

THE BURLESQUE BOOM: A PHENOMENON OF COSTUME AND FASHION

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What do we mean exactly when we speak of *burlesque*? Etymology shows that the term comes from the French, both as an adjective and as a noun, and that it defines a parodic genre of sixteenth and seventeenth century literature that aped major classical texts and subsequently gave rise to a theatrical tradition. The first traces of this theatrical tradition can be found in Victorian England, and the first British *burlesque* artist mentioned in history is Eliza Vestris, who performed in *operetta* and sang popular songs. *Burlesque* went on to develop in parallel with *vaudeville*, French cabaret, variety acts, the British music hall and the French *café chantant*, but always with the same characteristics: it was a working-class show and often mimicked the affectations of the nobility.

From Europe, it crossed to the United States where, though initially parodying classical tales or plays, it was subsequently influenced by the *minstrel shows*, becoming a “container” full of comedy sketches, variety acts, dance and music. Among these early American *burlesque* performances, we can include the *Girlie Shows*, which used an entirely female cast.¹ The most famous of these was *The Black Crook*, staged in New York in 1866 and remembered as the first American musical, the result of the merger of an American company of actors and a Parisian dance company. Its novelty was dancers with short skirts and skin-colored silk tights that gave an impression of nudity. 1868 saw the arrival in New York of the British producer Lydia Thompson and her company *Imported British Blondes*, almost all of whom were female, who brought to the stage *Ixion*, a show version of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. Thompson’s dancers were anything but anonymous, having their

¹ In this article, the author focuses on the history of female *burlesque* in the U.S., although the history and development of this genre differs from country to country, as in France and Britain, it articulated with local realities and was influenced by the theatre, literature and costumes of those countries. *Burlesque* also includes many male artists, both in male costume and cross-dressing forms, and from 1900 onwards includes drag queens, not mentioned in the article.

own routines and being presented by name (they danced, sang, and acted). *Ixion* was on *tournee* for more than twenty years, marking the development of *Girlie Shows* and giving rise to an early form of female *burlesque*. Their success encouraged entrepreneurs to invest in such shows and, in 1869, the theatrical producer M.B. Leavitt created the first female *minstrel show*, combining elements of *vaudeville* and musical parodies that were given the term *burlesque*. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw great developments in female performances, focused on the “queens!” of the various companies as the absolute stars of the show. Among these we should mention the Barrison Sisters. They were a group of five girls known as the “the most sinful girls in the world” for the mainstreaming of the word “pussy” in their performances. They played on its double meaning by singing “Would you like to see my pussy?” as they raised their skirts and showed their panties, from where a black cat would jump out.

According to legend, it was in 1917 that *burlesque* first included an accidental striptease (a date that also marks the beginning of striptease): in a New York club, the dancer Mae Dix accidentally lost her dress and remained in her underclothes. This accident was greatly enjoyed by the audience and encouraged the impresarios, the famous Minsky brothers, to repeat it. In the early twentieth century, showing bare legs was possible, together with allusive and flirtatious talk, but not the naked body. This drew both criticism from the self-righteous and police intervention, to the extent that *burlesque* was prosecuted and police raids often netted performers directly on stage. Prohibition, however, stimulates avoidance, and the characteristic costumes and choreographies of the *genre* were invented to circumvent the prohibition of nudity. To cover nipples “pasties” were invented, and for the pubic area the “merkin” (a pubic wig) was used, while for underwear the G-string (a thong) was incorporated; accessories that even today differentiate a *burlesque* show from a striptease. Furthermore, to allow the dancers to dance naked, the fan-dance was invented, which used enormous fans to cover bodily nudity in a series of sensual rotating movements.

The 1920s and 1930s marked the *Golden Age of Burlesque*, when artistes were known as “exotic dancers” and were stars.

We may recall Sally Rand, famous—particularly in the 1930s—for her fan-dance and bubble dance (a dance with an enormous rubber ball), who was arrested several times in 1937 because she appeared to be naked; she was in fact wearing skin-colored tights. Then there was Gypsy Rose Lee, the star of the 1940s, defined as an “intellectual stripper” who reclaimed greater dignity for *burlesque* and laid down the foundations and rules for shows. We should also mention Lili St. Cyr, the “first lady of *burlesque*,” famous in the 1940s and 1950s, who created the bubble-bath routine. At the end of her career as a

performer, she devoted herself to creating her own line of lingerie, inspired by *burlesque* costumes and designed for wives who wished to titillate their husbands.

Later years saw a decline in *burlesque*, although not of its stars, of whom we may cite two examples: Dixie Evans “the Marilyn Monroe of *Burlesque*” and Jennie Lee “The Bazoom Girl,” who revived *burlesque* in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, from 1968 onwards, Jennie Lee worked on her museum of *burlesque*—*Jennie Lee’s Exotic World*—at a ranch in California, although she died before it was opened. It was taken over by her friend Dixie Evans and opened in 1990 under the name *Exotic World* (in 2006 it moved to Las Vegas in Nevada with the name *Burlesque Hall of Fame*²). Today, the public can still see a collection of costumes, posters and original accessories of the most famous performers in history. To promote the museum, in 1991, Dixie Evans set up the Miss Exotic World competition for new recruits to the world of *burlesque*, giving new drive to the genre.

