

# Showgirls:

The Movie in Sestinas

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BLAZEVOX [BOOKS]  
*Buffalo, New York*

Showgirls: The Movie in Sestinas by Jeffery Conway

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# Showgirls:

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## Switchblade Nomi

The sound of cars whizzing along a highway.

A tight-jeaned blonde carrying a light blue suitcase emerges from a strip mall parking lot. A semi-trailer truck speeds past, and the girl puts out her thumb, ready to gamble her life away for a ride, hitching next to a green sign (*Las Vegas* 342). Elizabeth Berkley can hardly believe she's Nomi—

the role of a lifetime! She'd mused, "It's like, *No Me*"—the brilliant bit of onomastic play not lost on her, on a highway out West, with snow-capped mountains between Las Vegas and this promising start of her movie career. *Grab suitcase* (she mentally notes, not wanting to gamble screwing up the scene) *when the guy stops in the blue truck.*

She recalls her script's marginalia: *emote uncertainty when truck pulls over.* The driver, "Jeff," is eager to welcome Nomi into his King Cab, though he too is sizing up his gamble—stopping for this tough-looking chick on a highway in the middle of nowhere. Does her beat-up suitcase foreshadow trouble, or is it packed with cash? "Vegas,"

is Jeff's response when asked where he's headed—Vegas, neon mecca of Jeff Strykerish handsome dudes into pickup trucks and wannabe dancers with mysterious, smudged suitcases. When Jeff suggests she "sit a little bit closer," Nomi whips out a switchblade, threatens him as they fly down the highway at 70 MPH. Actor Dewey Weber isn't willing to gamble

with his *real* life and turns the wheel over to a true gambler, a Hollywood stuntman who'll spend a day on this road to Vegas, playing chicken with a fellow union member, a two-lane highway where he'll risk a high speed rear-ender with a semi truck. We see the pickup from behind: Miss Berkley and her prop suitcase slam violently from side to side inside the cab. At last, Nomi,

now tamed by this brush with death, sets down the blade, says "Nomi" when asked her name a second time. Jeff wants to know if she gambles. "No," she replies, though she's confident she'll win. Her suitcase, he says, must be stuffed full of Mafia money, and in Las Vegas, he insists, she'll need to risk everything to win. This small Ford truck whisks two aspiring actors into a desert night, across a mythical highway,

the Highway of Unhappy Destiny: Joe Eszterhas's implausible script inside a suitcase behind the seat of a blue pickup truck, and Paul Verhoeven's doomed gamble on this ascendant Vegas showgirl who calls herself (not her real name) Nomi.

## Friend or Faux

Demon Driver Jeff turns off the Vegas Strip into a brightly lit casino parking lot, tells Nomi, our young hitchhiker, to leave her stuff in the car, says not to worry. Inside, he gives her some money for the slots, then disappears to see about getting her a job. She hits the jackpot, and quarters pour out of the chiming machine. A friendly attendant appears, says “Look at you!” with wide eyes and totally faux

smile, “Wanna try some silver dollars?” Nomi completely buys this faux sincerity, actually *believes* she’ll win big and walk out of that casino laden with gold. As she gleefully feeds the slots, yanks the arms, her friend Jeff couldn’t be further from her mind, but when she stuffs her last half dollar into the metal slit and it comes up zilch, she hits the blinking face of the machine, pissed off she’s lost all her money.

A man lurks nearby: “What’s a matter honey, lose all your money?” He says she can make some more in about fifteen minutes, advises with faux concern: “Sooner or later you’re gonna have to sell it!” As Nomi storms off, it hits her: *Jeff has been gone for a long time, he’s probably left the casino. I better head for the parking lot, get my suitcase with all my stuff.* She crosses the busy boulevard to find an empty space where her “friend’s”

Ford truck once sat. She begins to pound the hell out of a (soon-to-be friend’s) car, ranting “fuck fuck fuck”—an hysterical mantra. Suitcase gone. Money gone. Dignity gone. Enter Molly Abrams with her arms full of nonthreatening stuff—notebook, binder—a pile she drops upon catching Nomi in the act of her violent faux pas, attacking her parked Honda. Molly peels Nomi off the car, casino lights flashing across their faces. The two women smack each other, hit

*hard*, make this catfight look like the real deal. Suddenly, Nomi hurls—fake barf hits the ground with force; Molly is appalled. Nomi, resisting the hand of this new friend, breaks away, darts into on-coming traffic, runs in the direction of the Riviera Casino. Molly pulls Nomi to safety, hugs her intensely. Then she spends her own money on two ginormous sodas and a basket of fries at a nearby fast food place, a faux McDonald’s with outdoor seating, decorated with cheesy Halloween stuff.

Molly launches questions: *Any family?* “No.” *What was in your suitcase?* “All my stuff.” *Where you from?* “Different places.” She offers Nomi a place to stay. “Are you hitting on me?” An emphatic *no*. All the while Nomi is shaking a ketchup bottle in faux rage—its contents splatter into the air, all over the table and floor. Her new friend waits patiently for the histrionics to subside, then asks if she’s got any money, and cautiously checks, “You’re not a hooker, are you?” Nomi, backlit by red casino

neon, smiles sheepishly, signals “no.” Abandoned in a casino, all her stuff stolen an hour or so before, moneyless, Nomi herself is surprised at the low she’s hit. The question remains: Is this understanding black girl a true friend, or an evil faux?

