

Teasing & Pleasing

TORONTO'S NOT-SO-SECRET WORLD OF **BURLESQUE**

By *Scott Dagostino*

L

eft to my own devices, I'm a very introverted person," says 25-year-old photographer Greg Wong. That seems a strange comment coming from a man who boldly stripped off

his clothes for a massive crowd of partygoers in 2008 and has been doing so ever since.

It was at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, during the 2008 New Year's Eve party hosted by Shane MacKinnon, that Wong became "Wrong Note Rusty," the latest member of Boylesque, an all-male burlesque troupe formed earlier that summer. "I went to the debut show at Pride and loved it," Rusty says, "I was totally turned on but I had an intellectual boner as well. I was being teased in a really fun, cheeky way."

That's what burlesque is all about, says Tanya Cheex, founder of the troupe Skin Tight Outta Sight, who have been performing in Toronto for nearly 15 years. "It combines sex, theatre, dance, comedy, performance art and circus sideshow." In her own career, Cheex says, "I was influenced by old men's magazines, Russ Meyer movies and things my

grandmother had told me about burlesque that she had seen back in its golden age."

While the original meaning of the word burlesque meant a satire or comic parody, the use of striptease in the early vaudeville routines soon gave it the racier meaning. It was Lydia Thompson and The British Blondes who first raised eyebrows in the 1860s by wearing flesh-coloured tights on stage. Just the illusion of nudity caused a sensation and over the next few decades, clubs in Paris like the Folies Bergère and the Moulin Rouge became known the world over for their scandalous dancing-girl revues.

North America later followed suit. In 1907, Broadway impresario Flo Ziegfeld opened the famous Ziegfeld Follies. Copycats sprang up cross-town, thanks to the Minsky brothers, in Toronto at the Star theatre, and the Gayety in Montréal got the girls on stage to reveal as much as the police would allow.

By the mid-30s, burlesque was being shut down by morality squads and US Supreme Court mandates, but not before artists like Mae West and



Girls of the Ziegfeld Follies



Skin Tight Outta Sight



Lili St. Cyr

Gypsy Rose Lee had become household names. In Germany, the Nazis' rise to power crushed the Weimar-era arts scene that included burlesque, as depicted decades later in the musical and film *Cabaret*.

During the war years, it was all about pin-up girls like Sherry Britton and Betty Grable, but burlesque saw a resurgence in the 1950s, especially in Paris, London and Las Vegas. Tempest Storm was a fiery redhead dancer, Lili St. Cyr would take a soak in her transparent bathtub and, most infamously, Bettie Page starred in many a bootleg bondage film. Those movies were an inspiration to Cheex. "There's so much energy and charisma to her," she says, "Even when Bettie was doing something 'bad,' she looked like she was having fun."

By the late '60s, burlesque was mainstream, its influence obvious in the TV sketches of *Laugh-In* and *The Benny Hill Show*, but it became a casualty of the sexual revolution. With porn and strip clubs taking over the boogie nights of the '70s, the striptease now looked quaint and outdated. "The art was lost," says Cheex. "No more live bands...The '80s were the golden age of porn." Burlesque was dead.

Tanya spent the next decade as a stripper, a dominatrix and, oddly, a drag queen. "I got my start performing in drag bars like 501 with Bitch Diva and Georgie Girl," recalls Cheex. "I'd be a Marilyn Munroe impersonator and I learned hair and makeup tips from my drag mothers. Scarlett Fever was a big influence. She was gorgeous." Cheex's love for burlesque might have remained dormant but, by the end of

the '90s, a strange nostalgia for the '50s and '60s was taking hold amongst people not even born back then. Blame it on Austin Powers? Groovy lounge music and swing dancing and rockabilly and yes, burlesque were back in fashion.

Writer/performer Sasha Van Bon Bon is often credited with leading the burlesque revival in Toronto. She danced at gigs with Jack the Ripper and the Major Players as one half of the Dangerettes, who soon began eclipsing the band. "I wouldn't say we took over the show but our performances and costuming became a central focus," she says. Upon meeting Kitty Neptune in 2000, they created the Scandelles burlesque troupe. Meanwhile, Cheex was hosting lounge parties that similarly led to her forming her troupe, Skin Tight Outta Sight.

