

SACHA YANOW CHERIE DRE



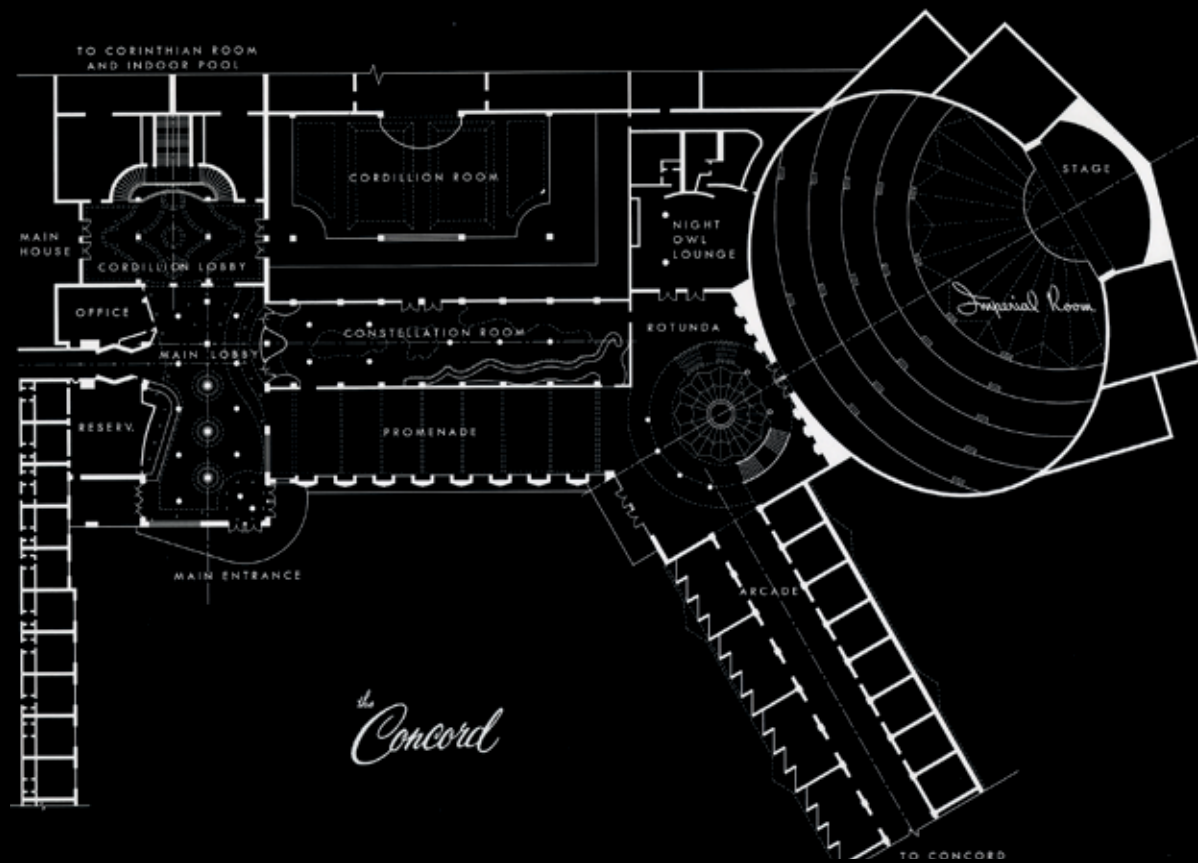
## Cherie Dre

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—Sacha Yanow



Crossingers Hotel, 2016



Blueprint of the lower level of the Concord, from *Catskill Resorts: Lost Architecture of Paradise* by Ross Padluck





