

## **Transfixed By Rose Wood**

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*"Once the new was shocking, not because it set out to shock, but because it set out to be new. Now all too often, the shock is the new. And shock, in our jaded culture, wears off easily." —Salman Rushdie, as quoted by Eric Felten in "After the Shock Is Gone" (The Wall Street Journal, December 3, 2010)*

### **Here She Is, Boys! Here She Is, World! Here's Rose!**

Rose Wood brings it and the "it" brought by the international performer is fierce.

As evidenced in the accompanying three transfixing video exhibits, the fierceness of this "it" includes but is not limited to high production values, the construction of a narrative arc, and cross-genre music selections from opera to rap and punk. However, it is the works' total atomization of traditional boundaries of taste and gender that garners the most attention. Indeed, Rose dexterously cuts through and across these lines and then snorts them.

### **The Exhibits**

Video fails to capture many aspects of live performance. I videotaped these three Rose Wood performances over the course of several years at various NYC spaces with different types of audiences who brought different sets of expectations in relation to the reputation and location of the space, the admission price and the time of performance. These video exhibits are one-shot wonders and document but a small fraction of the body of work Rose has created. I have personally witnessed and videotaped numerous Rose atrocities, like routines known by such handles as Red Dress, Cock Sucking Faggot, 2 Drunk 2 Fuck, Orgasm Addict, Shit Pizza, Whisper, Pretty Pussy, Homeless and Toilet, and the three video exhibits presented here, Exhibit A: The Bottle Act, Exhibit B: Walk on the Wild Side, and Exhibit C: Serial Killer, offer a representative sample of the structural and thematic elements at most constant play in Rose's body of work to date. While video is no substitute for the actual experience of a live performance with an audience, the values it contributes to the mediated spectator's perception of the past live performance experience, like close up and framing, should be brought into consideration while you view these video traces.

Video Exhibit A documents Rose's signature bottle act in a 2007 show at Performance Space 122 in Manhattan's East Village. Performed to Muddy Waters' "I'm a Man," the routine is a classic strip number of tease and reveal that throws a mean climax or two or three depending on where your lines of tolerance and taste are established. As Waters repeatedly and emphatically insists

on being a man, Rose presents a rough and randy female character in Daisy Dukes and a fringed Hooter's t-shirt whose corporate slogan emblazoned on its back, "Delightfully Tacky yet Unrefined," serves as an apt commentary on the unfolding action.

The bottle act encodes many hallmarks of a Rose Wood performance. The audience is usually directly brought into the number in a physical manner and confronted by the liveness and potential imminent danger of the performer before them. In this case, Rose spits volumes of Jack Daniels in their direction, makes direct eye contact with them and puts dirty panties on one of their heads. The condom's contents have also been known to be emptied on nearby audience members. The full frontal revelation of Rose's sex likely throws a curve to some but she isn't finished pushing gender and taste lines. Now comes the snorting. The number's sphincteral coup de théâtre even tops itself when Rose spits the final swig of Jack at the audience before stomping off in disgust.

Video Exhibit B was shot at The Slipper Room, a Lower East Side house of burlesque, and offers another look at the filth and the fury of Rose Wood. Performed to Lou Reed's classic "Walk on the Wild Side," a song immortalizing the Warhol transgender superstars Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis, strip is not the primary concern here. Only the skirt and panties come off and both in a rather haphazard, insignificant manner. In fact, burlesque's classic structures are of little concern in most of Rose's work. A Carrot Top-esque prop humor is this number's core. That all these drugs and ingenious paraphernalia are on Rose's person builds funny. Clearly not a glorification of drug abuse, is it perhaps a cautionary tale? Once again Rose directly confronts and interacts with the audience offering one a hit and through hurling pills and bodily fluids—vomit in this case—in their direction. The number's topper is an ultimate physical comedy taboo—a sphincter muscle sight gag, this time reversing the action of Exhibit A's pornographic stunt.

The final performance video artifact, Video Exhibit C, was shot this past October at The Box, also on Manhattan's Lower East Side, at around 3:45 am. This notorious NYC nightclub is known, among other things, for its erotic cabaret acts, deep-pocketed clientele, and exclusive door policy. The club serves as Rose's home stomping grounds: she has worked there consistently since its opening, and if any one performer most represents its ribald spirit, it's Rose, whose canoodlings there have landed her on the New York Post's Page Six several times for such noteworthy actions as having "vomited on stage directly onto the Oscar winner" Susan Sarandon.