1995 saw the birth of *The Golden Days of Burlesque History Society*,³ a non-profit organization founded by Jane Briggeman as a meeting point for all those who had worked in *burlesque* prior to 1965. The aim of the organization was to preserve the history of *burlesque* by publishing books, collecting materials and arranging meetings with dancers, singers, producers, stage technicians, costume designers, and choreographers, as well as theatre directors and owners who worked during the *Golden Age of Burlesque* all over the world. Briggeman’s mission is to ensure people do not forget an important part of the history of America and elsewhere. On the home page of the organization website www.burlesquehistory.com the following is written:

“You might say that ‘The Golden Days of Burlesque Historical Society’ was created ‘over lunch’ at the home of ‘Tanayo,’ once billed as ‘The Costa Rican Dream Girl,’ in December of 1994. Handing me an old address book, with scratched out faded names, many of which were stage names, she asked if I could help find old friends from her days on the *burlesque* stage. Three weeks later I accepted her challenge and the Burlesque Historical Society began to take shape.

When the search began, ‘Tanayo’ and I combined what addresses we had between us, which numbered close to twenty-five. But many of them were no longer good. People had moved, remarried or died. Several of the letters I sent out were returned. However some people we were looking for were found and they were very helpful. They were also interested in finding friends they had worked with in *burlesque*. So the group was beginning to form, even though

² *Burlesque Hall of Fame* www.burlesquehall.com. Accessed February 14, 2016.

³ The Golden Days of Burlesque History Society www.burlesquehistory.com. Accessed February 14, 2016.

at that time I am sure we didn't realize we were about to become 'a group.' What also helped in the beginning was the fact that Jennie Lee, known as 'The Bazoom Girl' during her career, did everything in her power to keep the dancers connected over the years. Jennie passed away in 1990, long before this group was created, but her interest in burlesque, its history and its people, has been a great help and inspiration to me over the years.

The growth of the Burlesque Historical Society was slow at first, and it still comes and goes in spurts. I suspect it may always be hard for me to comprehend how many thousands of people worked the various stages of burlesque, whether it was in theatres, clubs or carnivals. It took so many people to put on a show. Now stop and multiply that by all the shows that were playing simultaneously not only in the United States, but Mexico, Canada, Europe and the Far East. These shows all required: performers, whether they be strip-tease dancers, specialty dancers, comics, straight men, talking women, MC's, chorus line dancers or house singers; directors and producers; agents; musicians; stagehands; costume designers; choreographers; candy butchers; theater managers and owners; ushers and cashiers... and even still I may have left someone out. That leaves us with a lot of people to find! So we ask, WHERE ARE ALL THE PEOPLE WHO WORKED IN OLD TIME BURLESQUE?

As weeks progressed to months, and months to years, people were slowly being found. The list grew to 45, then 75, and at one time we knew where over 200 people were... all having worked in burlesque in one way or another. [...] But there has to be even more people out there somewhere... where are they? Can you help us locate them? If you know of anyone who worked in the burlesque theatres or clubs By or BEFORE 1965, (date negotiable)... please send me their information. Everybody is looking for somebody!

People continue to be found, and as long as they worked in old time burlesque in any fashion, they are a welcome part of this group. The group works well together, and they help find others. At this stage in the game from what I can tell, however, most of the men involved in burlesque are gone. They were usually older than the dancers. But the search continues, as it continues for all involved in the golden days of burlesque.

What 'The Golden Days of Burlesque Historical Society' is all about is quite simple. We re-connect old friends who worked in burlesque with one another, and share information. In the past, several Reunions have been held in both California and Las Vegas. Will there be more Reunions? I can't say for sure. What seems to be most important to the people in the group is that they receive the newsletters that are put out four times a year and that they can reconnect and stay in touch with old friends. What is most important to the Burlesque Historical Society is that the history of old time Burlesque is preserved.

We should never forget our past. Many of the names of people who were involved in burlesque are names you are probably not familiar with. That's because of all the thousands who worked the various burlesque stages. I feel

as though I have barely scratched the surface as far as learning names or about the various performers themselves. But I have help. I have learned so much from his group of individuals, not only about burlesque, but also about life. Their stories, and their histories, must be preserved before it's too late. The stigma surrounding burlesque must finally be put to rest. These people are and were performers of many talents. They all worked on a stage, out of reach of the audience. These performers put on a show...with comedy, musical numbers, dancing, costumes, scenery and lights. I only hope that we can continue finding others who performed on the many stages of burlesque before it is too late."

