

The 'D' Word Season 2 - Episode 3

ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans, and this is The 'D' Word. This season the theme is activism. We are jumping into the work of three dance artists who through performance, choreography and production are driving social justice. Through conversations about representation, caregiving and reclamation, we spotlight the issues that these artists care about to answer the question: How is our sector leading social change? This episode we have Ruthe Ordare calling in. Ruthe is a founding member of Virago Nation, an all Indigenous burlesque troupe in Vancouver on a mission to reclaim Indigenous sexuality. She also just finished her fifth and final year as the artistic director of the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival. Hi Ruthe Ordare. It's so nice to have you here across time zones. Thanks for making the time to speak with me.

RUTHE ORDARE: Yeah, thanks for having me.

ARIA EVANS: I wanted to start off, because when we first met, I was interested to know that you grew up doing jazz ballet, hip hop, lyrical, contemporary dance similar to myself, and I'm curious, what led you to burlesque?

RUTHE ORDARE: Um, well, when I was doing competitive as a teenager, I was always the kid that wanted to do a saucy sexy song for competitions. So I was just kind of always drawn to that strength in sexuality. And as an adult, you know, when I went to university, I wasn't able really to keep up my dancing. So I started choreographing musicals. And from there, I just kind of met some more people and found the genre of burlesque, and it just kind of made sense. It was a way to use my dance background, but also my choreographer background to kind of bring it all together and create what I wanted to put on stage rather than other people's work.

ARIA EVANS: Mmm. I love hearing you say, like 'creating something that you wanted to put on stage', that really resonates with my own journey. And I think when folks who maybe don't know what burlesque is, and they hear that term, their mind wanders to many different places. And I'm curious if you can define burlesque for us, in your own words.

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RUTHE ORDARE: [Laughs]. I can definitely try. It's a very, very loose definition. If you were to look it up, it's to parody something, it's to make jest and make it a performance. For me and for the community that I'm involved in, it's very much a DIY genre performance, where you can create your act, your story. You're in charge of costume, movement, booking your own things, marketing your own things. And it's really just at its core, entertainment. You can do it in the form of comedy. You can do it in the form of something political. You can do it in the form of dance. And often the way burlesque is right now is it incorporates an element of striptease. Usually not to full nudity, often down to pasties, covering your areolas and a G string, or full bottoms, or, what's called a Merkin which just covers what it needs to. [Laughs]. It's very hard to define as one singular thing, because it is such a really broad, beautiful, encompassing genre of performance.

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious, that like, very practical definition, do you have a philosophical definition that pairs with that?

RUTHE ORDARE: I think with burlesque, it's a performance style that allows you to fully develop your act and put onstage exactly what you want to do, what you want to be, and tell your story. I found in other mainstream dance genres that, you know, you're often doing someone else's project. You're doing their vision, you're doing a show that already exists. So, when you go into burlesque it can be anything you want it to be. And so you get to approach it as your true self to create your art.

ARIA EVANS: That's such an empowering way to look at what a dance form can be and how that can integrate and incorporate into your life. I want to jump back to one of the things that you were saying in how it's often DIY, you're making your own costumes, you're choosing your own music, you're choreographing it yourself. Do you have a favorite costume that you've created for a burlesque performance

RUTHE ORDARE: Oh when I say you do your own costumes, I am not a seamstress by any means. So you work with someone who can actually build it for you, but you're involved in the design process. I can't really sew, other than to maybe fix a seam here and there. But one of my costumes that I'm most proud of is, it was inspired by a legend of