The Barry Sisters



Shirley Gould circa 1951



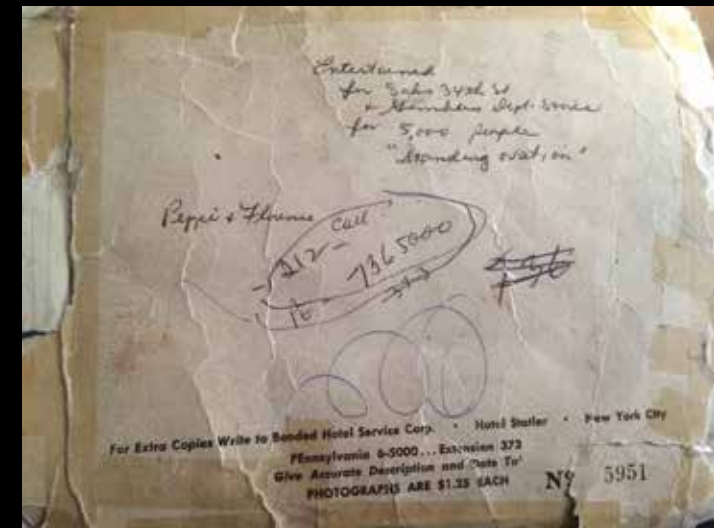
Cherie Dre sketch



Imperial Ballroom on front of postcard from the Concord



Shirley Gould and Sacha Yanow, 1978



Great Aunt Florence Solway and dance partner. The back of the photograph reads: *Entertained for Saks 34th Street and Gimbels Dept Stores for 5,000 people. "Standing ovation."*

## Sacha Yanow and Stephanie Snyder in conversation, 2016

**Stephanie Snyder:** Sacha, how did you become an actor and a performer? What brought you to this point?

**Sacha Yanow:** I grew up acting as a child. I don't remember how it started, but acting quickly became an activity for me that was joyful, and that seemed to bring the same feeling to the people around me, my family especially. It just seemed to come naturally. I felt that I was riding an energy that was natural to me. Also, I think it was an escape from some of the family melancholy that surrounded me at times.

**Stephanie:** Were your first roles in television and the movies, or onstage?

**Sacha:** Onstage. I grew up in a small town – Williamstown, Massachusetts, though my family is from New York. I was in local theater productions, and in school musicals, and in Shakespeare productions from the third grade on. Also, I was a figure skater from age five to fifteen. It was very freeing, moving fast, dancing on the ice; and I always wore the boy outfits. I was pretty advanced, like did all the jumps, but it's a super competitive world and I was never interested in that aspect, so eventually I couldn't continue.

I went to college at Sarah Lawrence instead of joining a theater company or going to an acting conservatory. When I got there my world really expanded. I came out, for one, and became interested in political science, sociology and literature, though I was still acting here and there. It was through a Sarah Lawrence connection that I got an internship at the Kitchen in New York City, and my ideas of performance exploded. I met luminaries like Laurie Anderson, Karen Finley, Carolee Schneemann, and Yoko Ono. I had small roles in pieces we presented by Susana Cook, Sarah Michelson, and Julie Tolentino. I was there for seven years, and through that time I went from being an intern to being the Director of Operations. I feel like I went to graduate school for arts administration there. Around 2006, towards the end of my time there, I was confused about whether I wanted to continue working in producing and curating, or return to acting. Coincidentally, my friend forwarded

me a call for lesbian actors to be in director Jamie Babbit's film the *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, and I ended up auditioning for it. I felt rusty – but something clicked, and that's when I decided to return to acting. I wanted to get formal training, since I had never had any, and I went to school at the William Esper Studio, which is a Meisner-based acting training program.

**Stephanie:** Describe the Meisner technique – what characterizes it?

**Sacha:** When people say “method acting,” they are usually referring to Lee Strasberg's technique, taught at the Actors Studio, derived from the work of Konstantin Stanislavski. In method acting, you use memories from your own past that are emotionally charged and somehow bring them up into a scene when your character needs them. Sanford Meisner developed a technique that, like method acting, is also in the lineage of Stanislavski and also involves emotional work, but it's less about the past. Learning it is a two-year process at the Esper Studio. The first year concentrates on stripping away your conditioned responses so that you can be truly present with yourself and others, learning to behave more instinctively in your surrounding environment, even under imaginary circumstances. The second year, you layer on character, scene, and vocal work that deepens the practice. I found the technique really powerful.

