



GYPSY ROSE LEE: AN AMERICAN ICON LAID BARE

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

GYPSY ROSE LEE: Hello. I've been in show business almost all my life. My fondest memories were of the years most of you remember as the Depression years. Mother and I were so poor we didn't even know there was a Depression. We went broke during the boom! All we knew was that vaudeville was dead. How we missed the good old two-a-day! I mean two meals a day, not shows. That's why I started in burlesque. I don't know how I got the job—I was only fifteen. Of course I was big for my age. I wasn't exactly what you'd call a stripling of a girl. I was thirty-eight when I was thirteen! Billy

Minsky's on Forty-second Street, a haven for the tired businessman. Those men were tired of any kind of business but monkey business.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. Good evening. My name is Paul Holdenräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As you know my motto here is simply to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution dance and levitate. And tonight it will probably levitate in many different directions. **(laughter)** Tonight is the opening night of our spring season. Once on a police raid, Gypsy Rose Lee protested, "I wasn't completely naked. I was covered by a blue spotlight." **(laughter)** I must say you really got to love Gypsy Rose Lee for that. You probably know by now that the New York Public Library archives has part of Gypsy Rose Lee's archives at the Billy Rose Theatre Division at Lincoln Center. It is at that New York Public Library division that Karen Abbott, whose book on Gypsy Rose Lee, *American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare, the Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee*, which we celebrate together with Gypsy Rose Lee's centennial, found this quotation. Now, listen very carefully and try to divine who may have said this, "May your bare ass always be shining." **(laughter)** Well, as you probably guessed, this is from a telegram Eleanor Roosevelt **(laughter)** sent to Gypsy Rose Lee on May 8, 1959. For all of you history buffs, you will find it at the New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division at Lincoln Center. If you are looking to find it quickly, Karen Abbott has helped us greatly by telling us that it's in Box 6, Folder 8, so

check it out if you are so inclined. I must say I feel rather envious—I have never gotten such a telegram.

I also like the story of Gypsy Rose Lee under Mayor La Guardia, who railed against so-called “incorporated filth” and made quips about her need to take off her clothes, to which Gypsy Rose Lee had a fast retort, as she often did. “Why, Mr. Mayor, you know I’d never end a sentence with a preposition.” **(laughter)**

Now, our season at LIVE from the New York Public Library is very surprising. In the fall, for instance, we started with Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer. In the spring we start with the centennial celebration of Gypsy Rose Lee. I see absolutely coherence in this. The Supreme Court justice and the celebration of Gypsy Rose Lee. In both cases what it stands for is freedom of speech and freedom of expression, which the New York Public Library is proud to present every year. **(applause)** In the fall we had everyone from Stephen Breyer, as I said, to a tribute to the *National Lampoon*, and in between everyone from Angela Davis with Toni Morrison, Keith Richards to Zadie Smith to Jay-Z, and this spring the range is no less daunting. From tonight’s joyously dishabille start—I must say the green room has never quite felt like the way it felt tonight, and it’s going to be hard on Tuesday when one of the great scholars of religion, who I much respect, Karen Armstrong, will come fully clothed.

And then we have at the end of this month a festival on all things and thinkers French meeting their American counterparts, from a discussion about happiness seen from the

American shores with Lemony Snicket and Maira Kalman, *The State of Surveillance* with Mireille Delmas-Marty and Jeffrey Rosen to *What Constitutes an Enemy* with Philip Gourevitch and Ann Stoler. And so many others. That is at the end of this month, so please check it out. The festival is called *Walls and Bridges*. It comes from a wonderful line by Isaac Newton—“we build too many walls and not enough bridges.” And also this season quickly, and in no particular order, a tribute to Chris Blackwell and *Island Records*. A conversation that I will have with Harold Bloom in May during the *PEN World Voices Festival*, and Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Prize, also during the *PEN World Voices Festival*. And David Brooks, Colm Tóibín in February, and, with some good luck, Tina Fey in April. So stay tuned! **(applause)**

After our show—and it is really a show, so be prepared and relax or whatever you are inclined to do during these moments—I will have a short also repartee with Karen Abbott, about twenty-two and a half minutes long, after which time she will be signing her new book. There will be a little surprise after our conversation, so that it doesn't become too ponderous when I ask her about the relationship between Gypsy Rose Lee and phenomenology. As always, I'd like to thank our independent bookseller, 192 Books, for being our provider of books during this season and for the past four years. So thank you very much, 192 Books. **(applause)**

I would like also to thank the band for playing on, the *Ixion Burlesque*, making its debut at the New York Public Library. **(applause)** I hope, maybe you should come for Karen Armstrong—that would be fun. I'm sure she's never seen the likes of this—with Albert

Garzon on the piano—I think I made your name sound awfully French. Maybe you are French, in part. And Mark Kirby on drums, so a big round of applause for them!

(applause) And I would like to thank my producer, always, Meg Stemmler, for bringing all of this together, and the publicist for Karen Abbott, who I’ve worked on so many projects with, most recently Jay-Z, Barbara Fillon, so a big round of applause for them.

(applause)

Now, Karen Abbott asked me to read a letter of one of her favorite letters in the entire collection, from the drama critic Bernard Sobel to Gypsy recalling a recent party she hosted, and I feel like it’s getting very warm, and so I’ll take off my jacket. And I of course more—and I’ll unbutton half of my waistcoat. Thank you. Okay, one more button just for that sound. Okay. Dear. I’ve unbuttoned it completely; let me button it a little bit up, I feel a tiny bit naked already. I like this. I think I’m going to change jobs. “Dear beloved dazzling Gypsy. It was all so wonderful, so cozy, exciting, alcoholic and fascinating that I have decided to forswear parties. No, I will never go to another party, for fear of obscuring the glow of yours. There they sat in that *salle à manger*, Heywood Broun and engaging Connie and you on the floor I believe, and deliciously sensual Fanny Brice, the pure Semitic passion percolating through the comedy conversation, with little watchdog Billie Rose at her side. There they all sat. Excepting those who like Tallulah Bankhead were standing at the refectory table, grabbing a second portion of the hot liver, and those like George Jean Nathan”—I’m making everybody sound French—“were not standing, were traipsing around the house, rushing into the kitchen and the antechambers, guzzling beer, listening to George Davis, sliding up and down the elevator, studying the

Greek frescoes over the mantelpiece, inspecting your well-worn and notably high-brow library, gossiping about you, chit-chatting about your guests, admiring the African knickknacks in the shadow of the high semicircular window. But alas and alack! It's all over now, the memory of the kiss Beatrice Lillie administered as she passed me in the hall, the feel of your rounded, taut breasts, the quality of Claire Luce's personality. The ubiquitous energy of your faithful secretarial Achates, the realization that some of your guests had salad and others did not. I'm inarticulate with emotion. I'm saddened at my own mendacity, because it's all the bunk that I won't go to another party as long as I live. Just ask me, and of course keep on loving me." Bernard Sobel.