burlesque, which is someone who used to perform in the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, who was an Indigenous performer named Lahoma. And she toured the circuit, she performed and she actually incorporated her identity in her striptease performances. And one of the pieces she had was this ostrich feather is shaped similar to a bonnet but was not you know, like quote unquote, Indian headdress. It was aesthetically inspired by it. In order to tribute her, I created an act called endangered species. And in the act, I come out in a very, like, cinched corseted, you know, big cleavage, bare legs, feathered bustle on my backside, and I come out and start the act. The feathered bustle on the backside actually opens up into a, I'd say about a six foot long wingspan. And then from there, I put the wingspan over my shoulders, and I take off the corset. Underneath, a sheer gown falls out. So I go from cinched, pushed up, bare legs to this very nude but natural forming dress that covers all of me, but you can still see my shape through it because it has a bit of a sheerness to it. And then I, in the act, incorporated some Powwow dance, a fancy shawl style. And at the end, I take that wingspan and it actually hooks onto my headdress crown to create the same shape that Lahoma used to use in her pieces. And so for me that costume is the storyline of, you know, the divine feminine in cinched corset and heels, to her natural shape, into crowning herself with what is optically a nod to a headdress, not actually a headdress, and to what it represents, being a person of dignity, of respect, a leader in the community, and crowning yourself with that to take that position. So it's a complicated costume that took quite some time to get together, but it's definitely one of my favorites that I ever made.

ARIA EVANS: Hearing you talk about how, in that piece, you wanted to integrate identity into the performance, you are also a founding member of Virago, which is an all indigenous burlesque troupe in Vancouver with the goal of expanding Indigenous women's identity, beyond the confines of victimhood and the virgin/whore dichotomy, which I can hear that in what you've just described. And similarly, when I was researching your community engagement initiatives, I was struck by how you talk about your passion to reclaim sexuality through burlesque. And why is reclamation important to you?

RUTHE ORDARE: It's integral for the health of Indigenous women and Two Spirit

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individuals. The state of things right now can be incredibly dangerous for Indigenous women and Two Spirit people to embrace their sexuality in a public and open way. As you know, the rates of violence, of sexual assaults, of all the dangerous things are higher for Indigenous women. So it's not always safe to be overtly sexual as an Indigenous woman or Two Spirit person. So by reclaiming sexuality, we give an option for people to be something other than what's currently out there, which as you mentioned, the virgin/ whore dichotomy which in ours, and I apologize if these words offend anyone, the noble savage and squaw. That's kind of the two options for Indigenous women and femmes. And we wanted to change that. We wanted to create a space where you can see that there's so much more to that. That Indigenous sexuality can encompass comedy, political statement, sensuality, just a whole spectrum beyond this noble savage/squaw option. And I think, when we as instructors of Virago Nation, have a class and give that space to people, they reclaim a certain part of their autonomy, of their voice to be able to say, 'No, this is who I am, this is who I am as a sexual being. And I'm allowed to take up space and I'm allowed to feel safe being a sexual being.'

ARIA EVANS: I understand that you're moving on from five years as the artistic director of the Vancouver Burlesque Festival. And in your mind, what is the legacy that you're leaving behind?

RUTHE ORDARE: Oh, well, I've been with the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival five years, but six in total being a volunteer there as well. And when I came in six years ago, it was an all white board. But individuals who very much valued and would be willing to prioritize inclusion and diversity and ensuring that as a festival, we were holding ourselves accountable to those values. So I came in, rolled into a festival meeting was like, 'Hey, I'm here to help out, do you guys want me to kind of spearhead this as a consultant, as, like, an advisor to ensure that you guys are doing diversity and inclusion and ensuring that all of our community is seen on that stage?' And they were like 'Sure.' [Laughs]. And the next year they gave me a job.

ARIA EVANS: Nice. [Laughs]

RUTHE ORDARE: So I think my legacy with the festival has been, not creating diversity and inclusion, but ensuring that there was a way that it was written down as a policy and done in good practice. I think what can happen with a lot of places is that it becomes a checkbox. Okay, well, we've got one Indigenous performer, we've got one performer who is, you know, plus size, we have one performer who is of Asian descent, and they're like, 'Great, we did it!' And it's like, you're missing the point. You're genuinely missing the point. So in my practice, with the festival, it's been that when you get your applicants, and in some years we'd get 250 applicants for 34 spots. My first step was ensuring my adjudication panel represented the diverse members of the community. From there, when we had our final scoring of the applicants, instead of just picking the top 34 scores, I would usually drop down a little bit, pick the top 80 or so, and then pull from there and decide how are we going to make sure that anybody who comes to the show is like, 'Oh, my gosh, that person looks like me, that person is similar to me, I see myself reflected on that stage.' And so you're curating from this pool of strong applications, and creating a lineup that every act is different, every person on stage brings something unique, something special. And it just, in my opinion, makes for a much more engaging and interesting show.