**Stephanie:** Was it during your time at the Esper Studio that you started creating work that was specifically autobiographical?

**Sacha:** That first year in the program, you prepare scenarios that have emotional meaning for you. Many of mine related to family. I used some of this material in *Dad Band*.

**Stephanie:** Being a queer woman and being in acting school, was that a natural fit, was that challenging?

**Sacha:** No, it was not an easy fit. The acting school was so different from the queerness of my social world and aspects of the art world that I was a part of. There were three hundred people in the school, and I think I was one of three people who were out. I grew my hair longer than usual to look more femme or “versatile” because in my first The Business of Acting class I brought in my head shot and the professor said, “I can't tell if you're a boy or a girl. This isn't gonna work.” I was often told that I was like Martha Plimpton and Lili Taylor, or Ellen

DeGeneres. Ellen DeGeneres! But I was committed to making a traditional trajectory work for me – meeting with casting directors, going to auditions. I was getting called in for parts like “the rookie cop” and “the weirdo best friend.” They were the outsider roles that a genderqueer person could fit into. I struggled with how to bring integrity and authenticity into this gaze.

**Stephanie:** When did things begin to open up?

**Sacha:** Near the end of my time in the acting program, I was introduced through my friend artist Sharon Hayes to director Brooke O'Harra and a great group of like-minded queer actors and performers – the Dyke Division of the Theatre of the Two-Headed Calf. They had created a live lesbian soap opera at La MaMa called *Room for Cream* that was in its first season, and they offered me a role. It was set in the fictional town of Sappho. It was amazing, and it had a committed audience and a cast of queer actors, visual artists, and downtown theater legends. I performed for three seasons with them, and in the third season I became a member of the Dyke Division, working as a writer as well.

Most of my friends at that time were makers, but I had never imagined myself as one. Writing for *Room for Cream* opened this up for me, and it was awesome because I was part of a supportive collective. Shortly after that is when I began making solo performances. Many of my maker friends, like Wynne Greenwood, Jibz Cameron, and Faye Driscoll, supported me in this process. Faye recommended me to be part of a shared performance evening in 2011, and it was the first time I performed my own work – *The Prince*.

**Stephanie:** *The Prince* is beautifully abstract and raw. It integrates drawing – almost like signage – and popular music, which *Dad Band* does as well. How do you describe the work?

**Sacha:** It was conceived as a public service announcement, but it unfolds as an episodic parable about a prince who tries to be special and never leaves her bedroom. We see her struggle with fantasy and isolation. I had become fascinated with the idea of public service announcements that were used to represent broader social and political concerns, and I wondered: Can I use this form to address intimate psychological struggles? Like, what kind of public service announcement would be really helpful to me at this moment?

**Stephanie:** There's a section of *The Prince* in which you're nude. Tell me about that, your use of your body, the exposure ...

**Sacha:** In the third part of the trilogy I was thinking about how the prince would shed the things that were holding her back. Basically her body saves her, and of course her body had been there all along. The body also represented community. It's the first time I was nude onstage. It felt very vulnerable, but it was what was right for the story and it felt like another costume, really.

**Stephanie:** Did *The Prince* have a particular relationship to “queer embodying”? Is that a phrase that you would have used to describe the work at the time?

**Sacha:** I started using that phrase recently because I was trying to put language to the way I think about my physical body and spirit when performing. It has something to do with being present – to move beyond time, beyond roles, beyond self – but it's really hard to put into words.

**Stephanie:** One of the things I love so much about the phrase is that it doesn't try to describe what queerness is, it simply states that it is, that it's embodied, and that it's real – that it's present. Thinking about your work, I also think about the way “queer embodying” suggests a kind of spirit inhabitation or transmogrification, and you've worked with the history of silent film and the bodily gestures and mannerisms of acting in this way.

