

culture

Being Fully Alive

Stripping classes teach women how to be comfortable in their bodies

by Julie Sabatier

“Allow your eyes to drift closed, heavy and soft. Like gently pulling the curtains closed after a long and full day. Feel yourself surrendering in. That’s right...all the way in.... Now feel into that warm space between your shoulder blades, relaxing the back of your heart. And if you’d like, imagine the weight of the world slipping down the curve of your spine.”

This is how Isis Leeor begins a class called “The Fluid Body,” part of her series of pole-dancing and stripping classes known as Stripper 101. The class begins in a red room in her basement with yoga mats and tea candles on the floor. Unlike many dance studios, there are no mirrors in the room.

Leeor sits on the floor with her students. Laughter erupts from her wide smile as she slaps her ass and instructs her pupils to shake their fatty bits. It will be a whole hour before any of us even approaches the pole in the next room.

Women from all walks of life come for two hours once a week for eight weeks to Leeor’s home studio to learn hot moves and how to get comfortable with their sexuality. This is just one of the services she offers. Trained as a counselor and hypnotherapist, she also teaches couples classes and a popular new workshop for women called “Look Ma! No Hands! How to Orgasm with Your Breath.”

Each one of Leeor’s unconventional workshops begins with guided meditation, where she encourages students to “drop in” to their bodies.

“I think a lot of women can respond to this idea of finding a therapy and an outlet of sex that’s safe and exiting,” says Sarah Lambert, a gay 25-year-old who found the stripping class through an ad on Craigslist. She has moved through all three levels of Stripper 101 and experienced two “Look Ma! No Hands!” workshops.

“My early expectations of it were [we were] going to learn how to ‘stripper-cize.’ A lot of people do use it as a form of exercise, but I don’t. The way Isis teaches it specifically—it’s very much therapy. I started thinking of it as group therapy instead of stripping classes,” explains Lambert, who works as a massage therapist.

Leeor, who says she’s notoriously bad with names, dubbed Lambert “Curvy Goddess” after that first class. Lambert says the class gave her more than a sexy nickname.

“I feel really comfortable in my body now. I can taste and enjoy food in a way I couldn’t before,” she told me at a taco shop in Southeast Portland. She’s had a lot of issues with her weight, she says. She ravaged her body with too much exercise and one bad diet after another.

Our food arrives, and she stops talking as she unwraps her burrito. When she takes a bite, I’m not there. It’s just her and the burrito. Eyes shut, she takes it into her mouth slowly, sensually, yet totally unaffectedly. I can tell she’s smelling it and enjoying it with every ounce of her consciousness.

This is what Leeor calls being fully alive. At 27, she’s been widowed, divorced and lived all over the world. She’s never worked as an exotic dancer, but she does have a background in movement along with a handful of other things.

“I’ve done Thai massage in Thailand. I’ve done

[neuro-linguistic programming] training. I’ve done thought pattern management training. I’ve had my fingers in a lot of cakes and gone, ‘Mmm...OK, but I don’t want the whole cake,’” she explains.

With her small frame and large features, Leeor resembles a sprite or a pixie. She holds her body like a child’s, her small stomach round and relaxed. She exudes a friendliness that is neither intrusive nor relenting.

Leeor has been exploring her unique way of connecting with the world since she first “broke open” at age 13. Along the way she discovered her capacity to experience a level of joy she describes as “one continuous orgasm.”

This is what she teaches in the all-day “Look Ma! No Hands!” workshop, and in a way, it’s what she teaches with Stripper 101 as well.

“What was really interesting to me was who was taking the class and what it was doing for them,” said Donnella Wood, 37, who took Stripper 101 after her girlfriend recommended it. Although she was the only lesbian in her class, she saw a range of human experience among her fellow students, including divorcees, sexual abuse survivors and a transgender woman.

Wood is a somatic movement therapist and Pilates teacher at BodyWise Studios in Southeast Portland, where she first encountered Leeor in a Pilates class. Wood says Stripper 101 brought up a lot of important questions for her.

“Why do we think stripper movements are sexy? Is this our postmodern attempt to make everything relative? Are we saying this is a new kind of feminism?” she asks.

For Wood, the class took a surprising turn after she bought a silicone “soft pack” to simulate a crotch bulge.

“I felt like there was permission for me to move in a way that I don’t usually have permission [to move], and that was really fascinating to me. It gave me permission to be confrontational, to be up in people’s faces, to thrust myself forward in a way, to really let myself be seen,” she says.

Wood continued to explore the duality of her masculine and feminine sides, eventually culminating in her final performance during an optional “recital” at Devil’s Point, a strip club in Southeast Portland. She performed two numbers, one without



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her silicone packing pal and the other with that extra bulge.

“I came out on the stage [packing] and yelled, ‘Who wants to fuck, ladies?’” she recalls. “I felt like in my class, other women were like, ‘Go on, baby, that’s awesome.’ There was definitely encouragement.”

Wood says Leeor and her classmates urged her to explore her mixed feelings about the fluid, feminine motions typical of Stripper 101. This is how she came up with her own, unique approach, and she says it’s had a lasting effect on her.

“It’s really important in a lesbian relationship to be able to hold the polarity of energy, holding masculine energy, holding feminine energy,” she explains. “It doesn’t have to be the butch/femme role all the time, but you need that in order for there to be fire in your partnership.”

Leeor is so busy with workshops that she has begun farming out her Stripper 101 classes to a crew of four teachers with a variety of training, some of them working in the stripping industry. She tries to lead at least one class in each eight-week session, encouraging her students to “show up” in their bodies and reminding them it’s about more than just performance.

“The classes are not about the stripper moves,” says Wood. “They’re a medium for allowing women to channel their sexual energy and allow a more authentic part of themselves to come through.”

For a complete list of classes and workshops offered by ISIS LEEOR visit www.becomingjuicy.com.



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