Now this gives you an idea of the kinds of joys of letters quoted in Karen Abbott's very fine book—I don't know quite what it is—is it a biography, is it a study? We'll talk about all of that in a very learned fashion. I learned everything about Gypsy Rose Lee from her book. And now we have the pleasure of welcoming tonight Gal Friday, **(applause)** whose costume is quite significant, let me look, yes, it's quite significant. **(laughter)** It is extremely hard for me to concentrate at this moment—I'm supposed to say something about it, I think I will turn my eyes downward and read to you a little passage from Karen Abbott's book.

"Gypsy Rose Lee continues her political activism, performing a striptease to benefit the United Committee for the French Relief at the Ritz-Carlton, strolling out onto the stage clad in a skirt, a few strings of beads, and a bolero. A German banking heir, Paul Felix

Warburg, scores her red garter for fifty dollars, and Mary Pickford offers four hundred if she'll keep the costume on.” **(laughter)**

Gal Friday, were we not at the New York Public Library—we can't be auctioning off her stars tonight—would, if we could, and I would love her to show us how she might, she would peel off slowly some of those stars, slowly but surely, please give her a cheer.

(applause) Each time she peels off—it's like getting deep in a text—she peels off yet another and perhaps yet another, yet another, please one more, maybe two more, layers! Ladies and gentlemen, what a pleasure. Thank you very, very, very much.

(applause)

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce one of the people you've been waiting to hear, to see, to feel, and that's Jo “Boobs” Weldon. **(applause)** Jo—Jo Weldon is the headmistress and founder of the New York School of Burlesque, internationally renowned as a burlesque personality, Jo “Boobs.” She's rounded her heels on stages from Coney Island to Las Vegas. She's the winner of such exotic titles as Bumpbest, and here I read, I don't know what I'm reading, the best bump and grinder, the best teacher and mentor, the biggest cougar in burlesque. She has worked with performers and here I know what I'm speaking of—Leonard Cohen to Spinal Tap, and has been featured on television shows from CBS Sunday Morning to Gossip Girl. So Jo “Boobs” Weldon, like a banana, watch her peel, watch her take it all off, right down to the fruit, ladies and degentlemen, Jo “Boobs” Weldon!

[Music plays during Jo “Boobs” Weldon’s performance.]

(applause)

JONNY PORKPIE: Hello. That was Jo Boobs Weldon, the headmistress of the New York School of Burlesque, with a special tribute to Gypsy Rose Lee, to a song to which burlesque numbers are rarely performed anymore, for obvious reasons, but then there’s Jo. Once again for her. **(applause)** Now, when the neo-burlesque movement was first coming into play, the path was forged by brave women in high heels and false eyelashes, and right behind them, well, right beside them, also in high heels and false eyelashes, is the next man to come to this stage. He is the original kind of boylesque. He is the first ever winner of the title Mr. Exotic World from the Burlesque Hall of Fame. Please welcome Tigger!

(applause)

TIGGER!: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, filthy, dirty scholars, and esteemed perverts, it is a pleasure to be here as a stripper and librarian myself. **(applause)** Thank you! Celebrating Gypsy Rose Lee at the New York Public Library. Strippers and librarians are both, after all, freedom fighters, so it only makes sense that these worlds should collide.

I would like to wish a happy hundredth birthday to Miss Gypsy Rose Lee. **(applause)**

She could not be here, she had a previous engagement—but she sent her muff. **(laughter)**

Oh yes, and her gown, and her shoes. So if you just want to come check those out, generously lent to us from the Burlesque Museum in Las Vegas and Miss Dixie Evans.

We would like to show you some vintage footage of Gypsy because we just love looking at you, don't we. Courtesy of her son, Erik Preminger. Now, in what you're about to see, Gypsy used her own camera to take this footage. She's practicing on the rooftop of Minsky's Republic in Times Square in 1931. She was then in the process of transforming herself from Louise Hovick to Gypsy Rose Lee and would have done anything to build her name and keep it in lights. Billy Minsky, who brought her to New York and proclaimed her Girl of the Year, called her act seven minutes of sheer art, and the rest of New York agreed with him. Soon after her debut on Minsky's Republic on Forty-second Street, eleven thousand people per week came to see her elegant, brainy joke of a strip, her burlesque of burlesque.

Check it out, she's talking to you, that's right, that's right, she's saying, "oh, no, I couldn't do that." There she is. All for you, it's all for you, she's making love to you.

You, you, you are the camera, ladies and gentlemen, Miss Gypsy Rose Lee, there we go, that was her footage. **(applause)** As a sidebar, after her arrest, she received six proposals of marriage, one live bunny, a dozen bouquets of American Beauties—we're assuming we mean roses—numerous boxes of candy, forty-four mash notes, a case of ginger ale, and several fawning telegrams from admirers, which you can check out because they are

reprinted in the copy of *American Rose*, written by Karen Abbott, but we'll be getting to her later.

Right now I would like to bring out one of New York's own living legends, living legends, from the golden age of burlesque. She has been performing burlesque since 1949, and she ain't quitting yet. She is eighty and proud of it. And back in 2005 at the Burlesque Hall of Fame and it was at a little desert goat farm in Helendale, she taught our own Jo Boobs the classic burlesque bump and grind over breakfast. So here she is with the breakfast bump and grind, the garter girl herself, Miss Bambi Jones!

(applause)

BAMBI JONES: “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?,” is that what that song is? That's a Depression song, right? Isn't that the Depression song, “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?,” is that it? Okay. My name is Bambi Jones, I was born in 1931, the same year that Gypsy hit Broadway. Minsky put her in the Republic Theater, she was a smash, sensation. Tigger! mentioned Dixie, the shoes, her shoes are here. These are Gypsy's shoes. My friend Dixie is in Seattle now, celebrating Gypsy's birthday in Gypsy's hometown, Seattle, so to Dixie up there, I love you, and here we are the sisterhood of the traveling G-strings, so here we are. **(laughter/applause)** There are a couple of things. Gypsy was married three times, I had three husband—Eeeny, Meeny, Minie, I didn't want no mo'. **(laughter)** I did want to do a little shtick for you, but what I will do is show you the little breakfast bump and grind that I taught Jo “Boobs” Weldon when we were at

Exotic World in 2005 at a reunion—no, it wasn't a reunion, it was a big burlesque contest. And we have a young lady here who was in that contest, and she is now an OB/GYN in this town, **(laughter)** and I was so surprised to see and there she is, can you stand and take a bow, what is the name again? Leroy the Girl Boy! And Tigger!, you little devil, you, I hate it when somebody wears more makeup than me.