"There was no template," Cheex says, "There were performers in LA and New York, but no one local." She and Van Bon Bon occasionally performed together at the Pilot or Lee's Palace and developed what she calls "a friendly rivalry."

As Van Bon Bon describes it, "I pioneered, then took off in my canoe. She pioneered but stayed to cultivate the land."

"Becoming a burlesque producer has been fun," says Cheex. "The difference now is that most women are producing their own shows. Back in the day, it was male-dominated but it's generally a women's thing at this point."

Fun isn't the first word Van Bon Bon uses, however. Despite several successful shows, "We just can't do these large productions anymore," she says. "It's ridiculously impractical... Everybody wants to be treated with respect but when you're managing 17 people and you have three dollars and a paper clip, sometimes you just can't offer it," she sighs.

While Sasha admits that her temper was often bigger than she'd like, Rusty adds that a burlesque performer's ego can be a complicated thing. "Some people are very protective of their character," he says. "They have a stage persona that is very different than who they really are." As he's said, for instance, he's actually shy. "I've never been to Hanlan's Point and I don't know if I can." It's a fear of "casual public nudity" that's strange even to him: "I've danced on the hood of a car



Gypsy Rose Lee



Bettie Page and Tempest Storm

in my underwear," he laughs, but in truth, "you're never really naked on stage. There's always a barrier. You're under layers of makeup and costume, being up on stage, blinded by lights. People always comment on your courage," Rusty says, "but really, some of these performers are very guarded."

This is a problem, he says, when disagreements arise. "The burlesque community tends to be very 'collective,' which can be a good and bad thing. Nobody feels like they have an all-encompassing perspective so nobody wants to take on the role of spokesperson." A classic argument in burlesque circles, for instance, is what separates the striptease from stripping. "I do hear a lot of anti-sex-work rhetoric within the burlesque community," says Rusty, "Things like, 'Those were just stripper moves' or '___ is just a dirty stripper.' They insist, 'Burlesque is classy! It's art! It's above stripping!' I don't take offense if someone calls me a stripper."

"I've seen artistry in stripping," says Van Bon Bon, "The

people saying this have negative attitudes toward sex-work themselves. They don't want to be aligned with people they perceive as immoral or as social outcasts, but I think being a burlesque dancer carries more stigma than being a stripper. I've seen so much goddamn horrifying burlesque, I'd align it closer to a bunch of children dancing around after naptime and apple juice than to stripping or any form of adult entertainment. It's a ridiculous snobbery."

Having worked in both professions, Cheex admits, "When I started stripping, I thought it would be like burlesque. It wasn't. They didn't care about my gloves and gowns," she laughs, "but we're all sisters. Some of the best burlesque performers are former strippers. It's still about sex. You still have to seduce."

"You can't just pull things out of your underwear drawer and go on stage," Cheex continues. "When burlesque is done badly, it's really embarrassing because of the vulnerability factor. And unlike a bad band or bad comedy, if people see a bad burlesque show, they might never return."

"Well, I think we could all stand to rehearse a lot more than we do," Rusty jokes, but he's seen the flip side of bad performing too: "Sometimes we get awkward audiences. Burlesque is a style of performance that heavily relies on audience participation." A quiet audience, he says, is a disaster but Cheex insists that the key to that problem is a strong emcee, someone who can let the audience know how to participate. "Miss Conception, Sky Gilbert and Keith Cole have all hosted our shows," she says and Cole is a particular favourite. "He really knows how to push people's buttons and I like that. Burlesque should be challenging."

Indeed, a challenge from Keith Cole is what led to the creation of Boylesque. Founder Benjamin Paley went to a Skin Tight Outta Sight show at the Gladstone in the summer of 2007 and says Keith made an unexpected announcement from the stage: "Ben has told me he's going to do an amateur burlesque performance for you!" It was awful because, he laughs, "I had a pair of really frumpy rumpy underwear on, but I'd



Boylesque



Jett Adore. Photo by Kenneth Morris

“ You can’t just pull things out of your underwear drawer and go on stage... ”

had a few drinks and went through with it.” Having loved watching burlesque ever since his uncle snuck him into a show on Coney Island when he was about 15, Paley says this was, “a light-bulb moment: why aren’t more men doing this too?”

Some had. Shane MacKinnon had led the Beefcake Boys for a time but, as he said in an interview in 2006, “A lot of people were intrigued by the idea of an all-boy burlesque group, but when it came time to perform, they always backed out.”

