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Sex workers, the forgotten essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Cruel Valentine, a Chicago-based burlesque performer, positioned their Nikon DSLR camera on a tripod. They decided to film themselves at night, in the parking space behind their house. Cruel Valentine pressed record and began to dance to club music, illuminated only by a pink spotlight they had set up.

Their curly black hair with blue-dipped ends was tied into a high ponytail. They had filled in their eyebrows with a brow pencil, applied winged eyeliner and put on dark lipstick that contrasted with the red clown nose they wore. Cruel Valentine was dressed in a nude bodysuit with garters that held up mismatched stockings: one black, the other white.

They delicately traced their hands down their chest and thighs while they fell into a squat. When the beat of the song dropped, they grabbed the black leather whip that hung on their neck. They gently swung the whip from side-to-side so that its three-foot tassels oscillated in time with the music.

Cruel Valentine wrapped the long tassels tightly around their wrists, mimicking bondage. Then, they grabbed the end of the whip and struck it against the ground over and over. The crack of the whip was muted by the electronic song playing in the background. With their back to the camera, they bent over, exposing their bare buttocks, and moved their hips in a slow, circular fashion.

As Cruel Valentine stood up, they took off their bodysuit and let it fall to the floor before kicking it aside with a chunky knee-high boot. They continued to dance while taking off a pair of panties and unhooking a lacy bra to reveal a thong and glitter nipple pasties. Then, they grabbed a wallet overflowing with cash beside the camera, threw the wallet and walked out of the frame with crisp dollar bills in their hand. Cruel Valentine ended the recording.

With the digitization of burlesque in the face of social distancing guidelines, Cruel Valentine, like many other burlesque performers, have pivoted from travelling tours to Zoom. Cruel Valentine now records videos to be shared on screen during a Zoom burlesque cabaret or performs live on Zoom using a webcam.

On top of burlesque, as a sex worker, Cruel Valentine had to put modelling and feminist pornography on pause and rely on other means of making ends meet. They were part of the flood

of sex workers, and non-sex workers alike, who made OnlyFans accounts to supplement income lost with COVID-19 restrictions.

Cruel Valentine became a burlesque performer nearly 14 years ago, when they moved from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Chicago to attend Columbia College as a musical theatre performance major. During their first semester there, they took a required course on musical theatre history, which covered the emergence of burlesque. Over winter break, Cruel Valentine decided to go to a live burlesque performance. “I was instantly enamored,” they said. “This is what I have to do with my life. Give this to me, make this my world.”

Cruel Valentine auditioned a couple of months later and got an understudy role with the Flaming Dames, a Chicago-based burlesque troupe. After a year, they left the troupe and have performed as a soloist ever since.

Before COVID-19, Cruel Valentine drove around the Midwest to perform at paid gigs in the region because they found it difficult to get work in Chicago. They stayed at each location for up to three nights, and performed acts blending choreography and improvisation. This is something, Cruel Valentine said, that they miss.

“There’s this inexplicable, intangible exchange of energy,” they said. “It’s more than being cheered for. It’s being that close to so many other bodies, minds and hearts. That’s what I love about performing.”

However, as a full-time graduate student at Columbia College pursuing a Master’s degree in Arts Management, Cruel Valentine found that cutting out those commutes afforded them more time.

Through burlesque, Cruel Valentine was introduced to other performers who did sex work too. While burlesque is distinct from sex work, they said there is a lot of crossover in people who do both. In 2008, Cruel Valentine got into alternative, nude modeling for Zivity, a platform in which models do not conform to norms or traditional beauty standards. Zivity has since closed due to a lack of funding. They said because they are plus-size and Black with colorful hair and piercings, they are not necessarily marketable to an audience that appreciates mainstream pornography alone.

From there, they expanded into feminist pornography, shooting with the Lust Garden, a distributor that produces queer, intersectional pornography. Cruel Valentine prefers this to working in the mainstream pornography industry, which is male-dominated.

“I prefer to work with anyone who’s not a non-cis man,” they said. “When I work with cis men, I’m like, is this somebody who I really want to collaborate with, and have tell me what to do when I’m naked? Nope.”

Cruel Valentine also became involved in financial domination, a sexual fetish in which the object of the fetish is money. In addition, they have phone and chat sexual encounters with clients via the platform NiteFlirt.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Cruel Valentine set up an OnlyFans account to make up for lost income. OnlyFans is a platform in which content creators are paid by subscribing fans to post content on the site. “Immediately, I was like, what am I gonna fucking do?” they said. “I bought a house in 2018. I have a big, old honking mortgage to pay.”

Cruel Valentine said they were lucky to have had past experience in sex work pre-pandemic and a cluster of dedicated fans that translated to the platform. Typically, Cruel Valentine posts once a day for approximately 60 subscribers, and may schedule posts in advance if they anticipate being busy with schoolwork or other responsibilities.

Interestingly, they said they do not have many subscribers who identify as submissives on OnlyFans. As a result, they share less BDSM content. Cruel Valentine will post videos of themselves that vary in how sexually explicit they are, from shaking their breasts to masturbation or sexual scenes involving a partner.

OnlyFans is also a source of supplemental income for Lavender Vyxn, who is a stripper at Rick’s Cabaret in Chicago. She knows Cruel Valentine, whom she met at a burlesque convention when she bought nipple pasties from them. Now, the pair is in the same Instagram-based sex worker support chat.

Lavender Vyxn sat in the frame of the Zoom wearing an abstract brown and grey sweater while being interviewed. She had styled her short, bleached hair with gel so that pieces of her hair stuck up in short spikes. She sipped intermittently from a white mug with boobs outlined in red ink as she spoke about her experience in the industry.

