



# Love and Burlesk in Geneva:

by Ruby Boukabou • images: Alexis Reynaud and Sebastien Dubouchet

I have not always been convinced by the notions of passion and artistic enthusiasm in relation to Geneva.

Arriving in 2001 as a freelance writer and performer with a total of thirty francs, no job, no papers and one shaky student contact made for a good way of testing the city. Admittedly it was a bumpy landing. Desperation forces action however, and when my golden job didn't appear as foreseen and thoughts of breezy success transformed to fears of collapsing on the steps of the UBS after they refused to cash a freelance cheque, I got creative in job searching and lifestyle.

Before long, with a few angels at my table, I found work serving beer, teaching English, dancing at events, festivals and in video clips with a Genevoise dancer called Saphar, and, my grand finale, pushing a girl in a French film. On my journey, I found the artists - the notably high quality and friendly jazz musicians, the circus people, photographers, some theatrical journalists... Sounds rich but still, the general feeling I had of the passion of the majority of people was so not so high. It was for sure the only country I'd been in where people would look at you if you're wearing something extreme as the likes of a red top or where men would stare theatrically at their watches and never forget if you are an anywhere-else-in-the-world-given fifteen minutes late for a date. I'd also had some hairy experiences with bourgeois too cool for school (and travelling tap dancers) girls. Obviously these are just surface issues. Dostoyevsky wrote in his diary 'went to Geneva. It's a good place to commit suicide' a writer friend whispered to me once as we exchanged weird Geneva stories. I gulped.

Four years later, landing back in Geneva onto the Chat Noir stage isn't a bad framework to revisit the city. And after the evening performing, watching and partying with the people, I am happy to announce my hopes for passionate artistic lifestyles and crowd in Geneva have been refreshed.

It's Wednesday night and the place is packed. A funky, warm and diverse audience, they chat, smile and laugh all in the right moments, joyfully immersed in the 'I love Burlesk' cabaret burlesque. The idea behind the monthly variety night is to bring high quality entertainment, love and yes passion to the

centre of Geneva. And the passionate woman behind the idea is Genevoise Natacha Sapey, aka Nana Divina.

"Since you two stars are hogging the mirror, I'll do my makeup backstage" is a rough translation of the last sentence I hear from say-it-as-it-is Natascha half an hour before the 'I love Burlesk' cabaret commences, and glimpse half her image reflected between Sandra's lipstick application and my false eyelash pasting. The dressing room of the Chat Noir is filling up with artists of all dimensions: Antoine the French juggler, Steve Buchanan, 'Mr Feet' the sound board genius, Buno, the crazy clown and Bob Chocolate, the knee striptease artist are amongst them (whoever said Geneva could be dull-oh yeah me). Saphar is still asking me to go over the last tap step in our routine and I am still complaining about the effects of French fromage on my hot pant clad butt. Natacha obviously sees that the chances of sharing our mirror are minimal and as she is the producer as well as the compare/hostess, leaves us be...

Forty five minutes later she emerges from backstage as the effervescent diva, Nana Divina, taking the full to the brim audience in palm of her wit (and cleavage). Warmed up by Indian music trio Tiger the Lion, on tabla, vocals, Koto (Japanese harp) and guitar, the lovely 'Gloria Tombola' (Fanny Pelichet), distributing love prizes and Saphar and moi as Siamese twins joined at the butt (one Francophone, one Anglophone), plus a red wine or three, they cheer her entry.. Nana is clad in tight golden Japanese style dress, has huge eyes and hair tied up to accentuate her features. She's got a touch of a drag queen character to her, and the edge is that she really IS a woman on a very bold, velvety high. And as opposed to many Drags who take the piss out of their audience, she luuuuurves them as much as she luuuurves Burlesk. She tells them that tonight is about creating an ambience of lurve; lurve of burlesk, lurve of cabaret and well just lurve. She is convincing.

My number with Saphar is the opener (in brief an act where a woman in dressing gown-me- has no one to play/perform with so finds a large doll in her room - Saphar. I then teach her some tricks, strips her to matching corset, hotpants and fishnets and they tap dance together to a Chicago track).



