

# TITULAR HEROINES

*Strippers upended  
social mores with pasties, G-strings*

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

In the world of *va-va-voom*, there's never been anything quite like the twirling tassels and titillating tease of burlesque.

The entertainment has its origins in the satiric art of 16th- and 17th-century Italy and France, from the Italian "burla," a joke. However, what we know as burlesque, which flourished in America from the mid-19th through mid-20th centuries, comes from a mildly risqué form of Victorian theater popularized here in 1868 by Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes. They were succeeded in the first half of the 20th century by Gypsy Rose Lee, Sally Rand, Lili St. Cyr, Blaze Starr and Hartford's own Ann Corio, who became stars amid the sequin-clad fan dancers and seductresses fluttering with fringe and furs.

"We look at burlesque and see the glamour and the furs, but it wasn't considered classy to the general public," says Elsa Sjunneson, researcher with the Burlesque Hall of Fame's Burlesque Oral History project in Las Vegas.

Bawdy chorus girls in elaborate ruffled underthings shook their stuff during full-production musical numbers and paraded among comedy teams in skits riddled with horseplay and sexual innuendo. Before appearing in movies, Abbott and Costello played Eltinge Burlesque Theatre a burlesque house on 42nd Street.

Theaters like Minsky's Burlesque off Times Square, famous for its catwalk into the crowd and infamous for its regular police raids, featured headliners known for perfecting the art of desire rather than gratification. More tease than strip, they capitalized on comedic subtext and exited the stage tantalizing spectators just enough to make them sweat and yell for more.

Gypsy Rose Lee, who would write a book that spawned a deathless musical, was rumored to take 15 minutes to slip off one elegant glove and denied men the act of her disrobing with the girlish remark, "But I'll catch cold." And though she claims to have never given the full reveal, Ann Corio's act was said to be a rite of passage for Harvard men and even drew Supreme Court justices.

As these "teasers" gained fame and fortune, chorus girls bumped up the line to perform strip acts culminating in the characteristic G-strings and pasties. Each ecdysiast — thank you, H.L. Mencken — had a gimmick. Dixie Evans played Marilyn Monroe. Dusty Summers did magic. Satan's Angel twirled flaming tassels attached to her pasties. Each in turn drew devotees by the thousands. In the 1940s, La Savona secured such ardent fans among U.S. sailors that they flew her panties from their respective flagpoles.

But burlesque proved a bane to governing officials, Sjunneson says, its lechery associated with drugs and hooch, violence and mob relationships. By 1941, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia actually banned the words "burlesque" and "Minsky's" from New York City.

"He was so horrified by these women taking off their clothes, he wanted to shut it down completely," Sjunneson says. "It's actually why all the zoning laws are the way they are. He was trying to keep Times Square classy and classy did not include the Minsky's theater."

But the cat was already out of the bag (so to speak), and burlesque descended into a world of naked girls dancing at X-rated strip clubs. In recent years, there's been a nostalgia for, and revival of, the good ol' days of sugar-coated sexual comedy.

"A lot of people don't realize that they've seen burlesque in pop culture for years," Sjunneson says. "We're talking about something that's been ingrained in our culture and it's not going away anytime soon."

Productions from "Gypsy" and "The Night They Raided Minsky's" to the 2010 Cher flick "Burlesque" are obvious, but consider also the resurgence of the burlesque bombshell image from our cover girl Dita Von Teese to Katy Perry and even the boom of boudoir photo shoots. For burlesque's pervasiveness, though, look no further than The Muppets.

"Waldorf and Statler performed 'Take Ten Terrific Girls' from 'The Night They Raided Minsky's,'" Sjunneson says, "and there's a naked Muppet in the background."

Sure enough, during the opening number of episode 409 of "The Muppet Show" those two balcony curmudgeons warble, "Take ten terrific girls, but only nine costumes..." with one blushing Muppet dodging and weaving between chorus girls in her slip.

The legacy of the burly-q even continues onstage through the revival art of neo-burlesque, a modern twist on the classic form. The New York School of Burlesque has been imparting the art for more than 10 years, developing costuming and comedy, modern dance and drama, sexual satire and social parody. The revival has launched troupes like Seattle's Atomic Bombshells



Sally Rand with her famous feather fans.  
Photograph courtesy of Burlesque Hall of Fame.



and Chicago's Starlets.

"I did a number to 'Wipe out' in polka dot bikini and poured 'suntan lotion' all over myself in gold glitter," says Barb Hennelly, one of 11 Sizzling Sirens from Sacramento, Calif. "I fell out of my beach lounge and when I came up I had two life-size lobsters hanging from my pasties."

Barb, a mother and graphic designer by day who's known onstage as Skarlet Feverish, also played a Starbucks barista — her reveal involved ripping pasty sugar packets to "shimmy the sugar" — and performed a satire with fellow Siren Indiana Bones on the homoeroticism of superheroes.

The Sirens' monthly shows see upwards of 300 folks — skewing female and ranging from their 20s to 40s. So much more than a strip stunt, Barb says, the shows celebrate positive self-image and examine sexual politics.

"An integral part of the neo-burlesque movement is the inherently political act of taking your clothes off onstage, not for tips, but for yourself, to express yourself and celebrate your body, in a way that's beyond just celebrating glamour and sensuality," she says. "It's a political act to be a 41-year-old woman shaking my 41-year-old ass under bright lights."

Sjunneson, a performer herself and daughter of neo-burlesque performer and producer Paula the Swedish Housewife, grew up among feather boas and glitter galore. She takes the sexual politics even further, calling performers' power of stage presence inherently feminist.

"Women are using their power to get the audience's attention, which I think is really important to recognize," she says. "When you're learning burlesque, part of what you're learning is how to use your power."

Now there's a reason to shake it. ■