## It's the Show, Girl!

“This next scene brings up a couple more important *Showgirls* motifs,” says David Schmader in his commentary to the film, which is titled “The Greatest Movie Ever Made,” available on the DVD (V.I.P. Edition). “Joe Eszterhas somehow got the idea that when women are alone, all they do is eat [potato] chips and talk about their nails.” The discussion of nails is sometimes expanded to dresses and breasts,

he adds, and chip talk occasionally includes burritos and fajitas. Breasts, though, seem to reign supreme in this extravaganza called *Showgirls*. We get a long shot of Molly outside her trailer, inside Nomi is doing her nails. It's six weeks after their turbulent meeting. When you're obsessed with a film, it's reassuring to know there's another queen who worships these women as much as you do—David Schmader had me at the beginning of the DVD

when he paused to coo “Hi Nomi!” mid-sentence as he explained how the DVD commentary fell to him (it certainly wasn't because he was addicted to breasts, but rather by way of the screenings he'd hosted in Seattle for men and women [but mostly Gays] who were drawn to the movie). He'd sit at a desk as *Showgirls* played behind him on the screen and give a little lecture about why the film is “the most misunderstood work of art of the twentieth century.” Nomi's nails

in close-up: a harlequin pattern of purple and pink, silver lines. Her nails a metonym, Nomi's attempt to paint herself as “comic servant” (*this ain't the DVD commentary talkin'—it's me baby, Jeffery, remember?*) with the gaudy film of cheap polish, a ruse to hide threat: They can scratch, hurt. Molly's breasts are encased in a shiny black bra as she coaxes Nomi to play assistant Showgirl Costume Seamstress, and accompany her to work. The two women

tickle fight, then leave the shabby trailer, go to a place where naked women are running amok: backstage at the Stardust. Our sagacious commentator nails one of the biggest mysteries in the storyline: the garlic-eating monkey act in *Showgirls*. He lets us in on something that he uncovered in the working script (which the DVD's special feature, “A Showgirls Diary,” gives us a glimpse of)—besides lots of bare breasts, Paul Verhoeven intended for the garlic-eating monkeys to be a great menace in the film,

but that thread, like quite a few others, was, sadly, lost in the final cut of the film. Costumers, stage hands, technicians, choreographers, and blonde-wigged women wearing skimpy gold lamé loincloth dresses scamper around a bare-breasted harridan flinging her “G.” Though Nomi is only there to show off her nails, she too is caught up in the excitement of showtime. One reason I adore DVDs: you can instantly re-watch something again and again: our aspiring showgirl

mimicking the moves of the showgirls on stage by flailing her hands. One of the film's sublime catastrophes is “Goddess”—a highlight of the DVD: a topless woman emerges from a fiery volcano, nipples erect as nails, caressing her gold-glittered breasts.

## Cristal Magic

*If popping out of that papier mâché volcano weren't bad enough, now I've got to wade through this sewer of insipid dialogue! "We could have brought anyone into this show, La Toya, Suzanne—" Yeah right, even if this movie were remotely grounded in reality, not even a B-star like Suzanne Summers would agree to "Goddess." My character*

*is supposedly famous for being a topless dancer! A character only Joe Eszterhas could dream up. And this nauseatingly bad white feather peignoir I have to wear—like a real star would be caught dead! More "blah blah blah" by this insipid guy they hired to play the head of the hotel—a less interesting movie actor version of Bewitched's Larry Tate. "—we wanted Cristal for this show.*

*Cristal Connors defines what Las Vegas is all about." Show me the money is all I gotta say. I'm not just some dumb-ass character actress—I'm the only person in this piece of shit who knows what movie she's actually in! I'm Gina Gershon. I've got talent, for God's sake. I'm a bad-ass rocker chick! I didn't go to Beverly Hills High to end up in an insipid film like this. Oy—Kyle MacLachlan as Zack—and he used to be a legit star.*

*I love how they think the international press would show up for a "star" like Cristal Connors—hilarious! Wait—line: "It's the best show I've ever been in, I only hope I can do it justice." Truly insipid. Oh, this is choice, Kyle/Zack gives me flowers, and my character is supposed to make eyes at him—yuk!—he's got that totally bad hair! Now off to the dressing room for a pivotal moment in the movie—*

*a scene ripped right out of All About Eve (a truly great movie): ingénue (Nomi/Eve) is ushered in to meet established star (Cristal/Margo) and the older woman feels "affection" for the younger (but in bad redo, it's overt lesbian lust) and I (Cristal) can't wait to get my show-girl costume off to expose and talk about my breasts with the other characters by remarking on my nipples—how they "press" and "levitate"—you know, insipid*

*shit like that. Poor Elizabeth Berkley, wearing that tragically insipid red fringe dress—she's as hopeful as Patty Duke was landing her first adult movie role in Valley of the Dolls. To be honest, Gina Ravera who plays the Molly character is pretty good. But Miss Berkley really believes "Nomi" will catapult her to stardom. After I see her in mirror, I look at my own face, apply the Margo-esque, après-show greasepaint, rattle off "If it's at the Cheetah, it ain't dancin'" and watch the bad*

*acting ensue. Take her "You don't know shit!" in stride, then, to go from bad to insipid, I show my interest by asking Molly about Nomi's nails. This here Paul Verhoeven movie sucks, but there's no denying I've got star quality, even playing this lame character.*

## She Can Dance

The first glimpse of Nomi in motion  
severs any slim connection to reality  
that *Showgirls* may have had for the viewer  
up to this point in the film. As the camera  
floats high above the dancing  
crowd at the Crave Club, Nomi is revealed

at the center of the throng, revealed  
to be a monster, a lunatic in motion  
(cross reference Elaine's clueless "dancing"  
in *Seinfeld*—although that was never meant to mirror reality).  
Nomi moves as spastically as a rag doll in a hurricane. The camera  
closes in on the frenzy, providing the viewer

with insight as to what all the fuss is about: a view  
of Nomi's kinetic art intended to reveal  
her intense passion (though caught in the eye of the camera,  
she looks more like a candidate for Thorazine). The motion  
she generates seems to eradicate all sense of reality  
for onlookers. Bouncer #1: "She can dance,

can't she." Wannabe choreographer James: "I'm gonna go dance  
with her." He sets aside his beer, then moves into Nomi's view.  
They begin to gyrate wildly to the music—until he shatters Nomi's reality  
by saying she *can't* dance, that she's just "teasing [his] dick." Nomi reveals  
her outrage by coolly kicking him in the nuts, setting into motion  
a full-on, dance floor brawl. As James stumbles backwards, the camera

follows him into the morass of extras (whose only camera  
time tragically immortalizes them as night club dancers  
who might as well be from another planet, whose motion  
on film defies any known dance or music genre). Nomi views  
the chaos she's ignited with pleasure, revealing  
a sly smile as she turns to leave the scene. But reality

hits when she's grabbed by bouncers and pegged as the real  
cause of the trouble. Cut to Nomi in prison cell. What the camera  
doesn't show (something that an early working-script reveals)  
is Nomi's vicious catfight with a fellow inmate—our dancer  
was to fend off the advances of "a big Black lesbian" in full view  
of all by clawing her face. (An excision of Nomi's nails in motion.)

