

SUE*, 31, "Gigi"

I come from a religious Afrikaans Boland family. From a young age I danced classical ballet, but my big dream was to become a vet; my mother wanted me to become a nurse. Ultimately, I chose to be an actress.

After school I studied drama at Stellenbosch University, and was always the character who showed off her body. The first time I went on stage nude was in the play *Equus*, but that wasn't stripping — that was art!

In 1989, I moved to Johannesburg and worked at the State Theatre. I earned only R180 a week, but loved being on stage so I compromised.

I started dancing at Caesars in Johannesburg to make extra cash. We had beautiful costumes, G-strings and false eyelashes — showgirl stuff, not stripping. Then we took a show to Namibia and the venue owner said it was too boring. I was the only cast member with boobs and everyone said, "Save the show and take off your top!" I was also told I'd make a lot of money if I did.

Knowing nothing about stripping, I went to Sardis in Johannesburg. I'd seen an ad for cabaret dancers and assumed they meant a Liza Minnelli number, so I did a theatrical act with a hat and cane! The owner said, "Good, your first show is today."

G-strings stayed on in those years; I only took off my top in the finale. I was really nervous at first, but got loads of compliments about my body and dancing, and I was instantly sold. In the 10 years of stripping since then, I've never looked back. I haven't given up theatre, but the money is so bad that I can't survive as a full-time actress.

Recently, I had a bit part in *The Graduate*, which I did between stripping work. I've also done a presenting job for Kyknet.

I work Tuesday to Saturday from 1pm to midnight. During the week I do shows at venues like The Lodge and House of Lords. I also perform on the East and West Rand, in Witbank and Pretoria. On Fridays I'm very busy, doing eight to 10 shows a day. Saturdays are mainly for private functions like bachelor parties. It's hard work, but on a good day I make a few thousand rand.

Nowadays there's full nudity on stage so I titillate and tease, and usually spend about three minutes completely nude. A lot of strippers take off



"Everyone said, 'Save the show and take off your top!' I was also told I'd make a lot of money if I did."

everything in the first minute and the audience loses interest. I make my work exciting and surprising.

Last year, I won Striptease Queen of the Year in a Cleopatra show in which I wore a beautiful Arabic costume. I had plastic snakes attached with fishing lines that moved while I played the flute and stripped. My shows are a lot like theatre. I also often get a man on stage, put a big dragon head on him, play with him and then slay the dragon, so to speak!

I love being on stage, wearing sexy costumes and having men in awe of me. I'll do anything on stage but I'm shy in private. Don't ask me to walk around a public swimming pool in a costume!

The money is great. I live in a fabulous townhouse and I've accumulated possessions much quicker than I would have with a normal job. As a stripper, you must be good with money. You don't have a medical aid or retirement plan, and one day I won't be able to strip, so I have lots of life policies, insurance and investments.

There are downsides, though. I travel 1 000 kilometres a week, and I'm more scared about getting to a venue than going on stage! Also, I don't have a social life. Dancing and working around so many men get to me. When I've heard, "What are you doing after the show?" for the hundredth time, I feel like strangling the guy!

Most people think strippers are common women from poor backgrounds, but we're often strong people and many

of the women are hard-working single moms. I think any woman who's brave enough to get on stage and take off her clothes has courage and strength.

If you don't know why men go to strip shows, the answer is simple: men are eternal hunters and are attracted to beauty. Luckily, I have a wonderful partner who's very supportive and not jealous; he understands that this is my job and respects me for it — he often comes to my shows.

Even so, theatre is my first love — my day job, if you like. I acted in playwright/director Deon Opperman's one-woman play *Whore* — it played to packed audiences at last year's Oudtshoorn festival. Next will be a play about the history of stripping.

When I have to get away from it all, I visit my mom in the Boland. She loves what I do and even makes my costumes. One day I'll retire to Gansbaai, be an old lady by the sea and train girls to do shows there!

ELIZABETH*, 31, "Sugar"

I started stripping to see if I could do it. At school I was really shy, a total introvert. Stripping was a way to explore my extroverted side. I enjoy manipulating men — in a nice way. It's empowering; I feel appreciated on stage and I see myself as an entertainer, not a sleazy stripper. In fact, I regard my job as a form of social work!

Lots of women ask how I can be exploited, but stripping isn't exploitation. As a secretary I earned

"I see myself as an entertainer, not a sleazy stripper — in fact, I regard my job as a form of social work!"



far less than the men around me and they didn't work nearly as hard — now that's exploitation.

Some days my work is really demanding — I get tired rushing to clubs all day. But then, I make really good money. Clubs pay about R200 a show and private functions are about R800, so you do the sums ...!

Of course, men can get rough. I've had bottles thrown at me, been spat on