

# QUEERLESQUE

## *All the World's Their Stage*

by Bryen Dunn



Burlesque has been entertaining devoted audiences around the world for many years, and it's recently skyrocketed back into the mainstream, with the depiction of the scene in Hollywood flicks such as *Moulin Rouge*, and more recently *Burlesque*. While places like The Crazy Horse and Moulin Rouge in Paris still offer traditional cabaret style burlesque for tourists, there is a more alternative wave of performers and producers shaking things up that are worthy of a visit.

Back as far as 1868, women in male drag were a focal point of a huge scandal in Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes," generally recognized as the first major burlesque show. It continued through with the campiness of Mae West and all her gay and drag queen friends influencing each other. Burlesque performances were actually banned in parts of the United States in the 19th century because of nudity, but its overall appeal never really went away, and eventually resurfaced in many forms over the years.

Gary Beeber is the director of the feature film *Dirty Martini*, and producer of *Gotham Burlesque* in New York City. "The new burlesque movement came directly from the NYC drag scene, modern dance and performance art, and was kick-started by the performers in my film," Beeber explains. "At the time in the late 1980's and early 1990's, these performers didn't realize that they were creating a form of burlesque. *Dirty Martini* was totally inspired by the NYC drag scene, and is now one of the top burlesque stars in the world," he proclaims.



The glamorous *Tigger!* (www.facebook.com/TiggerJames) claims, "There are

He's also released a rap song, "I'm the Bunny," on iTunes. "I turn 45 in February and love becoming an older glamorous person," he says gleefully.

scads of us queers in burlesque, some of us for many years, and there are new queer men and women joining the fold every year. Back in the 1990's New York burlesque scene there were a couple of us boys doing shows with a small handful of fabulous girls that kick-started this whole burlesque renaissance here. No one really focused too much on me being a man or being gay, because as performers we have always reflected a shared sense of humour, sexuality, and glamour, typically between outrageous women and their gay male friends." In 1992 performance artist Penny Arcade invited him to be an erotic dancer/stripper in her show *Bitch! Dyke! Fag hag! Whore!* played for a year in New York and toured Europe and Australia after that. *Tigger!* didn't come into being until 1997, and less than 10 years later he became the first crowned King of Boylesque at the annual Burlesque Hall of Fame show back in 2006.

*Scotty the Blue Bunny* (www.scottybunny.com) is another who came out of the same scene, and has been performing his special brand of spandex-clad spectacles around the globe since 1996. His website states he sings, spiels, offends, cajoles, fiddles, twirls baton, and busts really big balloons with his butt. Pretty impressive for a blue bunny I'd have to say. "I was a closeted suburban kid who moved to New York in 1987, fell in with a few fire-eaters and glass-walkers, and popped out of this much later as a host and MC who could juggle for three seconds," he laughs. He claims that ultimately the reason the world has a big gay rabbit is because of his time spent with the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus. "So many people I met moved away from home to rage and reinvent themselves in New York. I approach the ritual of performing for an audience with love and danger, and vividly remember stage diving and crowd surfing at the Helsinki Burlesque Festival a couple years ago," he recalls. He looks forward to hosting the fifth anniversary of that festival again in February, as well as the 10th anniversary of the New York Burlesque Festival in 2012.

Today, the current burlesque scene continues to entice and stimulate, but the boundaries have been somewhat loosened beyond the traditional vaudeville style acts. Performers often kick up their heels and drop their knickers to rock and roll, hip-hop, and other musical genres. It hasn't been until relatively recently that males have joined the ranks of this predominately female driven form of entertainment. Troupes are now often a mixed lot of female, male, cross-gender drag, and transgendered individuals. It's what is now commonly becoming referred to as Queer Burlesque or Queerlesque within the burlesque world.

Down south, *Ace Falcor* (fuckyeahqueerlesque.tumblr.com) decided to start a queer burlesque show in New Orleans when she realized there wasn't such a thing. Having performed drag for several years, she thought it was time to give burlesque a shot as well. "In my first act I started off dressed as a submissive leather boy, and as I started to strip I turned into a female dominatrix. Since then, playing with gender and sexuality in my performances has become a staple feature. Queer for me is a political term, not just sexual," she explains. Her first produced show simply titled, *Queerlesque* happened in May 2010, and her next one will be focused on performances by masculine women and other trans-masculine individuals. "Queer burlesque is a passion of mine and there aren't many of us that identify as such, either as performers or producers of shows. I'm also the moderator for the first community queerlesque blog, so hopefully this will bring more of us together," she aspires.