James puts into motion Nomi's release from jail, bucking reality  
by posting her bail. By now the viewer is convinced that the camera  
can't lie: this girl's a train wreck—just as her so-called dancing reveals.

## Cheetah's House Rules

*an interview with Rena Riffel, April 2008*

*Is it safe to say your most famous role is as an aspiring buxom blonde stripper in Showgirls?* “Yeah, well, most people saw that movie cuz it’s really, like, controversial, but I’ve done lots of TV stuff too, like *Dante’s Cove*—I was one of the stars in that.” *Your character in Showgirls was named Hope—*

*getting a part in a Verhoeven film, did you hope that would be your big break?* “Well, I knew it was a great role when I first read the script, but I kinda wanted to be one of the stars, you know, the Gina Gershon part. I didn’t want to be just a stripper, I wanted to be Cristal Connors, but I didn’t get it.” *It seems a lot of your TV work has been portraying similar types of characters, and your movie*

*work too.* “Uh huh, I played topless dancer Tiffany in the movie *Striptease* with Demi Moore the year after I played Hope in *Showgirls*, and like a year after that film I was on TV on the show *Married With Children*, doing a role as, what was my name? I forgot. Just ‘Stripper #1’ I guess.” *Over the past ten years or so you’ve starred*

*in a series of popular European films—*“Yes I have. I’m a big star in Australia. They are, you know, like women-in-prison movies sort of, and in them I get to be more than just a dumb blonde stripper—people say that’s how I come off in real life, but I hope that’s not all they think, cuz I like doing these strong, meaty female roles, you know like when I was Pussy Magnifico on a TV

show called *Strip Mall*, or when I was ‘Second Masseuse’ on the TV show *Clueless*. I love doing comedy, too. And it’s harder to star in serious stuff, cuz like when I take a tough dramatic film role I have to think of people I know, like my aunt, and draw from her. Movies are hard. Like in *Showgirls*, that first scene I played as Hope backstage at the Cheetah Club—I like totally had to learn about strippers’

real lives and all the rules they have at work, like taking a stripper name (my character’s real name in *Showgirls* is Penny). TV parts you don’t have to study for as much. My character Hope has to learn about doing lap dances, blowing the boss, and starring in a lesbian dance duet with another girl, all in like one night. In the movie I also had to learn to trust ‘Mama’—‘Henrietta Bazoom’—a really fun role—

*a mother-figure to all us girls.” So after so many great roles, mostly as strippers, what’s next for your acting career? What’s your future look like in movies and TV?* “I’d like to be a Goldie Hawn-type star. I have the looks. And talent. I hope.”

## Cheetah's House Rules (2)

They get naked and talk about it: "Nomi, do my boobs look any bigger to you?" They get personal: "Girl, did you miss your period *again*?" They put on make-up beneath a red neon sign (AL'S GIRLS). To their mother figure—overweight, aging Henrietta Bazoom—they yell out "Hey Mama!" when she comes backstage, slap the back of her trashy purple velour dress

to get her "tits pumping" (the nuances of this "surprise" dress: armpit-activated inflatable sacks and trip wires, so that boobs can be exposed with a squeeze of the arms when she stands onstage to do her comedy routine). Carmi wonders aloud whether she's had her period this month. The strippers carry on, hoot and holler, and high-five Henrietta but they stop all the nonsense in a flash when boss man Al

enters the room with a new stripper. They're sarcastic when Al introduces her as "Hope," stand at attention in the dressing room, try to keep straight faces. Boisterous Henrietta drinks right from a bottle of Jack Daniel's, and the freshest set of boobs informs all her name is Penny, not Hope. Al snaps: "It's Hope. Period. They don't wanna fuck a Penny, dumb dumb." When Mama goes onstage,

her girls wish her luck, look on from the wings as she takes center stage, twirls around, rubs her ass (made sore by a swift whack from Al), and begins her act—a warm-up to the stripping, a prolonged period of vulgar one-liners and banter. A drunk patron screams out, "Pull your dress up!" Squeezing and honking her "peek-a-booing" boobs to riotous effect, "Queen of Bazooms" Henrietta

quips, "You'd never even find the thing under all these rolls of Henrietta fat! I'd have to piss on you to give you a clue!" She's perfected her stage show: wisecracks and flashes of her bizarre-looking boobs. The girls keep hushed as temperamental, ruddy-looking Al wreaks havoc, cornering Nomi in the dressing room: "Where the hell were you last night?" Her reply: "Having my period.

You wouldn't want me to get blood all over the place cuz of my period, would you?" Nomi helps Hope blend her lip gloss while Henrietta performs, but she moves aside when the boss crosses the dressing room to explain lap dancing to Hope, tells her what to do if she's offstage and a guy takes it out and comes all over her. "Call the bouncer," Al says, "unless he gives you a big tip, then it's O.K." Nomi listens nearby, boobs

encased in black bra, as bare-boobed girls come and go, talking of periods, their next number, pimping owner Al and surrogate "mom" Henrietta. Backstage abuzz with wayward strippers in various states of undress.