I don't know if you know that Barbra Streisand is talking about doing Gypsy, that's hot off the press. What else? At my age, I have to make little notes. As you see, the garter, okay, I'm wearing the garter, many years ago I worked with so many people, Carrie Finnell, the lady that invented the pasties, and I was giving a garter at the time and Carrie said, "Why don't you call yourself Star and Garter, and the star with the garter, so I've been giving the garter, and unbeknownst to me, Carrie, I learned through history books was very close to Mike Todd and Gypsy Rose Lee and Gypsy Rose Lee did that show Star and Garter and the young lady here just did the star routine. So everything kind of ties in, everything kind of ties in. What Gypsy did was miraculous—she took sex, okay, she took comedy, and she put it together with disrobing, and she became the number one ecdysiast on the planet, and because of her we're here, we're celebrating her birthday, I'd like to say to her, and I don't have a drink right now, that I drink to her health when I think about her, I drink to health when I'm alone, I drink to her health so often that I'm damn near ruining my own. **(laughter)**

So can I have a number so I can shuffle off to Buffalo. Sorry, I'm sorry, I told Jo "Boobs" the breakfast strip bump. On the right, you visualize an apple, on the left, there's an

orange, and in the middle there's a coffee bean, so here we go, you ready, boys? Here we go, okay, this is breakfast for one, okay here we go, hit the apple, hit the orange, and grind the coffee, **(applause)** you gotta hit the apple, hit the orange and grind the coffee. **(applause)** Now breakfast for two is the other direction, you gotta hit the apple, hit the orange, and grind the coffee.

(applause)

JO "BOOBS" WELDON: These are letters between Rose and Gypsy. I'm Rose.

MISS TICKLE: I'm Gypsy.

JO "BOOBS" WELDON: Dear Gypsy, it is difficult for me to believe that you could be so heartless and cruel to anyone and above all your own mother. Two daughters living in mansions, two girls I have given the best of my life to, now when I am really in need they won't help me. God pity you. I wonder if you really are a Communist. **(laughter)** Love, Mother. **(laughter)**

MISS TICKLE: Dear Mother, you own three houses, at least five acres of land, a good car, and a paid-up annuity, which gives you an income of over a hundred a month that I know of, plus whatever else you have. I understand you collect rent from the houses you own. As far as our relationship is concerned, I would call it one of extreme decency and

generosity on my part, as you have from time to time called to my attention directly and in writing. Signed, Gypsy.

JO “BOOBS” WELDON: Dear Gypsy, I am so sorry for anything I have done to make you feel like you do about me. Just give me one more chance. I am sure you will be glad if you do. Love, Mother.

MISS TICKLE: Dear Mother, I heard that you were feeling better. I’m so glad, honey, keep it up. Don’t be chasing around the hospital in your bare feet, and stop flirting with the interns, it isn’t good for their blood pressure. If interns have any blood. A nurse once told me they didn’t. Instead they have salt water. Of course, you can’t believe everything nurses say. Darling, I’m going to go have my coffee now. Those bum jokes in the last paragraph are too much like the first-act curtain. Too talky. Love and loads of it, Gypsy.

JO “BOOBS” WELDON: Dear Gypsy, You made money your god and goal and that is all you ever cared about. I was your slave and colored maid for years. Now the time has come to let the outside world know just what kind of daughter I brought into this world. Things you made me go through and endure in regards to all your stepping-stones, to your getting where you were interested in getting at any cost, must now be told to your faithful public that do not know you at all, and after all is over and you’ve got what you wanted, you flung me away and did not want to bother with me. I had had my youth. I pity you. Signed, Your Mother.

MISS TICKLE: Dear Mother, a registered letter addressed to me, supposedly from you, arrived in New York and was forwarded to me here in Toronto. My engagement here with five shows a day is an extremely nerve-racking and difficult one and the letter will not make it any easier. This is even though I seriously doubt that you signed, dictated, or sent the letter. I cannot believe that you would. It is inconceivable that you would even think of sending such a letter. Yet, I must reply as if it were valid because it resembles so many other cruel letters and threats you have made to me time and time and again over the years gone by. This letter, as the others, is in the nature of blackmail and I am sick and tired of such threats. Whatever help I might have wished to give is utterly wiped out by your threats. If you did not sign or send the letter, disregard all of this, please understand how I feel. If you did not write or send the letter, I will someday show it to you. Yours, Gypsy.

JO "BOOBS" WELDON: Dear Gypsy, I have just been a very foolish I guess unreasonable Mama. I love you so much and I very, very grateful for all you have done for me and are still doing for me. I have been getting worse and worse with the asthma, in fact so bad I am now having very bad attacks. Now enclosed is the name and the address of the doctor and the place where I want to go. Can you and will you help me? I need one hundred dollars for the entire cure at the clinic and just enough extra for gas and my needs. Please help me, Louise, and then I will be able to do for myself again. I want to open a baby nursery here as soon as I am able. **(laughter)** God bless you, dear. Love, Mother.

MISS TICKLE: No response.

(laughter)

JO “BOOBS” WELDON: Dear Gypsy, I am going to give you back to God for Him to manage you and I. **(laughter)** He will untangle this whole unhappy affair, I know. In the meantime, I am going to know that you will and must love me, because Louise, dear, without me, you are lost. I will always be waiting for you to come to me. Lots of love, Mother.

MISS TICKLE: A telegram from Gypsy to Rose: I have no desire to repeat last year’s scenes, which are too fresh in my memory. Stop. Your so-called loneliness is of your own choice. Stop. If you want to go to Seattle, go direct. Stop. We just don’t see eye to eye, and that is final. Gypsy.

(applause)

GYPSY ROSE LEE: Hi Pop, how’s my favorite doorman?

POP: Fine, just fine.

GYPSY: Oh, it’s a wild crowd out there tonight.

POP: They're always wild for you, Gypsy.

GYPSY: No, Pop, you tell that to all the strippers.

POP: Nobody draws them in the way you do, real high-class customers, too.

GYPSY: They're all out there tonight again. The guy with a tie that lights up in the dark, his friend with a peashooter. What an aim that guy has!

POP: Yeah, and what a peashooter.

GYPSY: And Baldie's out there, too, bless his heart. Sitting there through all four shows, with his lunchbox on his lap and his room number printed on his forehead and there was a man in the front row looking at me with binoculars. I didn't know whether he was one of my burlesque customers or a birdwatcher. It made me so nervous I didn't know whether to strip or lay an egg!

JONNY PORKPIE: Coming to the stage next, a legend of television and radio, a man who is rumored to have interviewed over ten thousand guests in his time on radio and TV, ranging from Bing Crosby to Yoko Ono. In 2008 he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Theater Museum. Please join me in welcoming to this stage Joe Franklin!

(applause)

JOE FRANKLIN: I do go back. I go back to the days when the Dead Sea was only sick.

(laughter) And my first guest ever was Moses. Moses had a headache and I told him to take two tablets. Now, I don't do comedy, I just want to say that I guess my participation here tonight is built around the fact that Gypsy Rose Lee, who was a dear friend of mine, was inspired as a guest on my TV talk show to want and desire and finally get her own syndicated TV talk show, which I got for her, I introduced her to the syndicator.