Since 2003, Georgian southern belle *Vagina Jenkins* (www.vaginajenkins.com) has been gracing stages worldwide with her more classic striptease, a historical recreation of what exotic dancing looked like in the 50's and 60's. Her first performance was at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival where she used the needle, thread, and glue from her tent repair kit to fashion a "Garden of Eden" look from a



bra and panty set festooned with various silk flowers, and then performed to

politics, and rude drag queens. My shows combine punk glamour, cabaret prowess,

Etta James' "Sunday Kind of Love." She's currently working on *1st Beats, Bumps and Grinds*, which will be a touring cabaret of queer hip-hop artists and burlesque dancers. "I'm co-producing the tour with queer Korean emcee SKIM, and we are exploring what happens when hip-hop meets neo-burlesque, and modernizing what cabaret art means in the context of queer communities of colour," she explains.

Performers have always adopted a certain stage persona that they bring to life by way of music, extravagant outfits, and props. Queer burlesque brings this one step further by incorporating sexual identity and ambiguity into the productions. Most of these performers consider themselves to be queer artists, either by sensibility, sexuality, or both. Themes are often political, creative, witty, campy, and most definitely sexy.

On the other side of the Atlantic, *Club Noir* is a travelling burlesque show with its home base in Glasgow, Scotland. Shows take place regularly in Edinburgh and London as well, and incorporate DJ's, live music, comedy, and fetish acts. They also lay claim to being listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as being the biggest burlesque club in the world, often attracting upwards of 2,000 people to their shows. They were the first burlesque club in Scotland and are now the oldest in the UK. "We definitely get queer in all senses, as in Goths, transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and kings, gays, fetishists, and more ranging in age from 18 to 60. It's probably the most diverse mix of people you are ever likely to see in one room," states show spokesperson Sarah Crawford.

Berlin is another hotbed of a burlesque scene that pushes the boundaries of bizarre. *Clea Cutthroat* ([www.facebook.com/cleacutthroat](http://www.facebook.com/cleacutthroat)) is burlesque performance artist, model, and member of two outrageous bands, *Eat Lipstick* and *Bonaparte*. She describes herself as the Bloody Anti-Burlesque Diva, an outspoken bitch who eats blood, showers in milk, and throws bibles. "I'm into the ugly sexy, oddly fantastic, upside paradises, glittery

long lasting lip gloss, and fetish tendencies to bring a whole new meaning to Grotesque Burlesque," she boasts.

She also produces one of Berlin's most notorious annual events, *The Grotesque Gala*, that provides a platform for alternative artists of all mediums to express themselves in an atmosphere without censorship. "My work is very character based, and a direct reflection of me, my life, my obsessions, and current fetishes. I combine this with my inspirations from pop culture, religion, the occult, gender, and a little added glitter of course." You can catch her in December at The Queen Calavera in Hamburg, as well as at the Cabaret Bizarre & BRÖT party in Zurich. In January 2012, she'll be performing back in her native New York City for the first time in five years.

*Mad Kate* ([www.alfabus.us/index.html](http://www.alfabus.us/index.html)) arrived in Berlin in 2004 with the intention of starting a career in feminist performance art. She now hones her skills as a dancer, writer, performance artist, and member of two bands, *Kamikaze Queen* and *Bonaparte*, where she shares the stage with Clea Cutthroat. She's also co-owner of *Exit*, a fashion forward clothing/design store and performance space for the avant-garde. "There will never be enough time to explore all the different women I would like to be, but in each of these personas lay my intellectual and artistic interest in the politics of borders, both between bodies and within bodies. I think the term queer best describes what I do, because I hope that I can link my experience and voice to people of all genders," she proclaims. She's currently developing a solo performance project with another musician that she says will be feminist, queer, political, and aesthetically edgy.