## Is It Dancing?

You wonder what you're doing here; you can't believe Cristal wanted to bring you and the others to see some girl named Nomi. *Christ, you think, we're "winning and dining" the hotel's high rollers at a strip Club?* Then you remember they're Japanese and chill a bit—the Cheetah, yeah, they might like it. You're *so high*. You think: *I'm the Entertainment Director of the goddamn Stardust!* You're convinced you'll get V.I.P. treatment inside. Lick

your top teeth and gums again and again. You're a little grossed out—she licked your nostril to clean off some stray powder—you struggle with a chick like Cristal, she's a little intense. *But after all, I'm Zack Carey, the Entertainment Director of a Vegas hotel—I gotta have a hot girl.* You're curious who this Nomi is, the one she talked about in the limo: *Will she fuck me? She works at the Cheetah, and one thing I know for sure: She's not a dancer, she's a stripper.*

You're a party animal—you wear your sunglasses at night, even into a strip club, yeah, you've got the coolest babe—the star of a Vegas hotel show licking awesome coke off your face; you're so hip—*hell yes I go to dives like the Cheetah!* Tomorrow you'll retell the night's adventures to a rapt coterie. *Cristal is so cool, you're so lucky, dude.* And maybe you'll have something to tell about Nomi. You pull the strap of Cristal's sexy mesh dress as she walks directly

in front of you into the seedy club. She turns and you pull her directly into your chest, but she pushes you away, not the response you want. No strippers on stage, but a fat lady, telling the crowd her hole is making money. *Not Nomi,* you think. Your assistant Phil gets tables; the Japanese high rollers are licking their lips, desperate for some action. You sit near them, with Cristal at your side. *Yeah, all eyes are on me, you gloat, everyone at the Cheetah*

*is staring—I'm with the finest woman in the club.* "Ladies and gentlemen, the Cheetah proudly presents the girl to tickle your pickle: Heather!" A blonde struts out directly to center stage just as you peel off your sunglasses and light a long cigarette for Cristal. The blonde spins, kicks her leg up impossibly high, tosses her golden curls, strips off her red lace top. *Shit, this girl can dance, you think, and she just licked the pole, staring right at me! So fucking hot.* You start to wonder about this Heather,

this hottie, what she's like in bed, thrusting and bending like rubber: *Heather, yeah, you like that name, a stripper, the hottest dancer at the Cheetah showing off her perfect tits, come to daddy,* standing against the pole, licking her fingers, sliding them down into her black lace panties, looking directly at you. She bends over in her pumps, tugs at her undies, and strips them off. "Do you like her? I'll buy her for you." Did Cristal

just say what you think she said? *What is it with Cristal—is she into this Heather?* You worry for a sec about getting it up with a stripper in the backroom of the Cheetah: *a lap dance?* Cristal turns in your direction, gives your nostril another wet, messy lick.

## Lap Dancer's Delight

*excerpt from Showgirls: Portrait of a Film, text by Paul Verhoeven*

Normally, when I make a movie, I make detailed drawings of each scene of the script in sequence and indicate how to edit the shots together. *Showgirls* was rushed into production, but I knew the sets I would be working on, where I would place the actors, where Nomi would be for the camera to best focus on her body, especially her breasts. This would prove to be imperative for the success of scenes 34-36—

the lap dance Nomi refuses to do (until the club manager overhears the \$500 fee being offered and forces her to do it). I didn't have time to prepare storyboards in advance, but I thought through every detail—how Nomi would touch her vagina, for instance—mapping out (in the margins of my script) each frame of these scenes. There's a complex power play between Nomi (aka Heather) and Cristal as Cristal humiliates her: puckering her lips as Nomi strips on stage,

“renting” her for a private dance when Nomi roams the main room of the club in her nightie. Nomi's attempt to thwart Cristal's plan (“One at a time, no women—sorry, that's the rules”) is foiled by Al who simply says, “Done.” For the actual lap dance in the backroom, I sketched out every movement of the primary characters, every camera angle, each position of the extras, even how Nomi would gesture with her hand

as she tells Cristal and Zack where to sit once they're inside, also how her face would express her rising sense of power in the domain of the private lounge. The camera follows Cristal crossing the room, allowing for a new perspective of the activity in the club below, which is visible through the two large windows outlined with white lights. I produced a lengthy cartoon strip of Nomi's seductive dance: Nomi (standing) faces away from Zack

and bends over, looks back at him from between her legs as Cristal looks on and does a bump of coke—greedily dipping the nail of her right pinky into a ring (filled with blow) on her other hand. I also created a visual diary by putting a graphic image next to each directive for the backroom action—everything from when Nomi puts her head on Zack's knees (fig. #9) to when she pushes his legs apart, approaches like a leopard, positioning

her face in front of his (fig. #13)—clearly outlining and showing the steps for this elaborate “dance.” The spying, aspiring choreographer James Smith watches from the vestibule, from behind a beaded curtain, as the three-some inside delves into Nomi's powerful sexuality. Nomi climbs onto Zack's lap, thrusting and grinding hard, then rears back (James looks on from the doorway, then the bouncer sends him away), and agitates her body wildly (there's no diagram

for this particular move in my storyboarded script, the flailing action in these frames of the backroom lap dance was entirely improvised by Elizabeth Berkley [Nomi], but I specified her intense eye contact with Zack—when he comes in his pants [fig#14]).

## The Dress She Wants

Cut to Nomi on a park bench in contemplative pose, donned in a pair of Daisy Dukes, cowboy boots, and a purple, low-cut lace top (tied up to expose her belly). Behind her: a large black glass pyramid and Vegas rendition of The Great Sphinx. Dress-maker Molly bops up, says “Boo,” the two kiss, and head for the mall, where Nomi’s eyes will glue to the window of an expensive shop,

and she’ll coo, “I like that,” tapping her nails twice on the shop’s gleaming display case. “I can make that,” announces Molly, donning a white Panama hat, attempting to pull Nomi toward the mall’s fabric store. Nomi resists, caught up in the moment, and she cuts to the chase: “I wanna buy it. I’ve got the money. I never had a dress like that before. It’ll look great on me, won’t it?” Supportive black

friend Molly confirms: “Yeah.” The two admire the little black dress that adorns a headless mannequin for a beat, then dart into the shop. Nomi throws open the red velvet curtains of the dressing room, pops out and struts over to a large, four-panel mirror. She dons the short, sophisticated shift like she was born in it. A saleswoman cuts across the room: “It looks quite good on you” (her tone haughty for a mall).