Lavender Vyxn left Indiana to attend Columbia College in Chicago for modern dance. Though Cruel Valentine went there too, they did not know each other at the time. After earning her Bachelor’s degree, she said gigs were hard to come by and the gigs she landed did not pay well. She also dabbled in burlesque performance. To stay afloat, she worked three jobs.

Her partner then, who was a stripper, recommended that Lavender Vyxn strip to ease some of her financial concerns. They talked, made a plan and then Lavender Vyxn performed for her first

time at a club in Indianapolis about a year and a half ago. “I think there's a video of me somewhere, and I have yet to attain it. But I really want it,” she said. “Deer in headlights is the only visual I have for you for my first time on stage. But you quickly learn the ropes.”

Lavender Vyxn later secured a spot at Rick’s Cabaret through an audition of sorts. “Auditions don’t really exist,” she said. “At Rick’s you get into your costume, stand in front of a manager, do a walk and flash your tits.” This scrutiny by managers, who she said are “assholes,” does not influence her self-confidence. She said she does not care what people think of her.

Managers aside, Lavender Vyxn said she loves dancing there and, in particular, enjoys the challenges presented by pole dancing. At Rick’s, there is a center stage with a shiny metal pole at each end, lit only by a neon purple spotlight. Clusters of black leather chairs are positioned around small circle tables with fake candles emitting yellow light at the center. Neon red spotlights shine down from the ceiling and illuminate the carpeted floor.

The DJ at Rick’s is in charge of selecting music and calls each dancer onto the stage to perform her set, where she will receive cash tips. Lavender Vyxn’s chosen stage name is Honey. Rick’s does not allow dancers to have purses in the hopes of preventing them from using their phones to connect with patrons outside of the club. Instead, Lavender Vyxn wraps the tips that she makes from her act around her leg with a garter or rubber band.

On slower nights, Lavender Vyxn learned tricks from other strippers at Rick’s. She said that going fast on the pole, for instance, requires knowledge of momentum. She learned how to sit on the pole, tuck herself in and position her arms to maximize speed. When Lavender Vyxn returns to Rick’s, now open, and feels safe to perform, she wants to master doing a handstand without support from the pole.

Working at Rick’s has also taught Lavender Vyxn performance skills while also promoting her personal growth. “To put a price on being objectified by men and say, ‘Hey, that’s going to be X amount of dollars,’ is very empowering,” said Lavender Vyxn. She said she had to learn to set boundaries with the customers at Rick’s, or to affirmatively say no to uncomfortable or inappropriate requests they made. This is something that has translated into her life outside of work and into her relationships in which she had never set boundaries before.

At the start of the pandemic, when Rick’s closed, Lavender Vyxn branched out into different avenues of sex work, beginning with OnlyFans. Six months later, she decided to also be a cam model, which involves performing live in front of a webcam for paying viewers. Then, Lavender Vyxn created a Sext Panther account for phone sex operations.

At the beginning of each week, Lavender Vyxn lines up content she wants to shoot. “I’m kind of a lazy stripper,” she said. “I don’t have a set schedule.” Depending on how she’s feeling on any given day, she may choose to cam model for some time and on others, just reply to texts from Sext Panther and OnlyFans clients.

Holding the boundaries Lavender Vyxn learned to set at Rick’s has been complicated by the demands of virtual sex work. At the strip club, she was able to hold her rate and not budge. This was important, she said, because managers take an “astronomical” cut. Yet, on OnlyFans, someone can easily hit backspace or unfollow, rather than negotiate, she said, which has put her in a position of trying to negotiate her monetary worth while bringing in consistent income.

Approximately three months ago, Lavender Vyxn got a taste of stripping amid a pandemic. Some of her friends, however, lost work at Rick’s because they gained weight during quarantine. Rick’s opened at 25 percent capacity and functioned like a restaurant in which people had to wear masks while walking around, but did not when they were seated at their table. After conferencing with friends working at Rick’s, she decided to upcharge guests to see her face with the idea that seeing her face is now a privilege with the dangers posed by COVID-19.

This, however, did not work. She said she looked to the table over and some other dancer had no mask on. “I found that there was kind of this inner competition with other dancers of what they’re willing to do in this pandemic,” said Lavender Vxyn. “Personally, I’m not willing to risk that much.” She only worked a couple shifts during that period of time due to concern for her safety and decreased pay because fewer customers frequented Rick’s.

Now, Lavender Vyxn is headed back to Rick’s once again after a promising, lucrative shift last weekend. “There was some Cougar who loved me and I just reveled in it,” Lavender Vyxn said to Cruel Valentine. “He put a \$100 bill in my underwear. And I just loved it. I was like, I’m yours. Take me.”

Both Cruel Valentine and Lavender Vyxn are open with friends about being sex workers. Lavender Vyxn’s friends, who are not sex workers, do not believe the tropes that all sex workers are “dirty, kinky, damaged, or murdered in the streets,” she said. However, she is not “out” as a sex worker to her family, she said.

Cruel Valentine has been open with their family, who has been accepting of the work they do. They said they have been lucky in that. “I have no patience for people who can’t get on board and be supportive of things that are not necessarily their cup of tea,” said Cruel Valentine. “Just because you don’t want to do this doesn’t mean that it’s bad or morally reprehensible, or stupid or frivolous or a waste of time.”

Passionate about the work that they do and hustling during COVID-19, Cruel Valentine and Lavender Vyxn look toward a time post-pandemic when sex work can return to normalcy.

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