*Sheila Wolf* ([www.sheila-wolf.de/225](http://www.sheila-wolf.de/225)) is Berlin's Rockabella Drag Queen who has been filming drag performances since 2005, caught her first burlesque performance a year later, and had her first burlesque stage performance in 2008. "As a female impersonator doing drag I don't feel comfortable taking off all my

clothes, preferring to lip synch and mix up gender roles instead," she admits. She's yet another that is changing the face of burlesque with her unique incorporation of drag onto the stage. "I love performing, and will be doing some television stuff, and I'm also planning an outrageous event that combines burlesque and drag", she says. She also maintains an online presence with her magazines, *Queerlesque* and *Burlesque Fashion Index*, as well as a reference guide to queer Berlin.

Finally, *Hedo-Lux* ([www.hedoluxe.com](http://www.hedoluxe.com)) has been a costume designer in Hamburg for more than 20 years, designing pasties, hats and other accessories, often selling them at burlesque shows. Like many others, he didn't think of doing burlesque himself until being asked by other performers. Since then, he's done many events, and recalls a performance at the London Burlesque Festival in 2010. "The most fun is when something goes wrong and you have to improvise. I once was wearing magnets on a costume that heated up, and when I finished my performance I had eight scars to remember that one by," he grins. He often looks for inspiration from eccentrics like Leigh Bowery, Klaus Nomi, and Amanda Lepore. As for the fashion side of things, "I just finished an Arlecchino costume that I've dreamed of making for years, and got to wear it out in public on 11.11.11," he boasts. He's performing next at the Helsinki Burlesque Festival in February.

The annual *Burlesque Hall of Fame* is held in Las Vegas, and gathers all the top performers from around the globe. This year several top prizes went to queer performers, including Reigning Queen: Miss Indigo Blue; Reigning King: Captain Kidd; and Reining Troupe: The Stage Door Johnnies. In fact, every man who competed for King this year was a gay man, and most went on to win in different categories. As well, there were several queer burlesquers that hit the stage to perform during one of the gayest years ever at this event. It's definitely one to put on your calendar to attend in June 2012.

From the pioneers to the current crop of emerging talent today, there's enough to tease and tantalize every taste. So for your next vacation, add some more sparkle and glitter to your itinerary. Find out where these divas are performing next, pack your bags, but leave your inhibitions at home.

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Bryen Dunn is a freelance journalist based in Toronto with a focus on tourism, lifestyle, entertainment and community issues. He has written several travel articles and has an extensive portfolio of celebrity interviews with musicians, actors and other public personalities. He's willing to take on any assignments of interest, attend parties with free booze, listen to rants, and travel the world in search of the great unknown. He's eager to discover the new, remember the past, and look into the future.

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### Events

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#### Queerlesque

[www.facebook.com/qlesquenola](http://www.facebook.com/qlesquenola)

#### Grotesque Gala

[www.myspace.com/grotesquegalaberlin](http://www.myspace.com/grotesquegalaberlin)

#### Burlesque Hall of Fame

[www.burlesquehall.com](http://www.burlesquehall.com)

#### Club Noir

[www.clubnoir.co.uk](http://www.clubnoir.co.uk)

#### Gotham Burlesque

[www.gothamburlesque.com](http://www.gothamburlesque.com)

#### Moulin Rouge

[www.moulinrouge.fr](http://www.moulinrouge.fr)

#### Crazy Horse

[www.lecrazyhorseparis.com](http://www.lecrazyhorseparis.com)

### Festivals

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#### Atlanta

[www.southernfriedburlesquefest.com](http://www.southernfriedburlesquefest.com)

#### New Orleans

[www.neworleansburlesquefest.com](http://www.neworleansburlesquefest.com)

#### New York

[www.thenewyorkburlesquefestival.com](http://www.thenewyorkburlesquefestival.com)

#### Helsinki

[www.helsinkiiburlesque.com](http://www.helsinkiiburlesque.com)

#### London

[www.londonburlesquefest.com](http://www.londonburlesquefest.com)

### Screen

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#### Dirty Martini

[www.ten-in-oneproductions.com](http://www.ten-in-oneproductions.com)

#### Behind the Burly Q

[www.behindtheburlyq.com](http://www.behindtheburlyq.com)