

STORY BY NASIMEH
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Glitter, high-heeled shoes, and partial nudity are all familiar sights to Guilford students. Hell, any given Friday night is sure to include all three within the first few hours alone. But take all that, add a dash of prose, a snippet of song, a few monologues, and mix it together with a rousing bit of provocative, powerful performance on the Dana stage – well, then you have something a bit more unique.

More specifically, you have the nationally-renowned Sex Workers' Art Show, which came to Guilford for the second year in a row on March 24.

March 24 was a dismal and dreary Tuesday night, but you wouldn't have known it by the looks of the crowd in Dana. The auditorium's front hall was packed with students before the doors to the show even opened.

I was pleasantly surprised as I walked, wet and shivering, into Dana. This was a good turnout for any small campus – let alone a campus that's not exactly famous for student participation. What made this event so appealing?

For some students, the attraction was simple curiosity.

"I actually have no idea what's going to be going on," admitted first-year Molly Lonergan. "I just hope to get a perspective on (sex work)."

Others had a more straightforward answer for me.

"People love sex," said senior Imeh Ntuen. "That's definitely why there are so many people here."

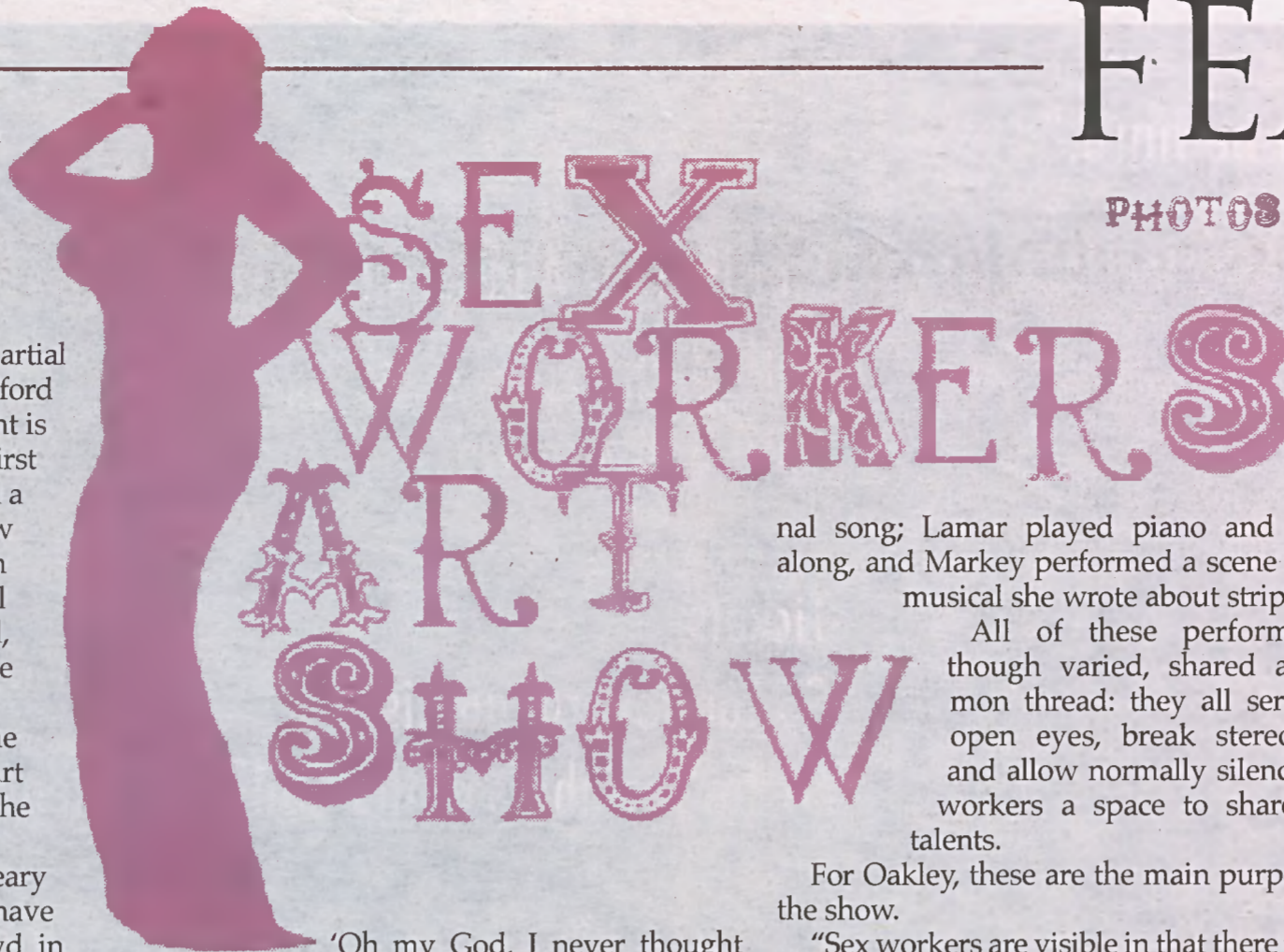
I got my definitive answer once the lights dimmed and the show started. Annie Oakley, the show's curator and director, pranced on stage (an admirable feat in the high-heels she was wearing), grabbed the microphone and enthusiastically shouted:

"I bet you're here to see naked ladies, aren't you?"

The crowd responded with an appreciative roar, and a beaming Oakley introduced her show.

This is the Sex Workers' Art Show's 7th national tour, but the show actually began as a collaborative community art project in Olympia, Washington. Fed up with the lack of discussion about the sex industry, Oakley sent out a call for submissions of art of any kind from current and former sex workers.

"The response was overwhelming," said Oakley. "The community totally came out, and the people who were involved were like,



'Oh my God, I never thought I could get on stage and say something before.'"

Over the next few years, the show grew from a community project to a touring phenomenon that reaches 10,000 people each year.

Being a touring show, the lineup of performers changes from year to year. This year's performers were author Chris Kraus, writer and porn performer Lorelei Lei, Headmistress of the New York School of Burlesque Jo Weldon, performing artist Erin Markey, burlesque dancer Simone De La Getto, musical performer Reginald Lamar, and performer – whose legal name is – The World Famous Bob.

Bob set the mood for the show by performing her opening piece (a hilarious monologue about her teenage years) in a full-length, bright blue sequined dress. Giddy from laughing, I awaited the next glitzy performer in tittering anticipation.

But what made the show so captivating was that the next performer was actually nothing like Bob. I was peering into the wings, hoping for some glimpse of bright feathers or another sequined dress when out walked a calm, soft-spoken Lorelei Lei. She didn't dance or sing, and her outfit contained minimal glitter, but she nonetheless held the audience enraptured as she read a lyrical story based on her own experiences.

Already, I was a bit surprised at the content of the show, but that was only the beginning of it. Over the next two hours, each performer brought something so unique and vivid to the stage that any preconceived idea I had about the sex industry was immediately changed.

Kraus read a section from her writing; Weldon performed a burlesque dance along with step-by-step instructions and a personal monologue; Getto danced and sang an origi-

nal song; Lamar played piano and belted along, and Markey performed a scene from a musical she wrote about stripping.

All of these performances, though varied, shared a common thread: they all served to open eyes, break stereotypes, and allow normally silenced sex workers a space to share their talents.

For Oakley, these are the main purposes of the show.

"Sex workers are visible in that there is porn everywhere, but they are totally silent," said Oakley. "If you talk to (Weldon), she'll tell you she was a stripper for 15 years, and she was never treated like she had anything important to say. This show allows a space for people to (speak up) and for others to hear it."

And hear it they did. As exciting as the show is for its visual and entertainment aspects, many Guilford students also found it an opportunity to gain a valuable perspective.

"(Sex work) is one of the largest industries in the world, and it's one of the least talked about," said Senior Sara Eisenberg, who helped organize the show. "And just like any of the other things that people are fed stigmas about, having discussions about it is very important."

Once the show ended, students were given a chance to participate in discussions, whether through mingling with the performers in the front hall, or by staying for the Q&A that followed.

As the crowds dispersed back into the dreary evening, I realized how little it mattered why people turned out for this event – what mattered was that they came at all. It wasn't about what you brought with you, but instead, what you took away. Oakley is very aware of that.

"This show is not directly responsible for the change in sex worker's profiles, but it has contributed to a culture where sex workers have started to be heard," said Oakley. "I think things are moving forward slowly."

If other people's experience was anything like mine, then things certainly are moving forward. I left that evening amused and entertained, but – more importantly – educated and with an invaluable new understanding of an age-old industry.

PHOTOS BY NASIMEH EASTON AND
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Clockwise, from top: Simone de la Getto performs her original song; sophomore Andrew Slater slips a bill into Jo Weldon's "tip jar" shoes; sophomore Max Cohan reads off questions that Weldon often got asked while stripping; first-year Kaylyn Howard, sophomore Paul McCullough and senior Imeh Ntuen receive new identities during an interactive demonstration illustrating the elusiveness of the "American dream."