Video Exhibit C is a performance document of a live silent movie morality tale performed to a music mix of Jimmy Swaggart and Courtney Love. Like Rose's other numbers, Exhibit C offers high production values and a tightly constructed narrative. This time a Jesus freak serial killer abducts, kills and mutilates a young woman and makes parts of her body his. The Texas

Chainsaw Massacre meets Jackass; an Ed Gein fantasy collides with the antics of Steve O in a crazed DIY sex change. A Grand Guignol for the 21st century. Listen carefully to Exhibit C's soundtrack and you'll hear the show's emcee, Raven O, making several sly-as-they-are-astute alternative readings of the number in progress over his microphone to The Box audience (this is a standard practice at the club during routines). Raven cries, "Talk about arts and crafts," and "It's like Martha Stewart on crack," as well as calling the performance "spiritual" and "holy."

## **The Transfixation**

The gender binary was smashed decades ago in academic theory but in practice and public awareness is only crumbling more recently. People are not just male or female but everything in between and outside the lines. Easy theory. Harder reality.

The transgendered body has been part of the public realm since at least the days of Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s and every decade has given rise to transgendered celebrities from April Ashley to Teri Toye and Amanda Lepore. But only in the last decade or so has the public been asked to wrap its head around more variant notions of transgendered identities and expressions like gender queer or original plumbing. A 21st century transgendered body on stage in such flagrant and downright freakish displays of perversion as Rose offers still arouses more than a little, to crib Marjorie Garber's polite phrase, "cultural anxiety." Rose presents audiences not with a simple gender binary but the either/neither, a chick with a dick, a boy with boobs, the not/not, what Genesis Breyer P-Orridge labels the "pandrogynne." Labels are limiting, even these.

Candy magazine has coined the term "transversal" and this nouvelle vocabulary also begins to hit on what Rose presents—a sort of transgendered reversal. The transversal can be accomplished through any number of means as the video exhibits here suggest. Exhibits A and B were shot prior to Rose's breast implant surgery and show use of a very realistic prosthetic device. Drag strippers of the 1960s, like Pudgy Roberts, often employed similar deceivers. However, most drag strip numbers of that era, performed by the likes of Vicki Lynne and others, structurally built to climactic revelations of the performer's sex, often by removing a wig or taking off a padded bra to reveal a male chest beneath. This component of traditional transversal strip is, while an important juncture in a Rose Wood routine, most often the smallest and most casual part of the number. Even then, the now allowable explicit revelation of sex on stage says little to nothing about the performer's gender and Rose still has much ground to cover in the routine. Exhibit C was shot after Rose's breast surgery and it is fascinating to observe how Rose, here playing a fully male character who yearns to be female, conceals the new implants from the audience and encrusts a false set onto her body just as the vagina will later be stapled on. Rose Wood transfixes staid perceptions of gender.

## **Let Me Entertain You**

Mae West observed, "People who are easily shocked should be shocked more often." Rose's use of shock or notions of taste and decency are far more complicated than her work's representation of gender. You've gotta have a gimmick—or two or three. West's admonition has played out to some degree but even into the second decade of the 21st century post-GG Allen and Ron Athey, some acts on stage, mainly those that are sexual or violent, whether actually performed or simulated, create a visceral and often vocal response from an audience. Listen to Exhibit B as the audience reacts to Rose's pretending to shoot up her penis and at the end of Exhibit A's bottle number when several deft physical skills are being put into play. Whether the action is suggested or real, some in the audience turn away while others are transfixed by interests prurient or other. Some of what Rose Wood would and has done is ingeniously gaffed. But other actions, like sitting on and picking up a near full whisky bottle or displaying her drug mule capabilities, offer as an entertainment a largely underappreciated bodily control skill set no different, except for the exact muscles involved, than those presented by contortionists, sword swallowers or jugglers.

For the jaded portion of Rose's audience who, as Salman Rushdie sees it, has lost the shock of the new and the new of the shock, Rose's work transfixes shock into a sort of pornographic slapstick—an erotomaniacal she-male Keystone Cop on Viagra. Yet "transgressive excess loses its shock value," according to critical theorist Slavoj Žižek. Exactly. That's the point.

Not transgressive, because hasn't there been enough of that already, but transaggressive, Rose's body of work, live or as a video trace, demands that the spectator look at it in a way that sees artistic and critical possibilities and accomplishments other than stupefied shock or revulsion. The legendary Tijuana donkey show or ping pong ball act may no longer shock and might even bore. Get over and beyond these barriers to the "it" that is really happening. What's remaindered and worth revisiting are Rose's Olympic-level skills, wit, beauty and a unique illicit, if barely legal, physical comedy.

Look, listen and learn.

**Rose Wood rules!**