And I was just told—I mean, she was the thinking man's stripper, she brought intellect to the art of stripping, and I was told what a verbal dynamo she was, so when she came on my show the first time, I said, "Gypsy, just talk, just talk, whatever you want to say, tell us a joke." "You want to hear a joke?" She says—this is one of my favorites, by the way, from way back, seems that she knew a man who owned TWA, and he said to the crew, this lady going on the plane right now, very important client of mine, keep her happy, she's a very active subsidizer of all my activities, she gets on the plane with her pet dog, they put the dog in steerage, they fly to Israel, and when they get to Israel, they bring out the dog. Guess what? The dog is dead! They say, "Oh, my God," they run into the cockpit, there's the captain, "Terrible news, Mrs. Goldberg's dog dead, we're all going to get fired." "I got an idea." He said, "About ten minutes into Jerusalem, or in Tel Aviv, is the veterinarian, maybe, maybe you can match the dog, we'll keep her happy with happy talk." So they say, "We'll try it!" They take the dog out of the cage, take the dog down to the veterinarian, and guess what? They are able to match the dog, it's amazing. So they

come back fast, take out the dead dog, put in the live dog, bring it out to Mrs. Goldberg. She says, “This is not my dog!” “Of course that’s your dog.” “It’s not my dog. I’m bringing my dog to Israel to bury it. My dog is dead!” **(laughter)**

And when I heard that, I said, “This lady’s gotta have her own TV talk show.” I asked her what is her latest crusade? She says—she was famous for her campaigns, Gypsy Rose Lee was. She said, “You know the lady who put missing children’s pictures on milk cartons? I want to missing transvestites’ pictures on half and half.” **(laughter)** Well, she was great, she was great. She used to do riddles. She asked what do they call abortion in Czechoslovakia? A canceled Czech. She would say what do they call a gay milkman? A Dairy Queen.

She was phenomenally verbal and she was great, she my favorite. I had her on my show at least five times. I want to give a good plug for Karen Abbott’s book, American Rose, it’s now in its third printing. **(applause)** That’s because the first two printings were blurred. I’m only kidding I don’t do jokes, I just want to say what an honor it was to be invited here tonight, I’m enjoying the show, and may the memory of Gypsy Rose Lee go on and live for many, many years to come, and God bless you.

(applause)

CHARLIE: Ah, baby, you know I think the world of you.

GYPSY ROSE LEE: Take your hands off me and stop touring the world.

CHARLIE: But baby I want to marry you.

GYPSY ROSE LEE: I can't marry you, Charlie.

CHARLIE: Why not?

GYPSY ROSE LEE: I told you before. I can't marry you because it's Lent.

CHARLIE: But can't you get it back for a few days?

GYPSY ROSE LEE: Fresh.

CHARLIE: If it's fresh, I'll take it.

TIGGER!: It's me again. It is my pleasure to introduce to you now my dear friend the Burlesque Mayor of New York City, the co-winner of the first-ever most innovative award at the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, which I believe has gone to New York City every single year, huh? He also, when he wrote and put out his pulp novel, *The Corpse Wore Pasties*—yes, you may cheer! **(applause)**—he became the first burlesque performer to write and publish a burlesque murder mystery since Gypsy herself. The

connections, they just keep on bumpin' and bumpin'! Ladies and gentlemen, Jonny Porkpie!

JONNY PORKPIE: I should have asked you for “Hail to the Chief,” Albert. Yes, they call me the Burlesque Mayor of New York City, at least they do when I ask them nicely. When I’m hosting shows I do a whole shtick about La Guardia, who Paul mentioned earlier Gypsy had choice words for La Guardia. La Guardia had choice words for burlesque. He called it “entertainment for morons and perverts.” **(applause)** And so, dear morons, gentle perverts, an excerpt from Gypsy Rose Lee’s murder mystery, *The G-String Murders*, the first of two murder mysteries set in the world of burlesque written by burlesque performers. We’re in sales.

Chapter One. “Finding dead bodies scattered all over a burlesque theater isn’t the sort of thing you’re likely to forget, not quickly, anyway. It’s the little things, incidents that don’t seem important when they happen that slip your mind. With me, for instance, as long as I live I’ll remember seeing that bloated bluish face, the twisted naked body, and the glitter of a G-string hanging like an earring from the swollen neck. Sometimes even now I wake up in a cold sweat with the sound of a body squashing on the stage and Dolly Baxter’s screams in my ears.

The things that are harder to remember are the incidents leading up to the murders. The raid is a good example. How was I to know it wasn’t just another pinch? Then Dolly Baxter and Lolita La Verne—they were always fighting anyway, so how could I guess

that their ordinary hair-pulling, name-calling differences of opinion were leading to death? I'll admit I should have known something was up when the Princess Nirvana opened at the old opera. She must have seen the signs backstage—they were all over the place: “Full net pants,” “no bumps, no grinds,” “keep your navel covered,” you couldn't miss seeing them, but when she did her specialty and took off her last pair of pants I was definitely going to hand in my notice.

I didn't, of course, but, well, maybe I'd better start from the beginning. Not when I first went into show business, but from the time I received the telegram in Columbus, Ohio. “Gypsy Rose Lee,” it read, “Gaiety Theater, Columbus, Ohio. You open February 12, Old Opera Theater, New York City, salary \$125 net, theater real showcase for Broadway debut. Wire confirmation, rush photos, H. I. Moss.” The wire was typical of him. H. I. Moss, owner of six burlesque theaters and undisputed impresario of burlesque, wouldn't wire, “Can you open?” And although I'd been working for him for two years, he wouldn't sign it Best regards, nor would he write Herbert or Isadore Moss. “Burlesque is the poor man's *Follies*,” was one of his expressions, but I'm sure he didn't feel that way about it. He was convinced that an H. I. Moss production meant not only Clean Entertainment for the Whole Family but also stood for the very best Broadway could offer. If he thought Eugene O'Neill could write a good burlesque blackout, then O'Neill was the man for him. If he couldn't write anything but *Dynamo* and *Strange Interlude*, Moss would shrug his shoulders and say, “Who wants to know from such corn? Girls! That's what the public wants.”

He might have been right, at that. Of all his theaters the Old Opera was the favorite. It had survived a good many impressions and the policy was Girls! Girls! Girls! In smaller print, they advertised “Laffs! Laffs! Laffs!” Next in prominence, Boxing, Thursdays. Moss emphasized the “clean entertainment” part, too. The night I met him he impressed it on my mind. That was the night he changed my name from Rose Louise to Gypsy Rose Lee. “That Louise is too refined for a stripteaser,” he said. “Refinement in burlesque we must have! But not too much.”

I really didn't want to join a burlesque troupe. No vaudeville actor does. If you find one in burlesque, you can be sure he got in through the starvation route. I certainly did. Maybe not exactly starvation, but when there's only one punch left in your meal ticket, it's close enough. Not only that, but I'd been locked out of an egg-crate of a hotel in the thriving city of Toledo. H. I. Moss didn't care much whether I wanted to be a stripteaser or not. He thought of himself as a star builder, a sort of cross between David Belasco and Flo Ziegfeld, with a little Napoleon thrown in as an added attraction. “I will personally see to it that your name is in lights on Broadway,” he said to me, exactly one half-minute after I met him. It was my closing night in a comfort station that the defunct owners playfully called a nightclub. The lights were dim, and a five-piece orchestra pounded out tune after tune while my new boss outlined my future for me. From the routine he was giving me, it sounded like I was going into training for the ballet, or at least the Olympics.