**Sacha:** Yes. After *The Prince*, people would talk about my physicality – that I could have been a silent film actor. These comments intrigued me. They resonated because when I perform, moving my body comes more easily to me than speaking words. I started to research the history of silent cinema. Immediately I saw that many silent-era stars were Jewish and looked like they could be my family members.

**Stephanie:** I've read a lot about Al Jolson, and I think it's amazing that the first talking picture is the most Jewish film I've ever seen in my life. I mean, Kol Nidre services on film in 1927? It's insane! One of the things that I kept reading about Jolson is that he had a physical power to bring audiences into a frenetic state when he performed. Something was transmitted. I think about that as an important part of Jewish entertainment history – the fact that it was *The Jazz Singer* that was

the first talking film, and that Jolson’s physical presence had such a powerful effect on people. Jolson was a huge international star. He was a force.

**Sacha:** Yes! My research into silent film stars brought me first to make a short piece called *We Are Dorotheys* in collaboration with Jibz Cameron in 2011, for a performance evening of Emily Roysdon’s at the Kitchen. It was a ten-minute piece about Dorothy Arzner, the first out Hollywood lesbian director. She was known for bringing out remarkable performances in leading ladies like Clara Bow and Lucille Ball. She also invented the boom mic so that actors could move more freely while they were performing. In my research I also became obsessed with a famous out lesbian actress named Alla Nazimova, who starred in the 1923 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* with a purportedly all-gay cast. I discovered that she and Emma Goldman had an affair around the time she first came to the US in 1905. She hung out with a lot of radical Jews in New York around the turn of the century. I found this a totally fascinating connection between Hollywood and anarchists and Jewish migration! I feel like I’ve just scratched the surface.

Much of this research went into my next solo performance piece after *The Prince*, called *Silent Film* in 2014, in which I created the character of the Little Vamp, who is an amalgamation of queer cinematic tropes of vampire and clown. I’ve been thinking about *Silent Film* in relationship to *Cherie Dre*, because I’ve essentially been moving forward in time, from the turn of the century and the 1920s to *Cherie Dre*’s time in the midcentury. I think my grandmother Shirley Gould’s alter ego – Cherie Dremond – was born from her love of films of the ’20s and ’30s.

**Stephanie:** What about vaudeville and its relationship to this history, and your performance work?

**Sacha:** In *Silent Film*, I was interested in the intersection of vaudeville, spiritualism, and magic in early film. There was a very special moment when vaudeville actors had to adjust to the intimacy of the camera. Also, I feel a great affinity to clowns and clowning.

**Stephanie:** Comedy has also, historically, been a way for marginalized people to express their intelligence and creativity.

**Sacha:** Growing up, being a clown was my way to get out of gender and social dynamics. When I was

young I drew a lot of pictures of clowns that looked like self-portraits, and I took on the role of a clown, at school and at home; it protected me somehow. When Jibz and I made *We Are Dorotheys*, we were in the context of Emily Roysdon’s performance evening, in the company of a lot of smart, intellectual, queer people, and I was nervous to do this very clowny skit. But being so warmly received helped me to stand firmly in my clown. I guess also being a clown involves accessibility and connection – there’s a present-ness with the audience. With *Cherie Dre*, I’m thinking a lot about how to let go of the need to “charm” or to be liked as a clown/performer – can I find the truly ugly parts and still keep a connection with the audience?

**Stephanie:** Given that Shirley Gould was bipolar, I would imagine in times of mania she was remarkably charming and charismatic.

**Sacha:** Yes. Making *Dad Band* really moved something within me about my dad. There was an exchange that happened, in the performing of the piece, and in my dad witnessing the performance. Psychologically, our history was integrated. His voice in my body, and in my head, was both released and affirmed somehow. Getting to perform *Dad Band* while my dad is still alive was profound. My mom saw the show and said nervously/jokingly, “I really don’t want there to be a Mom Band.” I thought, don’t worry – I don’t feel like I need to do a *Mom Band*. I know my mom better, she was more present growing up.

