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Stardom/Fandom: Celebrity and Fan Tribute Performance

by Scott Duchesne

Since the early 1970s, hundreds of Science Fiction and Fantasy (SF&F) conventions have been held worldwide. They are fuelled by the appearance of actors, writers, directors, artists, producers and designers promoting their latest projects, responding to questions of varying obscurity, having their picture taken, and signing autographs for thousands of fans. This convergence of fan and celebrity at SF&F conventions can be interpreted variously as the free market at work, a twenty-first century spiritual pilgrimage, a unique form of nerd tourism, or an amalgam of the three. However one defines them, I want to suggest that *synergy* is the basis of the relationship between fans and celebrities at such events. From the Greek *sunergiā* (cooperation) or *sunergos* (working together), synergy refers to the cooperative interaction among groups that create an enhanced combined effect. SF&F conventions are defined by *human* synergy—in the sense that both fan and celebrity momentarily merge for mutual advantage—exchanging emotional, psychological and social benefits through their interactions. These conventions similarly represent *corporate* synergy, as fan and celebrity interact as buyer and seller, negotiating cost and revenue to achieve a mutually satisfactory economic profit.

While we cannot ignore the effect of the latter on the relationship, this article will focus primarily on the former—in particular on the human synergy of what I call “Fandom Tribute Performance” (FTP). Simply put, FTP involves assuming the role of a fictional character from a particular SF&F text (i.e. *Star Trek*) at a gathering of fans within a framed area (a fair booth, a charity event, or an SF&F convention). The basic requirement of this performance is that the performer is *recognized* as that character. To that end, a costume can be as simple as a pair of pointed ears, or as elaborate as a fully-rendered suit of armour. The physical performance can also establish the validity of the character.

In taking this approach, I reinforce Lisa A. Lewis' assertion that as a "special relationship between audience and culture [in this case, *celebrity culture*]" develops in Fandom—the "pleasure of consumption is superseded [but, I argue, not entirely replaced] by an *investment in difference*" (Lewis 3). Lewis' use of the term "investment" throws the complex and contradictory entanglement of consumption and difference into sharp relief, suggesting that the social, emotional and psychological profit of FTP and Fandom performance in general¹ is fundamentally entwined with the economic profit of the transnational corporations who not only own the property in question (i.e. *Star Trek*), but also the image and work of the celebrity guest associated with it (i.e. William Shatner). The regulations that govern behaviour in the "Q & A" sessions where fans interact with directors, writers, producers, and "images" of actors highlights the reality of corporate ownership. In most cases, for example, the use of photographic or recording devices is strictly forbidden during these sessions.

It would be facile, however, to argue that FTP *only* functions as free labour and advertising for corporate properties. The relationship between corporate property owners and fans has always been uncertain; and the synergy of Fan Tribute Performance reflects that uncertainty while celebrating the property in question. The myriad forms of profit produced by this flow (material, communal, legal, and illegal) and how they embody the relationship between consumption and difference in Fandom is my central subject here.

This article draws from fieldwork I conducted in 2008 at the *Fan Expo Canada (FEC)* convention at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Formed in 1995, *FEC* currently combines five discrete conventions representing five genres: Comics (Comic Book Expo), Anime (CNAime), Science Fiction (SFX), Horror (Festival of Fear) and Gaming (GX) (Hobby Star Marketing). Not surprisingly, the choice of celebrity guests appears to be influenced by their cross-genre work. Like all SF&F conventions, *FEC* is framed by economics: convention admission requires a pass, and a pass (most SF&F conventions offer a variety of options) costs money.² However, the cost of a pass is often nominal because it is within the convention's "transformed" space where the greatest potential for economic profit lies. In this context, Fandom is literally transformed into an open market—a place where celebrity guests become commodities for the consumption of devout fans. But fans are performers, too. Indeed, it is through their appearances

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in the "Masquerade,"³ the official fan performance space at many conventions and one of its most popular events, that fans imaginatively express the "flow" of passion and capital.

The Masquerade functions as the profit-promoting showpiece of the SF&F convention. It is traditionally held on a Saturday night in the largest room available in the hotel or convention centre, which makes it the main social gathering of the convention. During the Masquerade, fans don their hand-constructed costumes and accessories for judges who award prizes in various categories. The Judges place high value on the material labour and passion fans bring to their subject as expressed in their workmanship. Any other feature of their presentation is regarded as supplementary or strictly for entertainment purposes. Some entrants simply walk on stage, turn around in a circle, and exit. The "capital" of the Masquerade is the prizes awarded to participants. Yet it is the performative aspect of the presentation, including the

A Joker Cosplayer, with fellow Cosplayer as The Riddler. Fan Expo 2008, Toronto, Ontario.