“Experience! That’s what you need.” His eyes peering at me through bifocal glasses closed dreamily. “And clothes! Velvets with feathers, diamonds in your hair.” The red and blue overhead lights reflected on his bald head as he raised his voice above that of the singer and the band. When he really interested me was when he really got down to cases. A pay-or-play contract. Diamonds in my hair was well and good, but at that moment I was a little hungry. “First you play my circuit, then you play a year in stock, here in Toledo. If at the end of that time, I, H. I. Moss, feel that you are ready for Broadway, you play the Old Opera!” He waited for me to gurgle, “Not THE Old Opera,” with awe in my eyes. Unfortunately, I had never heard of the theater, so all I could give him was, “What is the salary?”

From *The G-String Murders* by Gypsy Rose Lee, **(applause)** starring a character named Gypsy Rose Lee, read by me, Jonny Porkpie, author of *The Corpse Wore Pasties*, starring a character named Jonny Porkpie. Well, we’re nothing if not subtle, we burlesque performers. But, folks, we’ve come to the part of the evening where we learn a little more about the book that brought us all here this evening. A conversation, if you will, between Karen Abbott, author of *American Rose*, applaud. **(applause)** and the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library, Paul Holdenraber. Please welcome them to this stage for a conversation.

(applause)

GYPSY ROSE LEE: Oh, boys, I can’t take that off! I’d get cold!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What a pleasure. I've never used that word so effectively.

What a pleasure. You look so beautiful.

KAREN ABBOTT: I feel strangely overdressed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know how I feel.

KAREN ABBOTT: Yeah, I guess so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What are you doing to me?

KAREN ABBOTT: I don't know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, what else would you like me to do? I feel that one thing we should do, I feel that we should have the presence of this dress with us on the stage. I don't know how I'm going to do this, but I want to—can you help me with it? Because I feel like she should be with us and I just would like the shoes to be—which one would you like? I think you should take this one. I just feel like—

KAREN ABBOTT: Oh, dear. Almost there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I can see where you have your hands. Well, while we wait for Gypsy Rose Lee to come back—

KAREN ABBOTT: I think it would only be polite, since it's her hundredth birthday.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I just felt that she was too hidden there.

KAREN ABBOTT: Yeah, she was alone.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you nearly ready? Can't be that complicated. Could we please have Gypsy Rose back? Thank you! **(applause)** Well, it's a real pleasure and an honor to have you all here tonight, and Karen, it's a great pleasure to have you here. And it's a delight, really, to be celebrating the hundred years of Gypsy Rose Lee, so let's give her first a big hand of applause. **(applause)** Because without Gypsy Rose Lee, we wouldn't be having this evening, and Karen Abbott would not have written this book.

KAREN ABBOTT: And, by the way, her face was not usually covered by a muff.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just imagine. Use your imagination. Now, it has been said once upon a time that there are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. And the third is that moment sometime in the future when your name is spoken for the last time. Now, there is an issue here with Gypsy Rose Lee, in some way an issue pertaining—

KAREN ABBOTT: She's alive!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She's very moveable. She's a moveable feast. An issue with her name. Her name was always rather problematic for her. She changed it, and we are in no fear of ever having to have her name pronounced for the last time. In some way your book is a book—another book of resuscitation. Speak a bit about Gypsy Rose Lee and her name.

KAREN ABBOTT: It's a good question. A lot of the book deals with her identity and one of the theories is her mother was expert at forging birth certificates, and in the book I reprint the original birth certificate. I was told on good authority by the Seattle Health Department that here is the original certificate and she couldn't—Rose, Gypsy's mother—could not doctor *this* copy, but she made copies and doctored those. And on her birth certificate it just says "Infant Hovick," "Baby Girl Hovick," and then handwritten it's written "Ellen June Hovick," and one of the theories which, you know, knowing with Rose she had many theories and all of them were true, one of the theories was that she first named Gypsy Ellen June and then when she had June, she gave that name to June, who became June Havoc, the actress, and then started calling Gypsy Rose Louise, and she went Louise for short, so it was always a question. And giving Gypsy that name, you know, was also giving the mother a piece of her. She sort of lay claim to Gypsy by doing that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why did you write this biography? Probably even that word might be the wrong word to use in speaking about this book. Why did you choose Gypsy Rose Lee as a subject for a book?

KAREN ABBOTT: Well, I blame it all on my grandmother, who did not strip, although she could have, I think.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Although—

KAREN ABBOTT: She could have, I think. She was a saucy lady. She *is* a saucy lady. But she told me a story about—she was only a few years younger than Gypsy. And she always told me stories about growing up during the Great Depression, and she once related a tale about a cousin who claimed to have seen Gypsy Rose Lee perform in 1935. Now, the cousin said that Gypsy took a full fifteen minutes to peel off a single glove and that she was so damn good at it he gladly would have given her fifteen more. So this story got me thinking—who was Gypsy Rose Lee? Who could possibly take this simple act of peeling off a glove and make it so riveting that one might be compelled to watch this for a full half hour? So I spent three years researching that answer, research that included speaking to Gypsy's sister, the late actress June Havoc, her son, and also immersing myself for countless hours in the Gypsy's archives at the New York Public Library.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did you learn from speaking to her sister?

KAREN ABBOTT: It was like being transported back to the 1920s and 30s. I don't think I've ever had such a good time talking to somebody.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She was ninety-four then.

KAREN ABBOTT: She was about ninety-four, give or take, you know, again, with Rose and her birth certificates, you never know. But she spoke a lot about Gypsy's conflicted relationship with Gypsy the creation, you know, Gypsy had a very divided personality, and she was also always tortured by who she was as a person and who—this woman she'd created. The creation always gave her the things she'd wanted—money, power, security. But she lived in fear of her past coming back to haunt her, and if you remember the letters that her mother sent to her, you know—you know there's quite a bit of past that always sort of galloping up behind her and threatening to take her down, and June spoke a lot about that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And spoke about her relationship to her sister, as a relationship when you told her, “you were a good sister to her,” how did she answer that question?

KAREN ABBOTT: She said, “I was no sister to her. I was not in her life.” And part of that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is quite something to say. I mean, I heard the audio clip of that because you recorded that and sent me that little audio clip. It's heartbreaking in some way.

KAREN ABBOTT: And chilling—it was chilling. And, you know, how do you respond to that? But it was mostly talking about—there was a year that Gypsy never talked about, and June spoke about this with me and her son spoke about this with me a little bit. After vaudeville died and before Gypsy became the big star at Minsky's, you know, doing her dance on the rooftop of the Republic, she had a very—a year that was quite difficult for her. She was living on dog food, she was poor, her son suggested that she had done things against her will—or had been forced to do things against her will, which I took to mean maybe she had been forced to prostitute herself, and of course this isn't the sunny picture presented in her memoir *On Broadway*, which is all plucky and light, and so it was—June spoke a lot about that.

