

a whole new takeoff

Two for Tease

Burlesque ain't your great-great-great-grandmother's strip show anymore

By BILL STUART

When it comes to on-stage nudity, would you rather be beaten into submission with a lead pipe, or tickled into submission by a feather boa? If you answered the former, a classic strip bar is probably the place for you. If you answered the latter, however, the neo-burlesque revival is where you'll find your thrills.

Burlesque—once the province of bawdy comedy, striptease and playful costumes, populated by celebrities like Lili St. Cyr (whose "reverse strip" had her emerge naked from a bubble bath to slowly dress in a ball gown) and Sally Rand, whose famous fan dance concentrated more on mystique than blatant display of bodily parts—is experiencing a full-on renaissance. There are communities popping up all over North America to both honour the traditions of burlesque, and doing something original. Call it neo-burlesque, or the New Burlesque—either way, there are numerous examples, including the Victoria-based pin-up team of BettiLu Bombshells (individually known as Bettina and LuLu Mae), and Vancouver's randy musical husband and wife duo of The Wet Spots. Such acts are rekindling the art of the tease, and appealing as much to the mind and funny bone as they are to the groin.

Burlesque, a century or so ago, was originally defined as a literary or dramatic work that ridiculed or satirized a particular subject. It took on a new definition from the 1930s to the 1950s as one of the most popular and widely accepted forms of entertainment, but then faded as television and other media took over. But now, it's become a veritable classical tradition.

Riding the revival wave, Vancouver's Wet Spots have traversed North America three times in the last two years, showcasing both their stage act and their debut CD, *Ribbed For Pleasure*.



The Wet Spots present fun (and educational) sex shows.

The Wet Spots
9pm, August 6 & 7
The Comedy Cellar,
789 Yates
Tickets \$10
412-1020

One trip saw the duo performing among an interesting array of talent at the New York Burlesque Festival (you know it's big when it has its own festival in New York).

"I came away from New York Burlesque Fest absolutely amazed at how our local scene rates among the best acts out there," says Wet Spots crooner-guitarist John Woods. "The costumes (sometimes) may have been a bit more expensive and the choreography may have been a bit tighter at NYBF, but there were very few acts that could match the conceptual brilliance of some of our local performers. I don't know if it's the cross-pollination of the burlesque, drag, fetish and costumed club-kid scenes here in Vancouver, but our best acts are keen to twist and subvert popular notions of what is sexy. I think what sets us apart is that we're not afraid to mix the glamorous with the clownish and the grotesque."

During our conversation, Woods and his partner in kink, Cass King, talked about American new burlesque artists like Scotty The Big Blue Bunny, a six-foot, seven-inch tall man who does his burlesque routine in a bunny suit; Rocky Roulette, who does a complete striptease out of a three-piece leisure suit while bouncing on a pogo stick, or Bonnie Kilrpe, who performs dressed in Ronald Macdonald make-up and wig. Not quite Blaze Star territory, to be sure.

But then, there are also groups such as BettiLu Bombshells, who are harkening back to the more traditional and glamorous era of burlesque. Bettina and LuLu Mae's performances and promotional photos draw inspiration from war-era pin-ups and movies. "It's playful and much heavier on the tease," says Bettina. LuLu Mae agrees. "Burlesque is about having fun, not about ending up completely naked."

Both women emphasize the importance of having fun with what they do, and also the strong sense of empowerment they feel from their act. "We are taking control of what we are doing," Bettina says, noting that her situation is significantly different from how it might have been in the past, when performers sometimes found themselves in situations where stripping was a last resort. "We do things our own way," Bettina adds.

The Bombshells are in charge of every aspect of their performances, from inventing their routines, doing the choreography and picking the music, to making their own costumes. When the duo do perform, they are often overwhelmed with the audience reaction. "It's great to hear laughter from the crowd," LuLu Mae says. "With burlesque, there aren't as many expectations as there are in a strip club. The audience is really respectful, both the men and the women."

The Wet Spots performance also shuns the strip club expectations. "Unlike a strip club, it's not so much a business transaction. Strip club-goers expect a 26-inch waist, breast implants and platinum hair," says King. But with the new burlesque, adds Woods, "Anything can happen. And dancers can come in all shapes and sizes."

For the Wet Spots, showing a little skin is only part of the show. The songs King and Woods perform are not only funny, but they often connect with the audience. "Sex is ripe for satire," Woods says. "We assume that the audience does [the things we sing about], whatever it is, spanking, threesomes... and poking fun at these things can be both hot and funny."

Since the Wet Spots are so openly singing about these bedroom shenanigans, it follows that many of the audience members will feel free to open up to King and Woods after hearing such ditties as "I'm Sweaty, Sticky and Covered In Lube." The duo have been told by attendees that their songs have inspired threesomes and had someone saying he wanted to have a threesome with King and Woods.

"When we perform, it feels like a much more empowered environment," King says. Empowering and educational.

Aside from their usual nightclub performance this Friday and Saturday at the Comedy Cellar, the Wet Spots are returning to town in a couple of weeks for the Fringe Festival, where they will stage *Sing Your Way To Better Sex*, a combination of songs, sketch comedy, multimedia and a primer to common sex toys.

So with all of this educational content bumping and grinding with a healthy dose of tease, one must ask if the mind is the sexiest organ? King concludes, "Nah, it's still the bum." M



BettiLu Bombshells play nice and naughty.

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