# Natacha Sapey

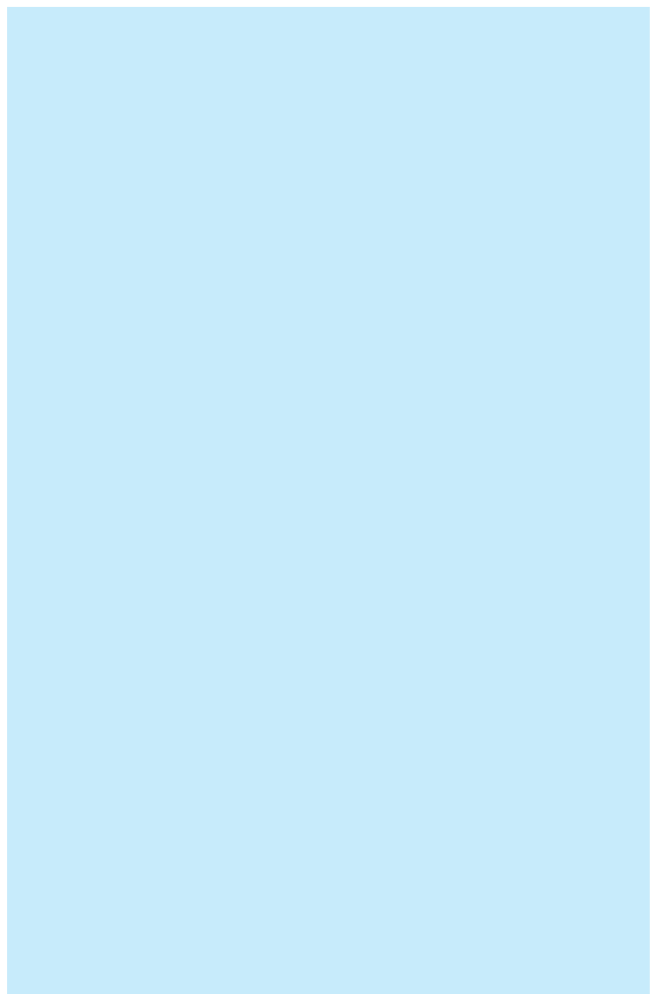
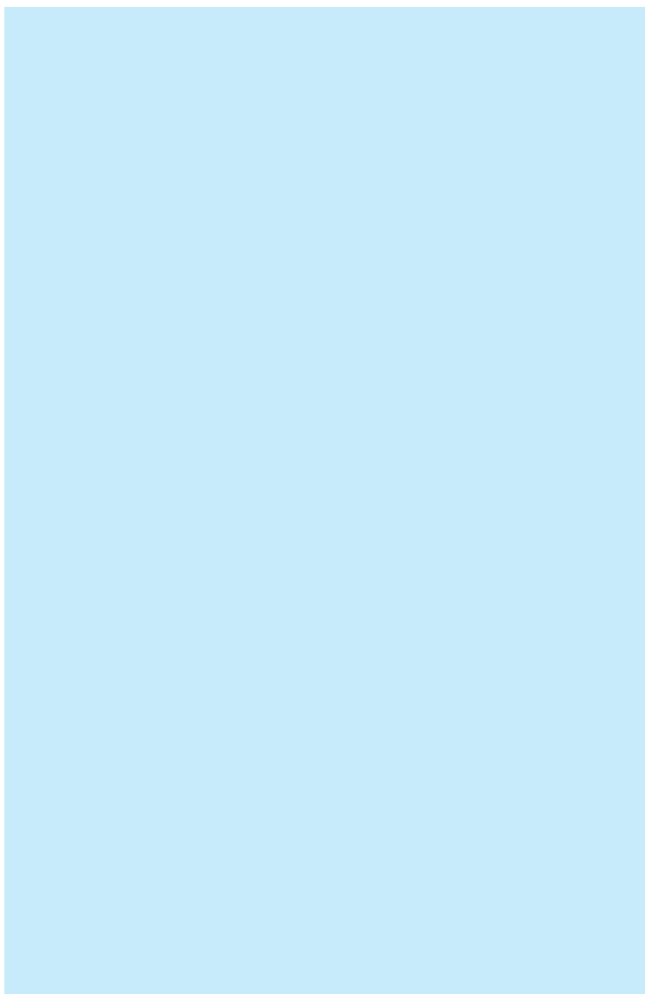
Having got through the act's audience debut without forgetting the steps or bumping into the furniture, and with indeed a good reception, I get a chance to peek through heads to watch the rest of the show and experience the diva in her natural habitat... in the spotlight.