Photo by Cavin Bennett

costumes and accessories that acts as a conduit for the human and corporate synergy between fan and celebrity, creating the myriad profits enjoyed by both.

In the following sections I examine amateur FTP in the Masquerade based on the "Joker" character portrayed by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) and the professional FTP of "bellydance princess and world dance artist" Amira Sa'id, who performed her popular "Slave Leia" belly dance. Both performances were "pregnant with significance" for SF&F Fandom (Hebdige 17), complete with costumes and an esoteric/erotic grammar of gestures—yet open to variations revealing the investment of difference that highlights the creativity of fan performance. Yet while both performances clearly fell within the FTP sub-genre of "Cosplay" or "costume role-play," a type of performance art wherein fans transform themselves into their favourite fictional characters through costume, makeup, gesture, and behaviour (Cosplay), they were also distinctly different. The Joker FTPs were largely reverential, celebrating the difference between Ledger's

Amira Sa'id at Fan Expo 2008, Toronto, Ontario.
Courtesy Amira Sa'id (www.amiradance.com)

performance and previous portrayals of the character by reproducing the former as closely as possible. By contrast, the “Slave Leia” FTP radically reinterpreted Carrie Fisher’s original performance in *Return of the Jedi* (1983); although dressed in a “slave dancer” costume by her captor Jabba the Hut, Princess Leia Organa (Fisher) never dances onscreen. However, the “pregnant” absence of her dance performance creates an erotic, imaginative space that has occupied the imagination of Star Wars fans for decades. Sa'id invests her “fan” performance into this absence with the physicality of Raqs Sharqi (a form of Middle Eastern dance) and not a little bit of parodic play, adopting a feminist approach to exploring issues of sexuality within SF&F Fandom. Yet despite their differences, both FTPs celebrate the characters and their accompanying texts—embodying the entanglement of consumption, celebrity, and various forms of profit they create.

What is a “celebrity” in the context of SF&F Fandom? Like other groups, the term is elastic, allowing for a wide continuum between celebrity and non-celebrity. This, in turn, leads to a guest hierarchy that distinguishes between “Featured Guests” (the top rank), “Special Guests” (the second rank), and “Special Appearances” (the third rank), implying differences in promotion, treatment, and compensation. This division is seen on the convention floor as well, where differences between a Featured Guest and a Special Appearance are expressed in the cost of an autograph or photograph. At *Fan Expo Canada 2008*, Featured Guests often charged \$40-\$60 for an autograph and an additional \$20-\$40 for a photograph, while lower ranked guests often charged \$20 for an autograph and posed free for photos.

Richard Dyer argues that “stars” function as: (a) “a form of capital” possessed by the corporations in question; (b) “a guarantee, or a promise, against loss on investment and even of profit on [the commodity in question];” and (c) a set of tools to “organize the market” (Dyer 11). As Alexander Walker elaborates, stars “draw great audiences not only because of their personal magnetism but also because they are symbols of certain types of entertainment [...]” (Walker 15). As the *FEC* hierarchy implies, however, not all celebrities are equal. In the crude economics of SF&F Fandom, most celebrities are at once capital, investment, and entertainment: their cultural capital draws fans to feature films, television series, music, theatre, and the convention itself. Interactions with celebrities at conventions help ensure that the passion fans feel for the celebrity and the property with which they are associated continues well beyond the convention space. The career of Leonard Nimoy

(1931–) is instructive here. Due to his iconic status in *Star Trek* Fandom and the feature films and television series associated with the franchise, Nimoy has released albums, poetry books, autobiographies such as *I Am Not Spock* (1977) and *I Am Spock* (1995) as well as maintained a career in theatre by taking roles such as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* and Martin Dysart in *Equus*. Nimoy’s role as a “form of capital” and a “guarantee” against loss has been clearly established over the past forty-three years. His appearance as a “Guest of Honour” at the 2009 *Fan Expo Canada*—following a popular appearance with William Shatner two years previously—demonstrates that he remains a profitable guest for both fan and corporate interests.

