

UNZIPPED

Go behind the velvet curtain of Company XIV.



Photos by John Abbott



Ready for the stage



A twinkling pop of color

According to Wikipedia, “Burlesque is a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects. The word derives from the Italian ‘burlesco,’ which, in turn, is derived from the Italian ‘burla’—a joke, ridicule or mockery.”

In the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, acclaimed troupe Company XIV invites guests to experience the surreal. The performance group’s accomplished artists come wrapped up in glitter, smoke, heels, feathers and some serious stagecraft. The show is bedazzling from tit to tail!

Make-up artist Sarah Cimino took me backstage to see how it all comes together. She answered these questions about her career path and her process for bringing these characters to life.

Ilise Harris: *How did you wind up specializing in theatrical make-up?*

Sarah Cimino: I didn’t set out with the specific goal of becoming a theatrical make-up artist or even a make-up artist at all, but I knew I wanted to work in theater.

In college (Experimental Theatre at NYU) I became interested in mask making. The fresh young college faces of my friends were limited in the stories they could tell, so I started experimenting in making animal masks, aging and grotesque faces. But it wasn’t until the end of college that doing make-up really even occurred to me.

During my semester abroad in Florence I took an Italian opera class, where I saw my very first opera. I saw a production of *Mephistopheles* on VHS; it was highly theatrical, and the singers wore incredible heavy painterly operatic make-up. I realized that they were painting directly on faces much the same way I was doing that with masks. I was just blown away.

It was a truly revelatory moment for me. I met with my adviser and asked her if make-up for opera was too specific a thing to say I wanted to do. She said it wasn’t, but that I should probably enroll in a make-up class and see how it went. I took a two-week make-up program and loved it so much! That was it for me.

IH: *Is burlesque different than cabaret, opera or theater?*

SC: XIV defies categorization. There are influences from many genres: baroque, burlesque, classical ballet, opera, vaudeville, cabaret and circus. But burlesque is definitely a predominant factor in XIV’s movement and costumes. The genre, and XIV in particular, is body positive, gender fluid, sex positive, welcoming and interactive.

Since so much skin is exposed, I don’t do a heavy foundation on the face. It is more beautiful for the skin to have a rawness, freshness, with lots of sheen. Unless I’m creating a look for a specifically heavily made-up character, the foundation is almost transparent. The vibe of the shows is lush and opulent; I want that sensuality to carry through in the make-up. We do a lot of smoky eyes, wine-stained lips, highlights and glosses. Of course, glitter! So much glitter!

IH: *How do you work with the director in developing your characters?*

SC: Most of the conversation about make-up happens with Austin McCormick, the director. I’ve been designing make-up for the company for over 10 years. During the early years, Austin and I would meet with these huge stacks of magazine tear outs; we’d have so many of the same references (almost always from *Italian Vogue*). Now it’s all on Pinterest so I don’t need to carry around all those tear outs! I’m fortunate to work so closely with someone who is as enthusiastic about

make-up as Austin, who considers make-up to be an essential production element.

When a new show is in the works, Austin and Zane (costume and set design) speak with me about the characters, casting and general direction of the world they are creating. A core ensemble will play different roles; then there are a few specialized principal characters.

I start with general research on make-up ideas to share with Austin, and then get his feedback. From here I'll create more specific mood boards, do trials and fittings to test the different ideas that I've imagined in my head. Once I've settled on the final designs, I'll create face charts, order products and make kits for the performers.

IH: *Company XIV's characters are gender fluid. Do you consider this when designing the make-up? It seems the more we try to define things, the murkier the boundaries become. With XIV, is art imitating life? Does burlesque perhaps suggest that gender is a social construct?*

SC: Austin and Zane are inviting the audience into an open, inclusive world that certainly blurs lines of gender. We celebrate the femininity, masculinity and everything in between in everyone. Make-up is a fluid, changeable, ephemeral medium, and I think the perfect tool for exploring and expressing persona and identity. When I'm designing the make-up, performer gender isn't a central consideration. I'm thinking of the color story, face structure, the character and ultimately about creating something harmonious and beautiful.

IH: *The cast does their own make-up. How do you handle that?*

SC: When doing a make-up myself, I improvise and mix together many different colors; it's a looser, more organic process. When designing a look to hand off to someone to do themselves, I need to be really clear about what I'm trying to achieve. I don't want the performers to feel overwhelmed by too many steps or products. The goal is to use the least amount of products while achieving maximum impact. I challenge myself to strip down to the essentials.

I prep on my own. Towards the end of tech, I'll come with the face charts and kits. I do make-up lessons with each performer, supervise dress rehearsals to see how things read under the lights, making sure the performers feel comfortable and confident in the make-up. I'm so lucky with XIV performers because they are so gorgeous, so open and enthusiastic about the make-up. They embrace any crazy idea we might want to try. The joy they bring to it definitely makes the make-up come alive.

IH: *Company XIV has M.A.C. as a sponsor, how does that work?*

SC: M.A.C. has sponsored XIV for many years. I can't say enough about how generous and supportive they are. Each season we get a sponsorship contract with a set number for product allotment. From there I am able to place orders for the products I need to create the looks and the kits. Occasionally I'll pick up supplementary items from other



Members of Company XIV posing



Before the curtain rises

make-up companies, but the majority of what we use and what you see onstage is all M.A.C.

IH: *What are your go-to faves for these productions?*

SC: M.A.C. Strobe Cream! It creates the signature XIV glow. I can't even count how many bottles of Strobe Cream we've gone through. We love the Cream Color Bases—Pearl, Luna and Hush for highlights. Our smoky eye is created with Blacktrack as a base, it has more durability than a pencil. White Paintsticks and Shivering White powder create our baroque detailing. I use Alcone for specialty items like theatrical lashes, applied with dark Duo. I love Lemonhead glitters, so amazing and user friendly.

On working with Company XIV, Cimino says: "I was first drawn to make-up because of its transformative and innate theatricality. I love being able to create a mood and a world for the audience to experience through the make-up, so XIV has been an absolute dream company for me to get to work with." **MA**

Company XIV's Queen of Hearts runs until Aug. 18. For more details on all of Company XIV's productions, visit companyxiv.com.

A wink and a stare



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by ANEST IWATA

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