Molly (appropriating a Nomi-ism) quips, “It doesn’t suck,” and into the mall the two women skip like giddy girls; Nomi twirls around with the black Gianni Versace bag slung over one shoulder. [Scarlett O’Hara cuts up the parlor’s window treatments to make a gown she can’t afford to buy in a shop, defies Mammy and rides into town; she sashays into the jail having donned the thick green velvet curtains to ask Rhett Butler for a loan.] [The dress

Carrie makes for the prom is pink (“I shoulda known it’d be red”), a dress envied by all, until it’s drenched by a bucket of pig’s blood.] [Eve mauls Margo Channing’s “Bo Peep” costume for *Aged In Wood*, and dons the dress by pressing it flatly against her bosom and hand-me-down black suit, admiring herself in the mirror backstage.] [Pretty woman Vivian Ward shops for a dress at a swanky Rodeo Drive boutique, but the saleswomen won’t cut

a hooker any slack, and they ask her to leave.] [Working girl Tess McGill cuts out of a cocktail party early to avoid being caught in the sparkly new cocktail dress she “borrowed” from boss Katharine Parker’s closet.] Outside the shop, Molly suggests they celebrate with a burrito or some fajitas, but Nomi pushes the mall exit door open, says she has to work. Molly screams upon seeing the black letters of a poster, “COMING TO LAS VEGAS,” and the picture of a guy donned

in a white shirt: Andrew Carver! Nomi dreams of donning the Versace design, cut and stitched to perfection, black with gold trim, a stripper-turned-Cinderella dress, bought at a mall with money from a lap dance, the most beautiful frock in the shop.

## Stardust Material

This scene is rather innocuous, but I guess straight guys and lesbians might find it titillating: Heather (aka Nomi) and Hope's naked pole dance. Two additional strippers emerge and begin to French kiss as Nomi pulls Hope across the stage by the hair—a move that's prescient of the S&M number in "Goddess": Cristal leading Nomi by leash from the Stardust stage. I think these are the kinds of images that feminists objected to when *Showgirls*

was released in 1995. How anyone could possibly be offended by *Showgirls* is beyond me, but I have to say that as a "lesbro" I've known a lot of lesbians in my day, and none of them ever bumped and grinded nude on a pole, though I watched a recent episode of Bravo's *Work Out* and saw Jackie Warner's trainers dance aboard an all-female cruise as a throng of drunken ladies, hoping for some T&A, pawed at them. Last month I bought the DVD of *Striptease*. A number

of reasons: it was released a year after Verhoeven's mess; it's full of bad strip numbers; it's also amusing to compare its star Demi Moore to Elizabeth Berkley in *Showgirls*. Demi is bad, I contend, but not in a good way, which is sad. Rena Riffel (aka Hope) is in *Striptease* too, as "Tiffany" (cast in another dumb stripper role—sans lesbian duet, though). It's a tedious movie, with one noted instance of hilarity: Demi dancing in front of a full-length mirror at home in her underwear, practicing what I'm

pretty sure is an unsexy routine—her Tom Cruise *Risky Business* moment? Demi, I'm sorry—I laughed out loud, hit rewind and laughed harder. There were also a number of times when I chucked old socks at my little screen in bored disgust. If the dancing wasn't horrific enough, there's the "single mom as stand-up gal" plot—even *Showgirls* doesn't stoop to that (well, a little—Julie does play lioness to her kids when lesbian-tough Annie curses and threatens them in the Stardust dressing room). I hope

to unload it in on eBay. Anyway, after their naked dry-hump, Nomi and Hope exit the stage, each pulling up a pair of red lace panties as they walk—by accident I just discovered if you press pause right before they descend the stairs (lesbians should take note) you can see their bare vaginas in close-up! (That's doing a number on my head at the moment.) O.K., Phil from the Stardust has come to scout showgirls and grabs Nomi's arm on her way back to the dressing room. Our dancer

doesn't take any shit, snaps "Fuck off!" He woos her: "When I saw you dance, I thought yes," tells her there's a spot open in the chorus, that he hopes she'll try out. Nomi eyes the "Goddess" card he puts in her hand—her showgirl dream flashes like neon across her face. No matter how many times I watch this scene, I love to study Nomi's expression as she gets this guy's proverbial number: "She sent you, didn't she?" A complete crash and burn as she realizes that her lesbian

admirer—lesbian lech, for that matter—has more to do with the audition than dancing skill. But Nomi's unsinkable hope wins out, and she begrudgingly takes the number. A drunk slurs, "I wanna see your ass!" at Nomi — a quintessential coda in *Showgirls*.

## Audition: Impossible

According to the trivia track on the V.I.P. Edition DVD of *Showgirls*, Elizabeth Berkley showed up at one of the call-back auditions for the coveted role of Nomi wearing a long coat and nothing else (which explains how this TV star landed the lead in a Paul Verhoeven-directed, Joe Eszterhas-written, big-budget movie, even though she had no real experience or cachet). Dance training for the routines began months before casting was finished; other girls

in the film would later report that Miss Berkley was “a much nicer girl” after she secured the part. Wikipedia page: a character was created for Elizabeth by producers of *Saved by the Bell* (Jessie Spano: a brainiac with talent for dancing) because her “personality” really impressed them during her audition for the role of Kelly Kapowski. Gina Gershon (quoted in Joe Eszterhas’s bio): “It was no big secret that Elizabeth was blowing Paul [Verhoeven] on the [*Showgirls*] set.” TV’s

