

# International Whores' Day, Sydney 2007

By Kate Holden

*Tart: pie, pastry, turnover, puff, Danish Pastry, French Pastry, Patisserie; Quiche, strudel, baklava, blintz, éclair. Also a saucy whore. (18th century vernacular)*

Prostitutes, or 'doxies' or 'blowens' or 'biters' or 'strumpets' as they might have been called by the marines and convicts of the 18th century, were among the very first white women ever to step onto the continent of Australia when they arrived at Sydney Cove with the First Fleet in 1788. Two hundred and nineteen and a half years later, their daughters in profession are gathering at Circular Quay, only metres away from that spot, to celebrate International Whores' Day as loudly and proudly as they can.

'Good God what a Seen of Whordome', exclaimed the aghast naval lieutenant Ralph Clark of the women convicts in 1788; what face the starchy Clark might have made of the bold women assembling in public on June 3 one cannot imagine. Some are in jeans and jackets, their faces unmade-up, but others have gone to town. The music is 'Hey Big Spender', the eyelashes are fake, the gowns are unapologetic red velvet on a Sunday afternoon, and the defiantly 'out whores' of Sydney gather in a small but intensely scarlet procession to make their presence known.

A few kilometres west on the other side of the Rocks, the Sydney Writers' Festival is in full swing. I have briefly escaped the throng there to join my former sorority. I worked as a prostitute in Melbourne for several years in the 1990s, but in my day, although sex workers' rights have been championed for years, it was still something to announce to an acquaintance that I was a working lady. In fact it's the writing of that experience I have been discussing in panels at the festival. Now here before me are the women I've been praising in public as invaluable members of society. They are unmissable as they proceed along the waterfront of Circular Quay: a bobble of red umbrellas (international symbol of protection against the elements and the risks of prostitution) and, just in case no one

understands who, or what they are, plenty of fishnet stockinged legs in classy heels.

'Spend a little time with me,' the music cajoles from a hand-carried stereo as the eye of every relaxed tourist turns to this covey of hoydens. 'I Cover the Waterfront' might have been just as good a choice as about forty women part the strolling crowd. 'NO BAD WHORES, JUST BAD LAWS' is the banner, white on red; red lipstick, red stilettos, red nails; high heels pick their way up the steps of the Opera House and pause on the steps of the forecourt.

*Mob, or Mab: A Wench or a Harlot.*

Among the procession are women in wigs and platform heels working the Betty Page look, transgender persons in jeans or skirts, shyly smiling girls, dykes, queers and at least two writers from the festival. Some of the attendees are burlesque performers, others perhaps come from the range of sex work: brothels, escort agencies, strip clubs, peep shows, fetish services, phone sex. The sex services industry in Australia reaches far beyond the immediate archetype of the blousy, comely pro. The women here are all shapes and sizes, some subdued, some grinning with pleasure at dressing up for the day and showing the world what they've got. There are few men present; they're probably at home playing computer games, one woman supposes. But here are the girls. 'Poor unhappy women of the town' no more,



Scarlet Alliance on the steps of the Opera House