Nana Divina: Genevoise, review dancer, theatre, film and television actor, presenter, clown, solo and cabaret artist and general creative livewire has, in the benefit of her audience, been around the block. Having trained at the 'Conservatoire D'Art Dramatique de Lausanne and speakerine à la TSR', then working as a review dancer, theatre actress and TV pre-

sender, her life and career took a funny turn after an encounter with American clown, currently seen on La Ferme, Jango Edwards.

"Jango really has been my master," she says over coffee in the wind down days after the Burlesque. "His level of freedom on stage inspired me a lot and for ever. He taught me to always, always trust my ideas and myself, and above all to push my limits as a performer."

Nana spent the next six years teaching and touring Europe with and without Jango, performing in festivals, com- ▶



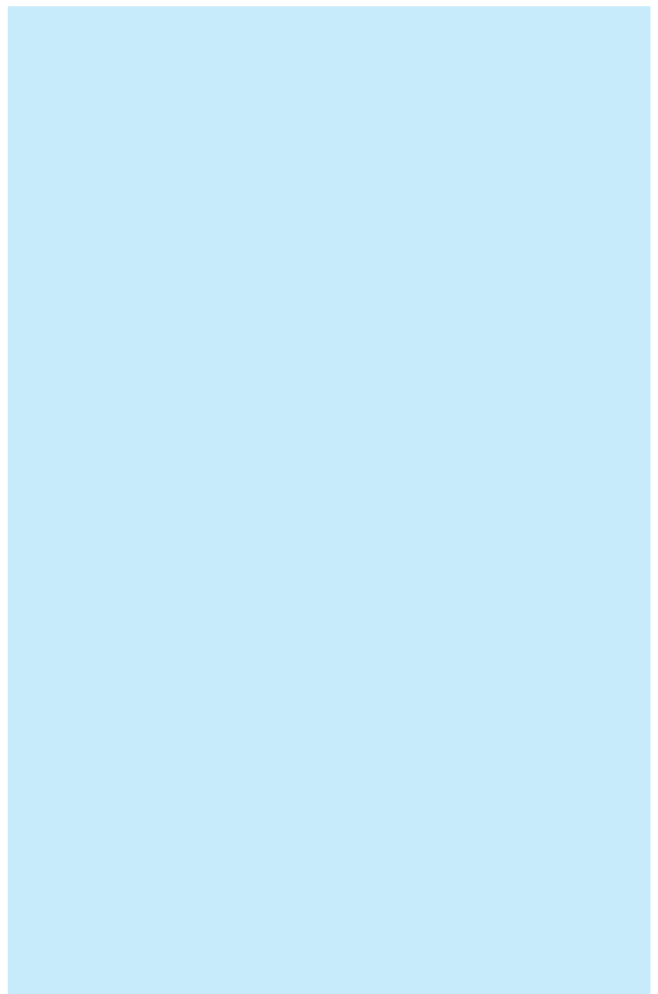
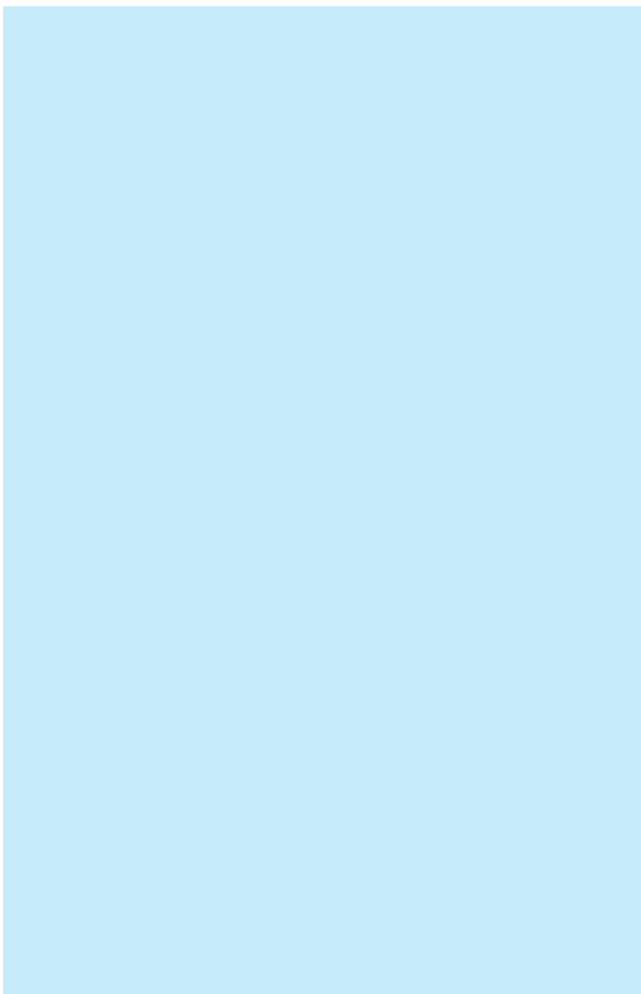