*Step It Up and Dance* aired on Bravo in 2008 as a season-long, weekly televised “audition show” for aspiring dancers. The concept: guys and gals come from all over to compete for \$100,000, the notice of producers and big time choreographers, as well as the approval of the show’s “hostess”—Elizabeth Berkley (who, it turns out, is unwilling to talk or joke about her infamous role in *Showgirls* with the young wannabes, so viewers, who never see her dance

on the show, must infer osmotically that this doe-eyed chick *can* really dance; in the first episode, a few of the gayer contestants gasp audibly for the TV cameras when she walks onto the set and it’s announced that *she* has the role of host/mentor/den mother—but they’re admonished like naughty little girls when they flail their hands back and forth in front of their faces à la Elizabeth as Nomi in *Showgirls*). The Internet Movie Database reveals that E.B.’s biggest

disappointment in life is her failed audition for the Rachel role in *Friends*. A big mystery to one “gossip blogger”: how did Miss Berkley metaphorically dance her way into a key role on *CSI: Miami* during the writers’ strike? Elizabeth, apparently, “made the audition happen,” despite the fact all of Hollywood’s TV and film crews were out of work and picketing the studios. As a young girl (as per *CelebrityWonder.com*), Elizabeth Berkley auditioned for the lead role

in the 1982 film *Annie* but was passed over because she was too tall for the role. In the end, little Miss Aileen Quinn got both the part *and* the movie’s biggest nod: her performance was singled out, even above the adult actors. The girl “won” a Golden Raspberry Award (Razzie) for supporting actress. Her dancing, singing, and acting were “dishonored as the worst” (apparently her 1981 TV portrayal of the unsinkable orphan didn’t help hone her art, just as Elizabeth’s

stint as Jessie Spano didn’t help her). Elizabeth got a Razzie for her first film role as Nomi (Worst New Star), and though the Razzies are not televised, the biggest moment of the night: she “won” twice (Worst Actress) for her dancing showgirl!

## Audition: Impossible (2)

Wide-eyed, Nomi steps onto the Stardust stage: her big audition, a chance to be a (scare quotes optional) legitimate dancer in a hotel show, the opportunity of a lifetime: to be in “Goddess.” There is a line of girls warming up and stretching, ready to go, hungry for fame, dying to be part of a Tony Moss show. Nomi stands frozen, awed by the lights, the room. “Hey, Pollyanna.”

Nomi (on guard): “What did you call me?” “I said you look like Pollyanna.” Tony Moss, the big prick producer, has entered to size up the auditioning girls. Nomi realizes that her outfit is dowdy, that she’s got to show more skin, so she darts offstage to yank down her top, exposes her dance bra, brushes some powder on her cheeks, rushes back to the line stretched across the stage—a line of hopefuls desperate for a chance to be in “Goddess,”

priming and preening like show poodles for the judge, the god of “Goddess,” Tony Moss. Nomi toughens up, shrugs off every last ounce of Pollyannaism. Mr. Moss slashes and burns his way down the line, stretches limits of constructive criticism with remarks inappropriate even for this audition: “Get a load of *these* watermelons,” he says, gesturing at the breasts of one dancer. “They belong in a patch, *not* a stage. See ya!” He’s got one interest—the show.

And he warns the hoofers that he can’t use them if they can’t “show.” One girl rattles off the classes she’s taken. “This show’s called ‘Goddess,’ not ‘Classes.’” Out. “You look familiar,” he says to one dancer. “Yes, Mr. Moss, I auditioned for you in January,” with a huge Pollyanna smile, “you told me to get my nose fixed.” The youngest auditionee is told to come back when she’s fucked some of her baby fat off; he stretches

her cheek blubber, then motions for her to leave. Nomi stands, neck stretched long, at the end of the line, and banters with Tony Moss; he promises to show her just how much of a prick he can be. Choreographer Gay takes the audition from there, runs the girls through the routine, one segment of a “Goddess” number. Nomi shines, of course, and manages to squelch any Pollyanna tendencies Tony Moss might zero in on. She is chosen as one of the three dancers

to remain on stage, one of three finalists, one of three left for an intense dance-off. Each complies when asked to show her tits; Nomi, left in tightly stretched sheer leggings after removing her bra, reveals “very nice” boobs (no Pollyanna would do *this*). Tony Moss tells her to tweak her nipples; meanwhile, the show’s star, Miss Cristal Connors, walks into the theater like the lesbian/bi goddess she is, watches Nomi ice her nipples (to get them erect), which turns the audition

ugly: Nomi throws the bowl of ice, storms off. Her audition for a dancer spot in the chorus over. “Goddess” star Cristal slinks backstage, stretches out next to Nomi, passes a Kleenex to this single-sniffle Pollyanna.

## Training Ground

Nomi slouches out of the Stardust after her botched audition, one hand dramatically on forehead (such bad acting is rarely seen in film). The Crave Club bouncer, the guy she kicked in the nuts, James (who later bailed her out of jail), is now a hotel valet, sees her: “Hey.” (Watch closely: the camera catches a blonde woman in a wheelchair rolling past—right between a life-size cutout of Cristal, and Nomi

exiting the hotel—a bit of Verhoeven foreshadowing mastered in his pre-Nomi Dutch film *The 4th Man*, the last thing he directed in Europe before being handed his Hollywood career. Prequel to *Basic Instinct*: an oversexed, vicious woman hell-bent on brutally killing men, does so without getting caught, and also films each murder on her handy camcorder; a movie laden with omens seen in the hallucinatory mind of the protagonist, Gerard, an alcoholic novelist.) James

comforts Nomi: at least what she does is honest. (Flashback: James, after stalking her into the trailer park, raps on the tinny door, assaults Nomi with “Dancin’ ain’t fuckin’,” admits to following her at the Cheetah, seeing her “fuck that guy with the chick,” & spits, “everyone’s got AIDS and shit,” backhands her with, “You fuck ‘em without fuckin’ ‘em and it ain’t right!” In that scene of the film he revealed his all-important opinion: *She burns when she dances*. Women,

apparently, or at least aspiring showgirls, *love* to hear that.) Nomi, a woman desperate for the approval of this Alvin Ailey-trained dancer, accepts James’s offer to grab a bite. CAMERA IN BACKSEAT OF CONVERTIBLE FILMING: the two peel down a Vegas back alley, music blaring, carnivorous Nomi chomping a hamburger like a cow. (Perhaps the beef blood streaming down her hands while shooting this scene appalled, then converted Miss Berkley. She was seen

a couple years later [1997] on a PETA poster promoting vegetarianism [see <http://www.peta.org/pdfs/berkleyveg.pdf>], donned in a \$600, womanly form-fitting gown made entirely of collard greens.) When his hand moves the gear shift lever into park and the music stops, James announces they’re at his place (a standard-issue *Flashdance* loft) and invites Nomi inside. (Jennifer Beals, who starred in that 1983 Joe Eszterhas-written film,

is today Elizabeth Berkley’s best friend. If the two had been close during the filming of *Showgirls*, Beals might’ve been at Elizabeth’s side during daily rushes to see the “artistic” dancing in this scene—which looks suspiciously like Nomi’s strip number at the Cheetah—and might’ve given her dear woman friend some tips from her old *Flashdance* repertoire.) In no time at all, James teaches Nomi the routine (she watches once [“Wait. Like this?”], then twirls her hands).