But I was interested in exploring certain aspects of my matrilineal line that still felt piercing in my personal history, involving my mom and her mom (my grandmother). My mom hardly talked about her mother, and she just focused on being a great mom herself. It was almost as if she didn’t have one. But there was a kind of melancholy that I didn’t understand and was affected by. I didn’t really know my grandmother because she was sick all my life. My mom’s father (my grandfather) was a bigger part of my life. He was a boxer, and he had seven very vibrant sisters (my great-aunts). One of them, Florence, lives in the Bronx and she’s ninety-three, she’s just amazing, and I visit her often and play bingo with her. She was a dancer and entertainer. She danced at the Copacabana and the Latin Quarter.

**Stephanie:** Wow, you come from entertainers.

**Sacha:** Well, really just Florence. I think the initial

idea for what is now *Cherie Dre* was about her, and the history of our family in the 1950s, being curious about Jewish entertainers and the Borscht Belt, and finding out that my grandfather’s other sister, Alberta – her husband, Phil, was the head of the labor union in the Catskills at that time. I think he even started it. He was an important person up there. My grandparents vacationed at the Concord Hotel. They had the same room every time, and I think for free because of Phil’s connections.

My grandmother wanted to be a dancer – that’s how Cherie Dremond was born. So through *Cherie Dre*, I’m trying to understand my mother’s mother, so that I can understand more about my mother, so that I can understand more about me. The more that I understand my grandmother, the more my mom becomes a whole person.

**Stephanie:** There’s mental illness in so many of our families. I feel like our culture is finally starting to talk about it as something common – not a personal fault. Being a human being is fraught with these things.

**Sacha:** I knew my grandmother only when she was older and very medicated and hard to communicate with. Nobody ever really talked to me about her condition, so she was somewhat scary to me when I was a young person. She wore lots of makeup that she would put on with her shaky hands, so she looked strange to me. And I was very attuned to my mom and could feel that she struggled when she was around her mother. When my grandmother was a younger woman, she embodied a kind of classic ideal of femininity for the time; she was the only one in her family with blonde hair – she was a bombshell, apparently! And my grandfather kind of looked like Frank Sinatra. I hear that when she was well, she was very social, funny, the PTA president. When she was sick, she would have bouts of paranoia, mania, and then be very depressed and not leave her room. She entered hospitals on and off to receive shock therapy, which seemed to help her at times.

Cherie Dremond was not necessarily a delusion of my grandmother’s – she was more like a desire. Cherie Dremond was like her fantasy of what could have been, or should have been, or a more fully realized version of herself, or perhaps who she actually was when she was in the mania. My uncle says my grandfather was the one who gave her that nickname because she was as beautiful as a

movie star and deserved a name like one (lots of Jews were changing their names at that time). But I don’t always know what’s true and what’s not true.

**Stephanie:** So the process of discovering who Shirley Gould was, and who Cherie Dremond was, seems part of the inevitable process of trying to understand memory. We carry people, even people we know well, through different versions, different perspectives. That’s what we become, sometimes when we’re alive, too.

**Sacha:** “Cherie Dre” is a nickname for Cherie Dremond. Ultimately it feels like I’m collaborating with my grandmother and giving Cherie a stage. Maybe I can be a vehicle for something unresolved in both her and me. It’s remarkable to have a performance practice that connects me with myself and my family in this way. I have so much compassion and respect for what my mother went through growing up as Shirley Gould’s daughter. I think maybe this project has to do with separation – between me and my mother, my mother and my grandmother, my grandmother and Cherie Dremond.

**Stephanie:** Separation and reintegration.

**Sacha:** Yes. I’m creating the piece while we’re conducting this interview. It feels hard to talk about it clearly because I’m in process.