Paley wrote to Van Bon Bon for advice through her column in *NOW Magazine*. “I was reaching out for mentoring,” he says, “but there was an assumption that I was only getting into it for the money.” He felt hurt by her sharp response, one she doesn’t deny. “I discouraged him,” she says, “Don’t think for a moment you’ll be riding around in limos here.”

This is true, says Cheex, but for her at least, “It’s becoming more and more possible to make a living. I’m getting close to quitting one of my part-time jobs.”

Having gone ahead with Boylesque undaunted, Paley now says, “We’re pretty high in demand, both by the novelty of being boys and by people really liking what we do, we’re getting a lot of bookings.”

Even for corporate parties, which seems bizarrely mainstream, but Van Bon Bon can see it. “Those Boylesque boys are cute,” she says, “They’re really coy and sexy in their cute little underpants. There’s nothing threatening about them. They’re perfect for a corporate environment.”

“Straight guys who’ve been dragged along by their girlfriends tend to come back on their own accord because they really liked the show. You can read that however you will,” Paley laughs, “but I think they enjoy the art and the comedy of it, even if they don’t find the guys attractive.”

Like it or not, Paley says, male burlesque tends to be funny. “We’re just less used to seeing men in that role,” he says. “Sexy Mark Brown” is the lead male member of Skin Tight Outta Sight and he told the *Ryerson Free Press* in 2009, “When you don’t have boobs, it’s not really the same effect. Not to say that there’s no seductive aspect to it at all, but it’s not really what I’m going for.”

“When we first started Boylesque,” says Rusty, “we assumed we’d have a

Girls of the Ziegfeld Follies



really strong gay male following but that hasn't really been the case. I think gay guys like watching us, but they don't like us making fun of being watched." The coyness of burlesque is a tough fit with a gay male culture used to the bluntness of porn. "We had an awkward gig at the Barn," Rusty admits. "It was the underwear party, surrounded by guys already more naked than we were!"

"Most of our audiences are a mix of men and women," says Paley, "There's a real different energy between all-women and all-men audiences."

Cheex notes, "Lesbians get crazy-rowdy at our shows. It's great, but we also get a gay following because our costumes and concepts are so overblown. We're basically drag queens."

"It's amazing to me that there's still so much burlesque going on," says Van Bon Bon.

"I don't know how this city supports as many troupes as it does," marvels Rusty. "Les Coquettes do four or five fully-produced shows a year and they're excellent."

Yes, agrees Van Bon Bon, "Les Coquettes are super snazzy! Just beautiful costumes."

"One of the wonderful things about doing burlesque in Toronto is there's such a huge community," says Cheex. She rattles off a list of favourites: Keela Watts, Chaos Divine, Fiona Flauntit, Dolly Berlin, Coco Framboise and Roxi DLite—the first Canadian performer crowned Queen of Burlesque in Las Vegas. "They've done their homework," Cheex says. Meanwhile, there are excellent troupes like the Shameless

Dames, Miss Mitzy Cream's Kitten Revue and, a favourite of Rusty's, the Cinnamon Hearts.

And all of them are gearing up for Valentine's Day. "There's always like five burlesque shows going on around Valentine's Day," says Van Bon Bon. "People get competitive."

This year, Cheex says, Skin Tight Outta Sight will be teaming up with Boylesque for one major Valentine's Day show. "It's my favourite," she says. "It's fun and raunchy and anything goes."

Van Bon Bon admires "these amazing tenacious women" who honour the history of burlesque but says, for her, burlesque has been a springboard into theatre. While working on a remount of *Les Demimondes* for Buddies in March, she plans to retire the Scandelles brand in favour of Operation Snatch, named after the shameful 1953 incident in which the BC government abducted the children of dissident group the Sons of Freedom, who protested naked. "Kitty and I have always considered ourselves political nudists," she says. "I am a huge fan of aggressive nudity."

Burlesque is flexible enough to accommodate all these things, Van Bon Bon says, "You can make it whatever you want."

For Rusty, it was a way "to push my own boundaries and challenge myself. I wanted to do something I could look back on as a really fun time in my life." It's amazing how far a sense of humour, a little courage and some very fancy underwear will take you.

Scott Dagostino is a Toronto-based freelance writer, whose manner of taking off his cloths resembles corn shucking. The art of burlesque can teach him much.