June came to her for help one time. June herself was having some difficulty. She was doing the marathon dance circuit, which was its own set of horrors, its own strange burlesque, and she went to Gypsy for help, and Gypsy at that time had been cavorting with a bunch of gangsters, one of them being Waxey Gordon, who was associated—If anybody watches *Boardwalk Empire*, with Arnold Rothstein, the gangster who fixed the 1919 World Series and June told me that Gypsy sent her to a party with these strange underworld characters who were not just innocently taking their clothes off, it was quite a

seedy scene, and she never forgave Gypsy for that. She said, “If my sister could do that to me, she never really loved me.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the mother, in the same vein, was rather violent. I mean, she might have murdered a few people.

KAREN ABBOTT: Just a few people.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did she?

KAREN ABBOTT: She did, I mean, there’s a photo in the book of the crime scene of one of them. But, you know, in the musical, again in the musical and the memoir, again, she’s never murdering anybody. There’s a scene in the musical, if anybody’s familiar with that, where Rose—just to save money, she was just as frugal as Gypsy was, very frugal. To save money, they would crowd everybody in the vaudeville act in one hotel room, and one of the hotel managers threatened to evict them, and in the musical she cries rape and gets rid of the hotel manager that way, but the real story that went around was that Rose actually fatally pushed the hotel manager out the window and claimed self-defense and just—it sort of quietly went away. I mean, she was a very convincing woman, to say the least.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: one of the quotations I very much love in your book. Nearly as much as the Eleanor Roosevelt quotation I mentioned at the beginning is one

from H. L. Mencken, where you quote Mencken as saying, “Puritanism,” I mean, I find this fantastic. Listen carefully, please. “Puritanism, the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

(laughter)

KAREN ABBOTT: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did you like that so much you’d like me to read it again? I will. “Puritanism, the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” I’m wondering what these Mencken words mean to you in the context of Gypsy Rose Lee and writing this book about an era?

KAREN ABBOTT: Well, when burlesque really took root, I mean it was after vaudeville was dying and the first thing that killed vaudeville was the talking pictures. Once Al Jolson came onstage with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, that was a huge blow to vaudeville, which up until that time had been the most popular form of entertainment in America. And then the final blow to vaudeville was the Great Depression, you know, the stock market crash. You know, the whole mood of the country changed, I mean, for good reason, and the country was no longer in the mood for the sunny, mindless optimism that vaudeville gave everybody, and they wanted burlesque, they wanted a different form of escapism, they wanted something dark and moody, and they wanted to go to these burlesque theaters and feel kinship with the women. These unemployed men would start

lining up in the morning just to get in the burlesque shows in the evening, and you know, they felt this camaraderie with the women, and just equally naked, these people are equally naked and equally baring themselves. And so that's what the country started turning to, which of course upset the puritans, because there was a lot of fun had in the process.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But some of the puritans probably enjoyed those shows, no? Yeah.

KAREN ABBOTT: Oh, yes, they did. They made sure that their censors and they themselves were there at every show. Nobody was missing anything.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would like you, as a historian of that period, to take me back in time if you could and tell me what—first of all, I'd love to be able to understand better than I do at this particular moment what the difference between vaudeville and burlesque is, that's my first question, and my second one is more specifically, what would a burlesque show entail? If I went to a burlesque show, what could I maybe expect and perhaps what could surprise me? And Gypsy as it were was sometimes just one part of that show, as I understand it.

KAREN ABBOTT: Vaudeville, the only thing I can really liken it to it's like the reality TV of the 1920s, although people back then actually had to work hard at being famous instead of just getting drunk and punching each other and rolling around on the floor and

going in hot tubs. But, you know, so people would find a talent, and even if it wasn't a talent, these people just invented a talent, and they practiced it and practiced it and practiced it until they became quite good enough to charge people to see it, and June spoke a lot about vaudeville, too, but one of my favorites, just to give you a vaudeville taste, was a man called the Amazing Regurgitator.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe we could check him out a little bit.

(film of the Amazing Regurgitator rolls)

KAREN ABBOTT: So he also, aside from that, he had another big feat where he could swallow a baby shark and a fish and then ask the audience which one should come up first.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Such innocent pleasures, no?

(laughter)

KAREN ABBOTT: Just good fun.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So what else would a show entail?

KAREN ABBOTT: A vaudeville show—kiddie acts, of which of course Dainty June and Her Newsboy Songsters, and, you know, from 1923 to 1927 Dainty June and Her Newsboy Songsters, headlined by June Havoc, was one of the most popular vaudeville acts in the country, and they were making like \$2,500 per show, which was an astronomical sum, like 32,000 in today’s dollars, and one of their numbers featured a dancing cow, and Gypsy always claimed that she was forced to work the back end of the cow, but June disputed this, and June told me, “Gypsy couldn’t dance that well,” **(laughter)** so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There was always a lot of rivalry between the two of them.

KAREN ABBOTT: I think their mother did the best job she could at turning them against each other. I think there’s a line in the book that says, “She raised her daughters like two grizzled generals preparing for war, with each other, with men, and with her,” and just continued on in that path.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Now, Some of your critics have worried that you have not followed a chronological order in this book which so often in biographies particularly one does follow in order to unveil, unpack as it were, the subject. Why did you choose the nonchronological narrative?

KAREN ABBOTT: I wanted to structure the book like a striptease, and part of that was revealing a little bit of this side, and pulling it back a little bit, revealing a little bit more

and pulling back a little bit until all was revealed, and Gypsy was just too complicated—she wasn't a linear person. She's somebody who—you know, at the end of her life she said, "I've had three wonderful lives and these poor sons of bitches haven't lived once," you know, this is after she was diagnosed with cancer and was looking at the other patients in the room. But she wasn't a linear person, and she was quite a complicated jigsaw puzzle, and I thought it would do her a great disservice to just tell this narrative in a linear way and just beginning, middle, end.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We heard some of Gypsy's own words before, and in her memoir she says the end result is a memoir that includes nuggets of truth tempered throughout by invention and fantasy, and I'm wondering whether your goal was to improve on that.

KAREN ABBOTT: My goal was to expand on that and also to just dispel some of the myths she created. You know, she—in the memoir and in the musical she sort of presents herself as a plucky, happy-go-lucky girl who was just a fluke success and a little bit hustled along by her mother, but Gypsy was a very driving, ambitious person and had been since she was a kid, and June said that when she was a girl in the vaudeville circuit, all Gypsy did was scribble one word in her notebook, it was the word "money" over and over again. And then of course Rose Hovick calls her on it thirty years later and says, "you made money your goal and your god and that's all you ever cared about," but she was a very—once she created the persona of Gypsy Rose Lee.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But she created more than a persona, more than a mask, as it were. She created a whole mythology, and do you think—she created so many of them. Do you think she ended up believing them?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think when she was living in that persona she fully believed in it. She couldn't not. I think if she stopped to think about the difference between who she was and who this persona was. She was a very troubled, sad woman in many ways, and if she stopped to think about—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Gypsy was a sad woman.