Fan Tribute Performance is a more complex part of the economic exchange where capital, investment, and entertainment focuses not on the celebrity in question, but on

A Joker Cosplayer, performing in character. This simple costume retains the basic components of the character. Fan Expo 2008, Toronto, Ontario.
Photo by Cavin Bennett

what fans do with the basic “capital” of celebrity and character, and the “flow” that work creates. In 2008, one of the most popular costumes at *Fan Expo Canada* was that worn by Heath Ledger as the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. On one level, Joker fan performance was a tribute to Ledger’s nihilistic interpretation, widely lauded for its connection to (and rejection of) earlier iterations of the character. In essence, Ledger interpreted the role with a *difference* that deeply resonated with fans. And this expressed itself in the synergy of FTP.⁴

The popularity of Ledger’s Joker for SF&F fans seems to

A Joker Cosplayer, posing. This simple costume retains the basic components of the character. Fan Expo 2008, Toronto, Ontario.
Photo by Cavin Bennett

emerge from the way the character *reflects* the work of Cosplay. His clothing, described as “custom” with “no labels”, along with his deliberately imperfect makeup that drips, cracks, and peels over time, is a costume most Cosplayers (costume role-players) can identify with as an external marker of The Joker. The costume, with its purple and green colour combination and vest and jacket referenced earlier portrayals of the character while becoming an iconic variant of its own. The creation of a “flow” through a pool of shared images and the expressive play of difference is one of the primary goals of Cosplay. On one level, profit here is largely emotional and psychological—that is, recognition for focused, creative work, and for connecting with the larger community. For the purposes of FTP, Ledger’s Joker featured easily replicated and identifiable gestures and speeches that could be “read” and evaluated by the Masquerade audience and judges. The character’s costume and makeup was cheaply and easily produced, but open to more detailed work if fans had the time and the money. As long as fans retained the character’s key physical and behavioural components, they could even make modifications according to personal taste and imagination.

Fan performance of Ledger’s Joker at *FEC 2008* was also a “tribute” to Ledger’s life and work. High quality Cosplay performances temporarily filled the absence caused by Ledger’s death. In fact, more people were taking pictures of, and with, “Joker” Cosplayers than any other on the convention floor.

Extreme variations on Ledger’s costume and performance were not as popular, interestingly, as those who worked to replicate his work and costume as closely as possible. This preference became clear with the “Novice” performance of Entry #56.⁵ The host’s announcement of the entry was greeted by applause and cheers, followed by the entrance of the performer who gave his interpretation of the character while an audio recording of Ledger-as-Joker played. While the performance itself was fairly stiff and self-conscious, the performer expressed the essence of the character by enacting the gestures Ledger brought to the role, particularly his use of a knife as the audio track played, giving spectators a sense of the actor’s presence. The Cosplayer achieved a synergy between the knowing audience and the (corporate DC Comics / Warner Brothers) image he was enacting through his portrayal. With the absence of the star, Entry #56’s FTP functioned as the symbolic “form of capital” that created social and economic profit at the convention.

In amateur FTP, the audience expects effort and passion from the performers and rewards them for creativity and commitment. In professional FTP, the expectations are much higher. “Professional” Fan Tribute Performance lies outside the confines of Masquerade performance. They are generally not part of the contest proper, but appear as a “feature” or “special guest.” These Cosplayers are compensated for their performances, which generally take place before the Masquerade, but are nevertheless “judged” by the audience on the quality of their costume and their enactment of a particular character. Professional FTP needs to represent more than the basic “essence” of the character; it needs to add to the

Fan Tribute Performance is a more complex part of the economic exchange where capital, investment, and entertainment focuses not on the celebrity in question, but on what fans do with the basic “capital” of celebrity and character, and the “flow” that work creates.

already deep understanding and appreciation fans have for the character (and the franchise) in question. To that end, the performance must include “virtuoso” elements.

Amira Sa’id’s professional FTP contains such elements. Sa’id’s “dance fusion” performance style is based in the tradition of Raqs Sharqi and combines “Indian Bollywood, Irish step dance, Egyptian, Turkish and Greek bellydance” into a variety of pieces produced for specific fan groups. Although she also performs dances inspired by *Star Trek* and the *Final Fantasy X* video game, her most popular performance is “Belly Dancing Slave Leia” (<http://www.amiradance.com/>).

Amira Sa'id at Star Wars Celebration IV, 2007, Los Angeles, California.
 Courtesy Amira Sa'id (www.amiradance.com)

Despite this focus on belly dancing, Sa'id claims that "I am not just doing bellydance moves; I am creating live theatrical art" (Personal interview). Her artistic objective is evident in her playful use of audio samples from *Star Wars* Episodes IV–VI. A section of the piece is entirely based on the "cantina theme" from *A New Hope* (Episode IV), mixed with more traditional sounds associated with Raqs Sharqi such as complex rhythmic structures played on the *Tabla*.

