

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Rosie Simmons

Timespan of a Melting Candy

by Megan Mizanty

"Hi there."

Ella-Gabe walks to me, extending a hand. Their eyes are warm, inviting, kind. Their voice soft and enunciated.

In here, everyone's special. All 25 of us are greeted individually, and Ella-Gabriel Mason* takes us in - I mean, really takes us in - names and all. They languidly stroll through the audience and offer each of us a folded paper.

"I have a note for you. Don't open it yet."

Hot air whooshes through the fans in Fidget Space as Ella-Gabe eases into *Sex Werque: Notes from the Field*. They casually take off their blue t-shirt. Then baggy gray pants. I see the Barbie-pink fishnets hugging their stomach first. The steeple-high stilettos, impossibly hard and unforgiving. Cleavage-tight tank. They begin to shape shift, chameleon-like, into different characters.

Vera. She's coy.

Eden. A sought-after character for Boomer men.

Electra. You can guess how she puts you in line!

Finally: Cherry Daiquiri. Sweet, fun, here for a wild night.

All of them touch the pole, dancing a little, flirting.

“What name will appeal to which person?” Ella-Gabe asks us. That’s the challenge of stripping: you need to sense what each customer wants. Their unique desires - even if that’s pretending to get a private lap dance at a bachelor party and chatting nervously about your wedding instead.

Ella-Gabe - or maybe Prudence, or Ingrid - reveals the myriad of striptease positions, all the subtle and in-your-face contortions—smacks, skin ripples, dips, humping—that fit into an eight-hour (yes, eight hour) shift. The most money they made in a day: \$1010. The least: \$-57 (entirely possible after paying the club, staff, bouncers, etc). In *Sex Werque*, numbers reign supreme.

Cut to a video projection - an array of arms, legs, tattooed torsos but never faces. We listen to stories of other strippers: reasons they started doing it in the first place (paying student loans, taking care of family, etc), instances of assault, exploitation - especially for women of color. The collected field notes are fascinating; of all the parts of this hour, I want more of this.

I’m tapped on the shoulder. The box office manager hands me a tiny plastic cup of five M&Ms.

“Try eating them as slowly as you can,” Ella-Gabe says, watching us.

About 35 minutes in, they’re glistening in sweat, vacillating between pole-work and talking with everyone.

“This shit’s hard!”

They gyrate their hips into the ground.

“Are you finished?”

I look down at my cup. One M&M left.

“Try stretching that out for eight hours. How slow you can experience something.”

Ella-Gabe offers a nuanced and acutely compassionate glimpse into the minutiae of sex work. *Sex Werque* occupies an ever-changing space of danger, connection, profit, intention, and ultimately, power.

[*Sex Werque: Notes from the Field*](#), Ella-Gabriel Mason, Fidget Space, Cannonball Festival, Philly Fringe Festival, Sept. 7, 18.

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