KAREN ABBOTT: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How do you mean that, actually?

KAREN ABBOTT: She wasn't very—Erik, when I talked to her son. He was kind enough to talk to me, he said that she was not a very introspective person. And I think if she stopped to really look into herself too long it would have overwhelmed her and she wouldn't have been able to be this persona that she created.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So do you think that the mythmaking is a way of fleeing reality and trying to create a form of momentary happiness in believing one is someone else?

KAREN ABBOTT: I do and June and even—I talked with June about this too and she said that *Gypsy* the musical was Gypsy’s chance at monumental revisionism. It was not only her monument; it was her chance at monumental revisionism. And this is the person she always wanted to be, this beautiful romantic idealist person with dreams, and it’s not who she was. And she said that, you know, that Gypsy would try to do these serious literary endeavors and she would like to go somewhere and talk about that, and yet when she got onstage, people just wanted her to take her glove off for a half an hour.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But she did have ambitions—your book doesn’t go into that so much, but she did have real literary ambitions. She was published, for instance, in the *New Yorker*.

KAREN ABBOTT: And Simon and Schuster.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Would she be published do you think today in the *New Yorker*?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think the novelty of being who she was would get her published anywhere. But she had—she was a very smart lady and a very, you know, as I said, ambitious lady, and she was going to do whatever she had to do to get published. She was desperate.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Was she a good writer?

KAREN ABBOTT: She was a good storyteller, she's a masterful storyteller, and that's seen all through her memoir and just through her persona, just even oral storytelling.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Who saw through the persona? Were there people who saw through it and saw that maybe some of the literary ambitions were not quite backed up enough by—

KAREN ABBOTT: Oh, yes. One of them. You're making me laugh. You're making me think of another H. L. Mencken quote. He did coin the word "ecdysiast" in her honor, H. L. Mencken did, but he also coined the word "booboisie."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I like that, I like that. Booboisie. I'm going to use it from time to time. Maybe I'll use it when I introduce Karen Armstrong.

KAREN ABBOTT: I think that's appropriate.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A famous work of booboisie, yes. Because in some way she had aspirations that she never fulfilled, both as a writer, she tried to act in some ways and sometimes didn't do as well as she had hoped. Do you think this was a source of extraordinary disappointment to her?

KAREN ABBOTT: I do, I do. I think when she went back to her dressing room after somebody just wanted to leer and watch her peel off her gloves, and she wanted to have a sort of higher discourse on her book or her movie career, she would go back there and cry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Was there a higher discourse to have, though? Was there a higher discourse to have on her work? Or was it just an aspiration that she was hoping to reach but her work doesn't quite warrant that serious investigation?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think that her experience of writing warrants a serious investigation. I mean, she joined a very serious writer colony where she was hanging out with George Davis and W. H. Auden—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And Benjamin Britten.

KAREN ABBOTT: Benjamin Britten and Carson McCullers.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What about Carson McCullers?

KAREN ABBOTT: What about Carson McCullers?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Certainly I was sort of sleepy reading that passage at that moment, and it really woke me up. What happens with Carson McCullers? Did they?

KAREN ABBOTT: Well, they were rumored. Carson had a huge crush on Gypsy, I'll put it that way. She had a huge crush.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Put it in other ways, too.

KAREN ABBOTT: I forgot where we are!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's okay, it's okay. I mean, it might be the last thing I do here. Go ahead.

KAREN ABBOTT: Carson had a huge crush on Gypsy. Carson had just broken up with her girlfriend, and Gypsy would invite Carson to come up into her room every night, and Gypsy, of course, would not be in her glamorous gowns, she would be wearing baggy underwear that sagged at the knees and she was very casual with Carson, and she would fetch her homemade strudel that she'd made from apples in the backyard and feed it to Carson and Carson would have her bottle of whiskey next to her and they'd lay on the bed and commiserate together, and when it got too late, Carson would just stay over, and they would, you know— Who knows what happened?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They would.

KAREN ABBOTT: They would.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And during that time W. H. Auden was downstairs.

KAREN ABBOTT: Oh, yes, probably listening in on the whole thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, because you mentioned it a little bit and how did he feel about the whole arrangement?

KAREN ABBOTT: Well, everybody, you know, really enjoyed each other, and they fed off each other, and Gypsy had these, you know, would have her cook prepare meals for everybody, and everybody from Salvador Dalí to soldiers in port to Columbia University professors would pass through and, you know, Tallulah Bankhead and all of these other people would come by and it became a big party atmosphere, which Gypsy excelled at, of course.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did the archives at the Library bring you that other books have not yet—did not find? I mean, what did you find, what new materials did the archives warrant you that other biographies of Gypsy Rose Lee left out?

KAREN ABBOTT: There was one letter from Gypsy—just to stay on the subject of her writing career for a second.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Right.

KAREN ABBOTT: She wrote to her publicist at Simon and Schuster. “I’ll do my specialty in Macy’s to sell more books. If you want it classier, I’ll make it a Wanamaker’s window.” **(laughter)** So she would have done anything to sell books, as clearly I am doing anything to sell books.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Absolutely. I mean, I think, I hope we’ll sell a lot of books tonight. I mean, it’s really—

KAREN ABBOTT: If you take your clothes off, maybe more people will buy books.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe, but I have no book to sell, this is most unfortunate. There is a theme tonight, I do get it, people would like to see me naked. **(laughter)** Now, she created a real mythology around her, and she created this proto-fame we now have. You know, Rilke the famous poet once said that fame is but a collection of misunderstandings that gather around a new name. She created this extraordinary kind of proto-Lady Gaga.

KAREN ABBOTT: I like to say that if Lady Gaga and Dorothy Parker had a secret love child, it would have been Gypsy Rose Lee. **(laughter)** You know, the woman knew how to make a dramatic entrance. One of my favorite stories is she would arrive at opening

nights at the Met and come in a long black limousine and emerge wearing a cape made entirely of orchids. So she cultivated this image as a grande dame. This was a big part of her image, but backstage in her dressing room at Minsky's Republic, that image would fade and she would try to amuse and shock her burlesque friends by performing some very naughty tricks with her pet monkey. I hope nobody from PETA is here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don't know, we'll find out soon enough. I love the way she spoke to her critics. You know, when, I can't remember if it's in your book.

KAREN ABBOTT: She always said, "As long as they spell my name right, I don't care what they say."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But it is—you know, everybody was saying to her, "what you do as a profession, it's not particularly sophisticated." She said, well, you know, her answer to that to someone once was, you know, "I do what you do every morning and every evening. I get dressed and I get undressed."

KAREN ABBOTT: She was right.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's just marvelous. It's disarming.

KAREN ABBOTT: You can't argue with that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You can't, you can't.