Sa'id's performance is not entirely entrepreneurial; she is a self-proclaimed "trekkie" ("Trek Therapy") who also has a long-standing interest in *Star Wars* ("Amira Unleashed"). For Sa'id the pleasure of capital is (somewhat) superseded by an investment of difference in her performance. Her "Leia Live!" show has brought her notoriety and a full schedule of appearances at SF&F conventions across North America, including several "official" *Star Wars* "Celebration" conventions. The "Slave Leia" piece (available on her website) is approximately eight minutes long and divided into three discrete sections; each showcasing a particular aspect of her "dance fusion" style. This includes two specific "virtuoso" moments influenced by Raqs Sharqi: a series of focused "hip circles," chest and hip "drops," and "lifts" to rapid *tabla* rolls (following an audio admonishment from Yoda to learn "control"), and a demonstration of the traditional technique of balancing a sword on the head while dancing in the third section.

Sa'id's choice of subject, particularly her exploration

Amira Sa'id, posing with sword.
 Courtesy Amira Sa'id (www.amiradance.com)

of female sexuality, has resounded strongly in the world of SF&F Fandom. “Slave Leia” has long been a sexual icon, as *Wired* author Philip Chien remarks, “There’s no doubt that the sight of Carrie Fisher in the gold sci-fi swimsuit was burned into the sweaty subconscious of a generation of fanboys hitting puberty in the spring of 1983” (Chien). Sa’id’ contributes to the understanding and appreciation of the Princess Leia character by satisfying the blatant “erotic absence” of “Slave” Leia’s performance. Sa’id explains that “[t]he most common comment I’ve gotten from *Star Wars* fans is that I have fulfilled their ultimate fantasy of seeing Princess Leia actually dance in the slave dancer’s outfit” (Personal interview). Indeed, a significant part of the *Star Wars* mega-text is the production of memorabilia representing and fetishizing “Slave Leia.” Sa’id contributes to this practice through her performance—the convergence of the perceived sexual appeal of movements derived from Raqs Sharqi, with its focus on the hip and stomach area, combined with her appearance in the iconic “Slave” costume, allows fans to observe Carrie Fisher-as Leia’s “erotic presence” by a proxy.

Although the “Slave Leia” role fits the stereotype of a male fetish—possibly encouraging the fetish-cult of “Slave Leia” to prosper economically and socially, Chien argues that

“it’s women for whom the costume holds the most enduring meaning today” (Chien). This argument rings true for Sa’id, who claims that “Jabba [The Hutt] put [Leia] into the outfit to humiliate her, but Leia was such a strong character; her will made the costume empowering” (Personal interview). In her 2008 performance, Sa’id began with a gold chain around her neck, which she broke before she began dancing. This gesture resonates strongly with traditional Raqs Sharqi, which has been regarded as a celebration of the power of a mature woman (Deagon). In this way, the human synergy of Sa’id’s performance not only represents the “ultimate fantasy” of an erotic, masculine reading, but also deploys a potentially feminist reclaiming of the icon.

Her performance acknowledges the historical presence of women in SF&F Fandom, as well as the existence of female *Star Wars* fans that, like Sa’id, regard the character of Princess Leia as a positive, feminist role model. Within the context of the SF&F convention, the absence of the belly dancing scene from *Return of the Jedi* is as just as, if not more, significant than Ledger’s absence. So then, Sa’id’s FTP plays an equally important role in the social and economic “flow” of profit in Fandom—creating and sustaining a presence that adds to the meaning and the production of commodities.

Amira Sa'id at Star Wars Celebration IV, 2007, Los Angeles, California.
Courtesy Amira Sa'id (www.amiradance.com)

The link between the human synergy of Fan Tribute Performance and audience, and the corporate synergy of property owners and fans is not strictly causal; watching Cosplay does not directly lead to economic profit. But as these two instances of FTP demonstrate, Cosplay's larger function in SF&F Fandom is to provide social profit, giving expression to and thus sustaining the passion of fans in a communal setting, thereby adding to the depth of material relating to characters and franchises. It is a style of performance accessible to fans, but also open to those wishing to make such performances a profession. FTP is part of a complex, global flow of capital and a community that thrives off of an ongoing investment of difference that's best represented by the interaction between fan and celebrity, and by way of performance.

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Notes

1 The most prominent case of this is Roger Nygard's documentaries *Trekkies* (1997) and *Trekkies II* (2004). The "soft" features of Fandom (social and emotional interaction) are privileged to the extent that the "hard" feature (commerce) is indistinguishable from it.

2 Attendance to the Masquerade at *Fan Expo 2009* requires a \$49 "Deluxe" pass, as opposed to the \$25 "Basic" pass.

3 FEC claims that its Masquerade is the largest in Canada.

4 For a useful history of The Joker, see <<http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/joker.htm>>.

5 This performance can be viewed on YouTube: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPst-n9cJi0> 3:02–4:28>.

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