As the two begin to make out, James slides his hand into Nomi’s tights (the film’s grossest moment), checks to confirm whether or not she’s on her period, sees her “woman blood” on his fingertips. Undaunted, he still wants *she who burns*: Nomi.

## Movin' On Up

There's so much I want to say about the next few scenes but don't know where to start, or what to focus on, like, I want to do a whole "movin' on up" trope, you know, females in movies starting their climb, getting their first break: Peggy Sawyer in *42nd Street* lucking into a chorus spot; Terry Randall in *Stage Door* being offered a lead role on Broadway

because her millionaire father secretly financed the play (she nails her big line, "The calla lilies are in bloom," garners keen reviews for her performance); Eve Harrington fought dirty-handedly to become Margo Channing's understudy and fawns all over the star when her cover is blown, allowing the diva to *really* know *all about Eve*; Neely O'Hara, pre-dope-

and-booze, appears on a telethon, begins her ascent up the steep slope of Mount Everest toward the *Valley of the Dolls*. I could go on all day with this, but I also want to mention that dance song "Movin' On Up" by People M— the one some deep-voiced woman sings (rather screams)—popular a few years ago. I looked on Google to find the artist: typed in the lyrics and first got

the theme song to *The Jeffersons*, which brought to mind: Nomi's best friends early on, the two who help her cope with her sundry trials and tribulations, are ebon. Seamstress Molly and choreographer James are worth noting in this way because they're members of Nomi's class; they're on an equal footing with the blonde stripper, but their ties weaken as Nomi starts movin'

on up the beglittered Stardust ladder. Nomi interrupts a love-in between James and bimbo Hope (aka Penny). A fraught moment: Nomi shames James ("Dancin' ain't fuckin', right?") for giving her part in the dance number to Hope (recalling another trope in American cinema—the *talentless* climber, the Phoebe! [see essay in verse, *Phoebe 2002*, by Trinidad, Crosbie, and yours truly]). Upon

getting a slot in "Goddess," Nomi returns to quit her now bygone Cheetah stripper job. My boyfriend Wally wanted me to talk about Mama Rose in the movie *Gypsy* and how Henrietta "Mama" Bazoom is a total Mama Rose manqué. When Nomi shows up to clear out her stuff, Mama is completely distraught at the news, yells out, "I got bigger tits than the Virgin Mary!"—tries to cope with the loss of her favorite. Oh, and what about Nomi's convulsive overacting

in this scene, yanking her garments out of the dressing room closet like she's on crack. (A Nomi trope: Complete and utter excess.) And didn't Joan Crawford get her first chorus spot by sleeping with the producer of some show on Broadway?

*“It’s a Ver-sayce”  
Reflections on Nomi*

Receptionist:

*Filing, answering phones—total bore—gotta find another job.  
Putting Christmas decorations up yesterday—sorta fun. Look  
at this girl comin’ in—make-up much?— they hired  
HER to replace sweet Drew in the chorus? So many dancing psychos in Vegas.  
“O.K., go right in.” I should revive my Marilyn Monroe impersonation act—  
if Nomi Malone can be a showgirl, why not? But I like her dress. Versace?*

Tony Moss:

*Wow, one minute she looks like Pollyanna, and now, Lolita. Did she just say “Ver-sayce”  
when I told her it’s a nice dress? Christ, an illiterate in MY hotel show. The job  
is hers though—Cristal wanted her in the chorus. Another act  
of lesbian solidarity I guess. “Oh yeah, I love Ver-sayce, too.” (Let me look  
at Gay and Marty to see if they bust up.) God, the quality of the Las Vegas  
showgirl is tanking. I should direct a Broadway musical. I wonder if anyone’s hiring?*

Marty:

*I know I’m just the choreographer, but shouldn’t I have some say in hiring?  
This hotel is so homophobic. And sweet Jesus, she didn’t just say “Ver-sayce”—  
where do they get this trailer trash? I miss Drew. I wonder if they put her in a Vegas  
nuthouse—maybe I should try and find out. She did, after all, get me this job.  
“Nomi, we’ll do a run-through this afternoon.” I can tell by her looks  
that she ain’t got no dance experience. Oh Lordess. And that Pollyanna act!*

Gay:

*That’s right, you better follow after me and listen to everything I say, or at least act  
like you’re listening—I’m the friggin’ Line Coach, missy—THEY might have hired  
you, but I can get you fired, you little bitch, trying to look  
all sophisticated in your designer dress—which is pronounced Versace, not “Ver-sayce.”  
I can’t believe Molly didn’t correct her—you’d think a girl with a seamstress job,  
who goes to fashion school, would know better. Only in Vegas.*

Personnel Secretary:

*Oy vey Dios mio. They get younger and younger every year in Las Vegas.  
“Date of birth.” 1973? Just a kid, being taken advantage of. An act  
of exploitation. Gee, she’s having trouble answering these routine questions on the job  
application. Poor thing—no family! All deceased. How sad. I wonder if that’s why they hired  
her—maybe they felt sorry. That’s sure an expensive dress she’s got on—Gianni Versace,  
I think. Wonder where the little lamb got the money for that? Smart look.*

Phil Newkirk:

*It's Heather, I mean Nomi, from the Cheetah—looks like she snagged the job. "Hey, you got it!" From Vegas stripper to Vegas showgirl in a heartbeat. "Congratulations!" From tassels to Versace. Dumbass Zack has no clue the whole lap dance thing was an act. She never wanted him. She wants ME—I knew the night Cristal hired me to hit the club, tell her about the audition. I'm why she took this job.*