ARIA EVANS: When I was listening to you talk about the costume that you had made, and facilitating workshops to make different costume elements, when we're talking about outfits that resemble regalia, how do you feel about the ways to approach that in a good way? Because for me, representation is important, but honoring what you're drawing inspiration from is equally as important. And I'm curious if those are conversations that you have internally with Virago or in your different communities?

RUTHE ORDARE: Oh, absolutely. It's integral. You need to be very intentional when you're incorporating culture and elements of culture into your art form. With costuming, for example, the piece that I created, it is a reflection of a headdress, it is a similar shape, but it is not eagle feathers, it is not a ceremonial piece. And the intention in using that imagery is to convey what that cultural item represents. And at the same time, you know, not cool, you're playing Indian. But I think that not only as Indigenous people, but people of all different

cultural descents, we can very intentionally pull pieces from our culture because they are representative of who we are in a good way. Doesn't mean you won't be questioned. But you need to be prepared, emotionally, and intellectually, to be able to say, this is why I did it. This is what it represents to me. Here's who I spoke to around my teachings. In one of our acts as Virago Nation, our very first act, it's called "Not Your Stereotype", and it is very uncomfortable for non native people to watch. I come out as like, we call her Hippy Dippie WooWoo, with the, you know, made in China dream catchers and like the crystals and the headband and Sparkle comes out as like, she just calls them Sports. So she's wearing a jersey with an indigenous person's face on it. Yeah, Scarlet comes out as Polka Hottie so like a Halloween costume without a Jack-o'-lantern or trick or treating. And so each girl comes out in these awful awful stereotypes and our Indigenous audience is like howling, they are loving it, they get it. Non Indigenous are sitting there like 'Why?'

ARIA EVANS: 'Can I laugh?'

RUTHE ORDARE: Or really pissed off. And it's actually really funny. It's thrusting those negative stereotypes, those playing Indian characters into people's faces and saying 'You need to see this, you need to see why this is not okay and why it's uncomfortable.' And then what happens in that act is Rainbow Blitz comes out and she's dressed as a medicine person with pieces from her culture. She's a Squamish, Haida, oh, my goodness, I'm going to forget all of her... she belongs to a number of nations. And she comes out and she smudges off our characters, she smudges off what we're wearing, and the music switches at that point. And we take off all of these awful costume pieces and we have a prop fire on stage and we throw them into the fire. And at the end of the act, Rainbow hands us each a box. And it's a black square box and it has on the front, a design that represents each of our own nations because we're all from different nations. And then we sit them on the ground, we open them up and we each pull out an item that we have designed based on our own nation. And we put those on at the end of the act. So we go from stereotype to setting them on fire, to going back to who we are in creating, and bringing out, and putting on pieces that actually represent who we are. I think going back to your original question, it

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is really important when you do this, to know how to talk about your decisions. And you really do need to think before you do it.

ARIA EVANS: It's beautiful to hear the journey of how both in performance, and also the way that you're thinking about cultivating these spaces to present workshops and lead people at festivals, you're really taking us on that journey of reclamation of seeing how we can detach ourselves from the stereotypes that are really harmful and step into the places where we get to heal and celebrate who we are. And what a beautiful way to do that tied to a sensuality that is empowering. Thank you for your work and thank you for the words that you've shared with us today. It's been a really incredible conversation. And I can't wait until the next one.

RUTHE ORDARE: Thank you. Yeah, it was great to be here and hopefully we'll be back in your area soon. And that we can travel again. [Laughs]

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, come up to Tkaronto, we'd love to have you.

RUTHE ORDARE: Yeah, that'd be wonderful. Thank you.

ARIA EVANS: That's our show. You can find Ruthe Ordare on Instagram at Ruthe Ordare, and Virago Nation at viragonation.ca. The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year, dance: made in canada presents dance on film + video, a curated selection of films screening at the Paradise Theatre in Toronto on August 13, and available on demand at dance:madeincanada.ca for a limited time. The 'D' Word is produced by Grace Wells- Smith and Sam Hale. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell. Dance: made in canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is the artistic director and also co-festival director. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council for making The 'D' Word possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Talk to you soon. Bye.