suejackson.com.au) is a Melbourne writer, photographer, family therapist and enthusiastic dancer.