**Stephanie:** I’m very appreciative that you’ve been willing to talk about it at this point. It’s a gift, really, something that doesn’t usually happen. Thank you, Sacha.

## SACHA YANOW CHERIE DRE

September 9 – October 9, 2016

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College

Public reception with the artist:

Friday, September 9, 4:30 – 6:30 pm at the Cooley

### CHERIE DRE

The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, is proud to present *Cherie Dre*: New York-based artist Sacha Yanow's immersive new installation. The exhibition is part of a larger solo performance project about Cherie Dre, the show-girl alter ego of Yanow's grandmother who suffered from bipolar disorder before modern diagnoses and treatment.

Developing the performance at the Cooley, Yanow transforms the gallery into an environmental stage set: a psychological, social, and physical landscape. At times, visitors may encounter Yanow working and rehearsing in the space.

Yanow embodies her own imagining of Cherie Dre through covers of Yiddish pop songs by the Barry Sisters, dance routines, monologues, and conversations with her grandmother. The space is simultaneously her grandmother's bedroom in the Bronx in the 1950s, Cherie Dre's ballroom stage at the Concord resort hotel in the Catskills, and Yanow's own research area.

As in Yanow's previous work, *Cherie Dre* weaves together personal experience with broader queer and feminist social histories. Specifically, *Cherie Dre* excavates the artist's relationship to gender and femininity, magical thinking, gambling, and performance, alongside the history of the Borscht Belt and Jewish entertainers in America.

Written and performed by Sacha Yanow  
Dramaturge: Morgan Bassichis  
Costumes: Signe Mae Olson

*Cherie Dre* is curated by Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College.

### DAD BAND

West Coast Premiere

September 15, 7:00 pm

Black Box Theatre,  
Performing Arts Building, Reed College  
Part of The Portland Institute  
for Contemporary Art's 2016  
Time-Based Art Festival  
Free with reservations: [pica.org](http://pica.org)

*Dad Band* is an intimate psychological portrait of Yanow's father, her internalized dad, and patriarchy in general. "Dad" covers and lip-synchs to his favorite songs from the 50s and 60s, shares footage of his 1970s winning appearance on the *To Tell the Truth* game show, presents motivational speeches, and more. Dad's button-down shirts become his costumes, his yellow notepad – usually reserved for stock market details – contains his set list, and his Agatha Christie novel collection and Wall Street Journal become his props. Over the course of the evening, we get to know Dad as he dances, sings, screams, and lectures. *Dad Band* and *Cherie Dre* are companion pieces, part of Yanow's ongoing investigation of personal and social histories through queer embodying.

Originally commissioned by The New Museum, New York in 2015, *Dad Band* was conceived and premiered during Wynne Greenwood's *Kelly* exhibition at The New Museum; *Kelly* was curated by Johanna Burton, Stephanie Snyder, and Sara O'Keeffe.

### SACHA YANOW

Sacha Yanow is a New York City-based artist and actor. Her solo performance works include: *Dad Band*, New Museum, New York (2015); *Silent Film (In development)*, The Lab, San Francisco, Pieter, Los Angeles, and MAPP/Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY (2015), Dixon Place, New York (2014), and Movement Research Festival, New York (2013); and *The Prince*, Dixon Place, New York (2013). Her residencies and awards include: LMCC Process Space (2016); SOMA, Mexico City (2015); Dixon Place, New York (2014); Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York (2012); and The Field, New York (2011). She was creative consultant for Elisabeth Subrin's feature film *A Woman A Part* (2016), and co-director and dramaturge for Dynasty Handbag's performance piece *Soggy Glasses* (The Broad/REDCAT 2016, Brooklyn Academy of Music 2014). Yanow received a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and is a graduate of the William Esper Studio Actor Training Program.

cover image: Shirley Gould/Cherie Dremond circa 1951

overleaf: The oysters of New York Harbor

below: Bird prints

# COOLEY

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial  
Art Gallery, Reed College

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