petitions and theatres, giving master classes then living solo in St Petersburg to meet with the famous Russian famous clown ensemble "Litsedei".

Within Geneva, Nana's history of creating environments and live shows include assisting the set up of electro hotspot Weetamix and acting in three hander 'Petasses' (loosely 'the bitches'), which also toured Paris. In terms of learning curves to really delivering to an audience, however, it was in her one woman show, directed by Jango in 2000, that was the steepest and she feels it was here where she really found her own presence and voice. "It made me really face myself, the public and the industry," she says. "On opening night I could have happily stayed at home in my bathtub... a very humbling experience." It also made her realise a huge factor: passion as a career still needs financial backing!

"It's like you can get into second gear fine by yourself and travel like that, but to shift up to third gear, you really have to have that investment."

So to make a living and develop her craft while production for more solo work and the burlesque got up and out, Nana has acted in many other projects. Thus her face is now familiar on the French and Swiss screen where she has played in Robert Nortik's "Blanc Bec", MC Theiler's "Stop it", French Georges Sebag's "Le Zéro", Fulvio Bernasconi's "Swiss Love" (created for and screened at the Swiss national Exhibition Expo 01"), to name a few. While juggling production and promotion of 'I Love Burlesk', a monthly affair, she currently co-hosts the TV show "Le showmag de Jango et NaNa" on Comedy! Tv (Cable French channel).







'Nana is too crazy for TV', one audience member told me at the after party at the Chat Noir, though said as a compliment. It is in the interaction with her audience that the diva really glows, and the buoyancy of 'I love Burlesk' is thanks to her ability to weave together acts and punctuate them with sassy comments and cheeky audience interaction. "From my work in reviews I realised I loved affecting an audience, touching an audience," she says. "The Burlesk is also a platform for artists I am promoting. It is a fantastic form of theatre. Burlesk for me means first of all entertaining and then creating a whole world. It is a form where the audience can dive into different worlds, interact and feel part of the family created for one night... enjoy together a slice of 'Love & Fun' artistically presented."

Nana's dream for the future of 'I love Burlesk' is to offer the burlesque cabaret to more people in a larger and distinctive

atmosphere, "a venue such as an old beautiful cabaret theatre, but adaptable enough to allow a modern and crazy style... Somewhere over the rainbow where the tradition can meet today's art...and simply love it!" At the moment the artists are not paid, and the door charge of ten francs just covers costs. She hopes for investment so this can change. For now, we get the chance to develop new work for audiences that springboard to other gigs.

I love Burlesk. A very passionate Genevan affair.

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