KAREN ABBOTT: But, all that said, she did take great pains to be known as the intellectual stripteaser. You know, this is somebody who wanted to appeal to gangsters, socialites, artists, New York's literati, and, of course, Eleanor Roosevelt, which I think was the money quote from the entire New York Public Library is the telegram there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's fantastic, no, I mean I must say, I'm going to go into that Box 8, Folder 6, and look at it. It's quite extraordinary, the treasures we have here. I mean, who knew? Who knew?

KAREN ABBOTT: And thankfully now we do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do we have that clip of Gypsy? I don't know if we should show it, but I feel like we should, which ends your book with her fantastic what's on the mind of a stripteaser. Do we have that? I'm not sure we do. We don't.

KAREN ABBOTT: I'm not sure we do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's so fantastic.

KAREN ABBOTT: It is fantastic. Well, I'll explain a little bit about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe you want to read some of those last lines. I don't know, you want to maybe explain. But they're so great, I must say, I just really liked reading them. I looked at them, but I also like reading them. Here's some of them, or maybe do you know them by heart?

KAREN ABBOTT: No, I do not.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You don't.

KAREN ABBOTT: She changed it so many times.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Here is what you quote.

KAREN ABBOTT: Okay.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe you want to explain it, too.

KAREN ABBOTT: I will explain it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's called The Mind of the—

KAREN ABBOTT: “The Psychology of a Stripteaser.” You know, she was big into Freud. For somebody who wasn't very introspective, she was big into Freud.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What might that mean from her perspective?

KAREN ABBOTT: She, you know, she was very concerned with psychology, and very interested in it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think she ever read any Freud?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think she did. I don't think she applied to herself. I'm sure she used it on other people.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's quite a common disease.

KAREN ABBOTT: It was her most famous routine. It was called "The Psychology of a Stripteaser," and it was very self-satirical, she was a very sophisticated, brilliant self-satirist. She would make fun of things like, you know, the rigorous education that she began at the age of three in order to take her clothes off. You know, she studied abroad, she did this, she did that, just to be able to be showing her pasties at the end, and it was very name-droppy and self-referential, and I will read a few.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do read a few, because they're marvelous and very witty I find.

KAREN ABBOTT: “Have you the faintest idea of the private life of a stripteaser? My dear, it’s New York’s second largest industry. Now, a stripteaser’s education requires years of concentration, and for the sake of illustration, take a look at me. I began at the age of three, learning ballet at the Royal Imperial School in Moscow, and how I suffered and suffered for my art. Then, of course, Sweet Briar, oh, those dear college days, and after four years of sociology, zoology, biology, anthropology, my education was complete, and I was ready to make my professional debut for the Minsky’s on Fourteenth Street. Now the things that go on in a stripteaser’s mind would give you no end of surprise, but if you are psychologically inclined, there is more to see than meets the eye. For example, when I lower my gown a fraction and expose a patch of shoulder, I’m not interested in your reaction or in the bareness of my shoulder. I am thinking of some paintings by van Gogh or by Cezanne or the charm I had in reading *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, and when I lower the other side and expose my other shoulder, do you think I take the slightest pride in the whiteness of that shoulder?” And here’s she’d go—I can’t really do it. “I’m thinking of my country house and the jolly fun in shooting grouse and the frantic music changes then off to my cue, but I only think of the things I really ought to do—wire Leslie Howard, cable Noël Coward, go to Bergdorf’s for my fitting, buy the yarn for my mother’s knitting, put preserves up by the jar and make arrangements for my church bazaar, but there is the music and that’s my cue, there is only one thing left for me to do and so I do it,” and here she lifts her skirts and she had these marvelous legs, she had legs like she invented walking, marvelous legs, “and when I raise my skirts with slyness and dexterity, I am mentally computing just how much I’ll give to charity. Though my thighs I have revealed and just a bit of me remains concealed, I am thinking

of the life of Duse and the last chapter of *The Last Puritan*. None of these men are obscene, they leave me apathetic, I prefer the more aesthetic, things like dramas by Racine and *Gone with the Wind*, and when I display my charms in all their dazzling splendor and prove to you conclusively I am of the female gender, I am really thinking of Elsie de Wolfe and the bric-a-brac I saw, and that lovely letter I received from George Bernard Shaw. I have a townhouse on the East River because it's so fashionable, to look at Welfare Island, coal barges, and garbage scows. I have a chinchilla, a Newport villa"—and then she unfastens her cape and swings it out in front of her like a matador. "And then I take the last thing off and stand here shyly with nothing on at all, clutching an old velvet drop and looking demurely at every man, do you think for a moment that I am thinking of sex? Well, I certainly am." **(laughter)** That's it.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I think in many ways upon your reading this it proves a good reason why we're here at the Library celebrating her, because she was a very fine stylist, and very witty.

KAREN ABBOTT: And she wrote a lot of that herself, she wrote a lot of her own routines and her skits.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think that the humor was used as a tool, a defense mechanism, something that kept her at a distance from others?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think so, and she—that’s what she tapped into early on, the idea of marrying comedy and sex. And you know fifty years before Madonna, she learned how to transform performance into desire, and that human instinct that we’re always going to want most what we never have, and she reasoned that “if I first laugh at myself, nobody else is going to laugh at me,” and she—I think how she really sort of became comfortable in her own skin, so to speak.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It’s very much the Cyrano de Bergerac syndrome; you speak about your long nose before anybody else does.

KAREN ABBOTT: A good analogy. Or your size ten-and-a-half feet, which she was very self-conscious of, by the way. She would also always try to wear skin-colored shoes to camouflage her enormous feet but yet they’re marvelous.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They are rather big, I must say. You say in the book that she was the most private public figure of her time.

KAREN ABBOTT: *Life* magazine said that of her.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And let’s imagine for a moment as we come to a close of this little chat you and I have had. If she—Karen, if she were here tonight, what in fact

would you, do you think, ask her? Pretend for a moment, just a moment of a suspension of disbelief, that I am Gypsy Rose Lee. Darling, what would you ask me?

KAREN ABBOTT: That's a good question. I would ask you, I think, if she ended up liking herself. And I know that's very serious, but it's something I really wondered. Throughout the writing of the book, my opinion of her changed so many times. I was afraid of her, she scared the crap out of me sometimes. I admired her, I thought she was brilliant, I thought she was cruel, I thought she had an enormous heart, I went all over the place, and I wonder—I'd like to ask her which one was the real her and how did she feel about it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you have an inkling of an answer she might give? Would she give a serious answer, or would it be just flippant?

KAREN ABBOTT: I think she would say, "Oh, darling, I'm all of those things. Just spell my name right."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very, very much.

(applause)

KAREN ABBOTT: Thank you guys so much for coming. Thanks everybody for coming!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And we now have—

KAREN ABBOTT: A little surprise.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A little surprise for you.

KAREN ABBOTT: There is a project that Jo “Boobs” and Burlesque Hall of Fame are working on, it’s an ongoing video project where they’re gathering clips from burlesque troupes all over the world, and a few of them sent in clips tonight saying happy birthday to Gypsy and we wanted to show a few of those.

(video clips play)