Zack Carey:

*Oh, so this new girl, Nomi, is Heather, my hottie lap dancer. Got a job here just to look into my eyes again. Bet Cristal had no idea this would happen when she hired her, Vegas style (cold hard cash), to make me come. It was no act: She wants me. Great taste, too. Versace.*

Drew, My Pretty Name  
after Lynn Crosbie

*you fucking bitch, Nomi—think you can just take my spot in the show, sit at my table, use the Aqua Net I left behind? not so. Vegas is dangerous, prurient, and I am a showgirl of mystery. by now I'm sure they've told you to never ever go out on stage crying. that's what I did, and now I'm wearing tinted sunglasses, a Versace scarf—you heard me right—VERSACE, not "Ver-sayce" for Christ's sake (you IDIOT!), my wig, stolen from "Goddess," I*

*wore it out the door the night of my last performance, Gay screaming at me as I ducked into my car, "That's property of the hotel!" she's a shrew, but the show must go on, so eat the prescribed brown rice and vegetables, and remember, she's not what she seems—she's bulimic, and a liar. she's had nervous breakdowns, dangerous episodes, ask her about her dentist husband's brains in her hands. she wears Lee Press•On Nails (Active Length). Marty tells me (we're still best friends—you*

*surprised? we used to shoplift together, moved smoothly through the aisles) that you have really nice nails with decals and shit. Momma used to do my nails when I was a kid, paint them lilac, while we waited for Daddy. he was a merchant marine, wore his uniform all the time. I held conch shells to his ears while he slept. he showed me how the sheets billow like sails when he lay on top and pumped into me, how danger and love are really the same. he is the Devil. or was. Momma pleaded "Not*

*guilty" and they bought it. then she killed herself. I wore a mourning veil, and not to be ignored, I sewed starfish over my eyes and slashed my wrists. unlike you, I went to dance school, the Detroit Dance Company, which was in a dangerous neighborhood, so different from Farmington Hills, Michigan, where I grew up. I performed in Swan Lake, landed parts in popular TV shows, like Gimme a Break! what the hell have you done, Nomi? you're just a slut who wears*

*too much make-up and tight clothes. I had talent. weeks in the hospital, without wearing perfume, or receiving candy. I still have no friends. yesterday I went to the rec room, not because I wanted to go, but because they tell you to go. and you do. an old lady did a show, singing "(Won't You Come Home) Bill Bailey" into a Mr. Microphone while people just like you (nuts) drooled and wet themselves, or did nothing at all, never moving, only breathing. I beat myself with my fists, imagined I was somewhere else. not the Stardust, too dangerous—*

*you don't believe me? just wait. awful things happen at night, sick and dangerous things, when the monkeys roam wild in the dressing room without their diapers, wearing nothing but the lipstick one of you might leave out. oh and Nomi, don't toss my postcards, I want them. there are three: one with a picture of a Cape Cod lighthouse, another of a cat—not a cutsie kitty, but a black cat with piercing green eyes. she has on an Elizabethan collar, you probably have no fucking idea what that is and never will. real actors wore them in shows.*

*the third postcard shows an antique house. a doll's house. it is lovely and dangerous, just like you, I'm sure. surely (seething) Gay ripped down the sign that my mirror wears, "Drew," my pretty name. she's just the type to say and do mean things to people. but not I.*

## Practice Run

*a conversation between Patrick Bristow [Marty] and his real-life lover, Andrew Nicastro*

“Andy, help me rehearse my lines again, from the top. Please?”

“Okay, but I think you’re overdoing—it’s just a bit part in a movie.”

“Are you F-ing kidding me? Joe Eszterhas wrote this script!”

“Oh right—Mr. *Flashdance*, Mr. *Basic Instinct*, Mr. ‘High Art.’”

“And Paul Verhoeven is gonna direct—damn it, this is *big*.”

“All right, sorry. Don’t freak, Mary, I mean Marty.”

“Real funny. Let’s see, I walk Nomi onto stage, introduce her. It says Marty goes to the wings, talks with a woman, gestures pointedly toward—oh please, so like, the conversation between my character and that woman, a big chunk of dialogue, is like, an aside? It won’t even be *heard* in the movie? This is bullshit! My agent promised this role would be substantial. ‘Art film, juicy part’ is what he said on the phone. I want a meeting on the script!”

“Calm down, Pat. Don’t do anything you’ll regret. You said this is a great script, chance of a lifetime. You can say good-bye to TV after this—you’ll make Marty the most memorable gay choreographer in film history. You’re an artist! Don’t ever forget it. That’s why I fell in love with you. But please don’t turn into Neely O’Hara before this movie wraps—we need the mulah. And as you said, this role could make you big.”

“I can’t believe I finally found you, love of my life! Big hug. Thanks baby, I’ll make you proud. Now, about the script. You know, it doesn’t say that my character is gay. I mean, in this movie I’m a choreographer for an exciting Las Vegas hotel show: Marty, a no nonsense professional who pushes the dancers, doesn’t try to please anyone, except producer Tony Moss. This character *believes* in dance as art.”

“Um, but it’s *you* in the role! I mean, I get that the character is an artist, all dedicated to the show and shit, but like it’s *you*, and you’re a big queen—I mean I love you and all, but *puleeze!* Remember my film scholar friend, Eric Schaefer? I showed him the script when he was over last week—in his opinion, the Marty character is way, way over the top. Like a character in a later Russ Meyer film,

but without the varnish of self-parody. He said from the looks of it, this film has the potential to be a ‘ludicrous failure.’ The line between schlock and art might blur a bit when *you*, my gay love, as this hardass Marty character, holler ‘Thrust it! Thrust it!’ at Nomi as she arches her big Spandexed hips off the floor during rehearsal. *And* it’s not even noted on your script that the *Saved by the Bell* girl is Nomi. Preposterousville! Don’t be mad, please.”

“Please don’t say another word! I can’t believe you’re trying to ruin this movie for me, Andrew! Eszterhas got a million bucks for this script! Not only is it art, it’s my big break. The name Patrick Bristow will be made by the role of Marty!”