

Male Strippers

A lifestyle revealed

By Alyson Ward

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On the big screen, Channing Tatum stumbled out of bed, stunned by the morning light. He kissed his hook-up partner (Olivia Munn), and they both peered down at a second woman asleep in his bed, struggling to remember her name.

In a crowded theater on the Katy Freeway, Taylor Cole leaned over in the dark and whispered: "So far, that's me."

Cole, 33, is a dancer for La Bare Houston, the club that has given women thrills for their dollar bills since 1979. And watching the male-stripper flick "Magic Mike," which opens today, Cole saw a pretty good reflection of his own life, one choreographed dance and casual threesome at a time.

We'd wondered whether "Magic Mike" - which stars Tatum, Matthew McConaughey and a strip-club stage full of beefcake - really resembled the real world of dancing for dollars. So we took Cole and two of his La Bare colleagues to a screening of "Magic Mike" and asked them to spill their secrets.

Our sources:

* Cole, 33, who quit a railroad job at 18 to become a dancer. Besides performing five nights a week, he's formed a small company called Construction Specialists.

* Justin Whitfield, 39, who started as a La Bare dancer 15 years ago. In 2005, he opened the End Zone Bar and Grill and now dances just occasionally. He's married and has two daughters, 2 and 4.

* Erik Cap, 40, who started out as a La Bare waiter 22 years ago and is now managing partner. He's the McConaughey character in this flick but without the tendency to sing onstage.

(Those are all stage names, by the way - what they go by at the club. Real names in this industry invite stalking and other trouble.)

These guys aren't trying to convince you that stripping is fine art. They don't insist they be called "dancers" or "entertainers." They're male strippers, and they're fine with that.

"You can't take life too seriously when you dance in your underwear for a living," Whitfield said.

The "Magic Mike" verdict: The La Bare men were stunned at the movie's accuracy. Director Steven Soderbergh, they say, got the look and the lifestyle, the onstage moves and the backstage vibe just right.

We wanted specifics. After all, these guys know the take-it-off, make-it-rain world as well as anybody.

So here's what "Magic Mike" and the men of La Bare have in common:

Those stage acts look pretty familiar

You'll see a lot of dancing (and writhing) in "Magic Mike." Most of it looks pretty familiar, the La Bare men say. Strip-club acts are like folk songs: They get passed from club to club, and it's hard to know where they started.

"It's Raining Men" is brought out early in the movie, with a stage full of men in raincoats who twirl umbrellas as they strip down to their skivvies.

"That's an old act for us," Cap said.

You'll see the standard cowboy shtick. The cop. The firefighter.

"Those are very basic staple acts," Cap said. "They're still strong, but they've been around for so long."

A handful of "Magic Mike's" moves were new - "I've never seen some of those acts," Whitfield said - and some of the dancing was a bit over the top.

"We've seen some great entertainers in our time, some great dancers," Cap said. "But some of those spiral triple flips, turns, geez. ... We don't see that level."

Drinking and dancing go hand in hand

There's barely a scene in "Magic Mike" where somebody's not drinking a beer or downing a cocktail. Can strippers really drink that much and keep their boyish figures?

Yep. But it takes work to look this good.

Strippers all have regular gym routines. They take supplements. They drink more water than you can imagine. And there are some general rules for imbibing.

"If you drink your clear liquors, you'll save calories," Whitfield said. "If you're going to drink liquor, drink clear. If you're going to drink beer, drink light beer. If you drink a mixer, drink diet soda."

Strippers do form relationships with their customers

Not everything happens on the stage. "Magic Mike" doesn't focus on this, but relationships with customers are the lifeblood of any strip club.

There are several levels, of course. First, there's the casual hook-up. "We call them one-moment stands," Whitfield said - impulsive and quick, the encounter's usually over before first names are exchanged.

Then there are the customers who just want to hang around. "They want to be part of the fun, part of the experience," Cap said. "They'll pick you up, take you to go eat, take you to the gym, they'll buy your supplements."

And then there are the regulars, which the guys call "tippers." A tipper is a woman who comes in regularly - maybe a couple of times a week - and focuses on one man.

"You can't make it as a dancer if you don't have a few tippers," Whitfield said. "You won't make enough." If a woman can be counted on to buy one, two, maybe three private dances each visit, "that's an entry-level tipper," he said.

These dances generally run \$30 each and last the length of one song. A good night, Cole says, is earning more than \$300.

Some women are in unhappy relationships, Cap said. More than sexy thrills, they want to spend time with men who'll talk to them - and they're willing to pay for it.

Whitfield kept a tipper for six years that way. "She'd get dances from me," he said, "but for the most part I'd sit there and talk to her." A stripper's role, he said, is "part therapist."

You, too, can be recruited into strip-club stardom

In "Magic Mike," a 19-year-old kid named Adam (Alex Pettyfer) can't keep a job or a football scholarship. But when he gets recruited to work for a strip club, he becomes a star - and finds a life he loves.

That's a hauntingly familiar story to Cole. Fifteen years ago, he was 18 and hated his day job. Whitfield was a guy he knew at the gym.

"He recruited me," Cole said. "It was almost the exact same scenario."

And after 15 years of dancing, travel and the sort of antics we can't write about in the newspaper, Whitfield and Cole decided they had so many stories, they should write a book. They've signed a contract with a publisher - Ellora's Cave, which specializes in erotic romance books - and the book is in editing now. Working title: "Take It Off! Confessions of a Male Stripper."

Stripping isn't always a dead end

"Magic Mike" is about getting sucked into a lifestyle.

"I call it Fantasyland," Whitfield said - that glamorous, bizarre life that happens after midnight. He lived it for several years. But then he got married, had kids, bought his restaurant. He dips into dancing only occasionally now, just to "scratch that itch."

A lot of male strippers try to move on before they're too old to dance. Like "Magic Mike," they try to start a business on the side, strive to build a career or a relationship that will last past the fantasy.

Cole, too, is working toward that goal. Like the movie's star, he builds custom furniture.

But Cole remembers when he was just getting started at La Bare. He couldn't wait for night to fall so he could go to work.

"After 15 years, I still feel that way," he said. "I love going to work every single day."

"There's no 401(k) in this job," Cap said. "The only benefits are women and parties and cash."

And for a while, that's enough.

alyson.ward@chron.com