



Candy from the cabaret show Crazy Horse, and (below) the troupe. Picture: Riccardo Timelli

LIFE OF A SHOW GIRL

THEY ARE WEIGHED EACH WEEK AND MUST MEET A STRICT BEAUTY CRITERIA, BUT THE DANCERS OF THE CRAZY HORSE WOULDN'T TRADE THEIR LIFE FOR ANYTHING, WRITES MARINA TRAKOVICH

Candy St Louis' mother had different expectations when she put her daughter through ballet school.

The Brooklyn-born burlesque dancer laughs about it, as she applies her makeup before her latest nude review show.

"My mum was really surprised when I wanted to do Crazy Horse, she was like 'I don't understand, I paid for ballet school' and she thought that I should be in a ballet or a modern contemporary company, but it's really what I need to do in my life," she says. Candy is in the Paris-based troupe currently performing in Sydney and has been dancing cabaret and burlesque for five years. Her nights are spent in ridiculously high Christian Louboutin heels, coloured wigs and thigh-high stockings as she performs in a carefully crafted light show, celebrating the decadence of Parisian sensuality and the female form.

After beginning her career in Las Vegas, she moved to Ave George V in Paris where she has collaborated with striptease queen Dita Von Teese and other burlesque stars. Over the past 65 years, Crazy Horse and its dancers have become pop icons and a part of Parisian heritage with their Balenciaga costumes and Salvador Dali-inspired props.

The velvet-lined chairs in the original, intimate venue have seated the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Elvis Presley, Madonna, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rihanna and Beyonce, who

filmed her video for Partition at the famous venue.

"You know, I wanted to be a dancer because of pointe, because of the Nutcracker, because of Swan Lake but this found me in a way ... even though I literally found it," Candy says. "No one knocks on your door, I feel like it's just this connection that happened, I can't explain it. When I saw the show on

TV in New York, just that little segment, I was like, that's what I want to do.

"I didn't even see that they were topless, I just saw the movement and how the women were and that's how I move naturally.

"It's very empowering, I feel magical up there. It really is a dream. You can shy away from what you do and still be a good dancer, or really get into the dancing and the movement and the lights. Having the audience there looking at you, it's so raw, it's really empowering, really magical."

In order for this magic to happen the girls go through 500 litres of make-up, including 300 "crazy red" lipsticks, 720 pairs of false lashes and 2500 pairs of stockings a year.

And getting a place in the coveted troupe is no simple feat. There are 500 unsolicited applicants a year attempting to reach the Crazy Horse stage. Each must first meet the incredibly strict aesthetic criteria set out by the show's founder Alain Bernardin.

The girls are artworld, dressed in lights and meticulously arranged costumes. They must be between 168 and 173cm tall and have a ratio of 21cm between their nipples and 13cm from their belly button to the top of their legs.

Every move is meticulous choreographed and in synch with the other dancers to

create a story with just the movement of a hand over a plush prop. Every eyelash flutter to the audience is calculated and sensual.

"It's the famous sway we have which is in your back. When you're standing up straight, imagine lifting up your torso and imagine not lifting up your chest or sticking out your butt but arching the lower back and it gives a very elegant silhouette, so over the years it gets deeper and deeper and you get this arch in your back," says Candy. "After

time it gets really, really deep, I think

I've got shorter as the arch in my back is so deep now!"

Dancers even undergo weekly weigh-ins to ensure they are in peak condition.

"In Paris I wake up and go to the gym and then I come home and get ready to go to the theatre," she says. "We are meant to get there an hour early. I get there an hour and a half, most of us do because we stretch, do our makeup.

"And then I mentally prepare my brain and my body for the shows."

Candy says leaving America for a life as a Parisian showgirl was transformative.

"On the streets and on the stage, I'm the same," she adds.

"It's changed me from a 'Brooklyn baby' into a Parisian lady'. It really has made me into an adult. I've got to know myself through being so far away from home and the movement on stage."

Unlike Paris's other famous cabarets such as the Lido and Moulin Rouge, which feature both men and women, the Crazy Horse performers are exclusively women.

"It's really intimate, which I love," adds Candy. "There are 14 women on this tour. 11 girls on every night, but you learn something each day from someone. I'm grateful for this experience.

"We have this sensuality, this class, femininity, that's something men cannot bring into this world, so it's very important to our show.

"Because it does empower us, it's so easy to forget."

The Crazy Horse Forever Crazy cabaret is playing at the State Theatre until tomorrow.

“

It's changed me from a 'Brooklyn baby' into a 'Parisian lady'

Candy St Louis