The 1990s marked the rebirth of *burlesque*, first in America and then in Europe and the rest of the world, influencing other arts and becoming a social and cultural phenomenon. This rebirth featured two styles: *Classic Burlesque* and *New Burlesque*. *Classic Burlesque* harks back to classic forms (such as the fan dance) in the choice of music, costumes and set design, and typical vintage garments of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, giving the show a retro identity. *New Burlesque* has adopted contemporary styles, and has been influenced by the cultures and subcultures of the 1990s: it is Old-Style *Burlesque* with elements of punk, rock, pop, uniting corsets and colored locks, tattoos, feathers and piercings. *New Burlesque* is a melting pot of classical and contemporary elements and a fertile terrain for experimentation.

To differentiate these two styles, we may compare two of the artistes who represent them: Dirty Martini (www.missdirtymartini.com. Accessed February 14, 2016) for *New Burlesque* and Dita Von Teese (www.dita.net. Accessed February 14, 2016) for *Classic Burlesque*. Dirty Martini has built her character on her opulent physique, so different from other models and dancers. Realizing that the shape of her body was unsuitable for dancing, which she had studied since she was six, she wanted a show without physical limits and discovered *burlesque*. She started performing in the 1990s in New York and soon met with success, becoming one of the most fascinating artistes of *New Burlesque*, not just in America, but also in Europe. She is one of the most choreographic performers on the contemporary scene, her shows recognized internationally for their mockery and self-mockery mixed with elements of the American subcultures, pop and rock. She won *Miss Exotic World* in 2004 and has now joined *Cabaret New Burlesque* (<http://cabaretnewburlesque.net>. Accessed February 14, 2016), a company that, in 2008, performed in Italy at the *Napoli Teatro Festival* (www.napoliteatrofestival.it. Accessed February 14, 2016). It was there that I discovered *New Burlesque* and was fascinated by it, because the female role it introduces was so different from anything that I had seen before in magazines and on television. Through her *New Burlesque* numbers, Dirty Martini urges women

to be themselves, criticizing the models imposed by the media that dominate the world of dance and fashion, praising imperfection and making herself the standard-bearer of a new feminism. For her, *burlesque*, besides being an art form, is a way of breaking ordinary genre stereotypes; it is the new punk rock, offering women a way of redefining themselves, without considering the limitations imposed on them by society. I asked a few questions of Dirty Martini (by e-mail on March 2010):

Stripping is often regarded as commercialization of the female body. Do you think that the same applies to new *burlesque*?

Because modern *burlesque* is created, performed, run by and glorified by women, the voice of the revolution is different than conventional stripping. Although I'm not the foremost voice of this discussion academically, I can say that the difference is in the preparation, intention and presentation of the show. The exchange is led by the performer and any situation is guided by that performer to their specifications. No one in the room is allowed the privilege of guiding that experience or choosing the person or exchange for their cash. Most of the time, the venue has no control over that either. The only recourse for guiding the show that the audience may have is not applauding or participating or going to get a drink when they don't like what's going on. That said the curator of the show creates an atmosphere that may be interpreted in any way by the audience and some audience members may have preconceived notions and beliefs that the performer cannot control.

Can new *burlesque* be considered a new feminist movement?

I believe in myself as a feminist super-hero! I myself and many of my colleagues do consider themselves feminist or queer artists, but the trouble comes in defining all of *burlesque*. I believe that any step in the direction of glorifying and not objectifying womanhood—that is the, strength, beauty, sexuality, ingenuity and thoughtfulness of women—is a step toward freedom. *Burlesque* may be a bit advanced for some countries and cultures to handle but I think it can be very liberating for women and their admirers in this world of male supremacy.

Dita Von Teese has, on the other hand, has made *Classic Burlesque* into a true life-style, to the extent of wearing vintage clothes at all day long. She has successfully recreated a retro image and become a fashion icon, immediately identifying her with the world of old-style *burlesque*. In her shows, as in her everyday life, she represents glamour, perfection, classic femininity, luxury, and the past, thus ensuring that her character is the top representative of the *burlesque* genre. Dita started in striptease at clubs when she was about 19, in the early 1990s, and, to distinguish herself from the others who came on stage

nude, she wore vintage-style lingerie. A natural blonde, she dyes her hair raven-black against her milk-white skin, creating a retro style, and always uses fire-red lipstick—nonconformist choices that led to her early successes. In 2002, she was featured in *Playboy*, presenting her image to the world. At that point, Dita realized that to escape from the striptease clubs and find a wider audience, she had to create a more stage-like show. This she did with a “luxurious bath in a Martini glass,” achieving worldwide success. She has modeled for Moschino and Jean Paul Gaultier, and been a testimonial for *Agent provocateur* and *Frederick’s of Hollywood*. *Wonderbra* has named a line of lingerie inspired by the 1940s and 1950s after her, and, in 2014, Dita created her own lingerie brand—*Von Follies*—which takes its inspiration from *burlesque*, including a line for “curvy women” and for new mothers. She says in an interview⁴:

Who could you imagine wearing the collection?

I think my lingerie collection is designed for anyone who wants to have glamour in everyday life... and, admittedly the collection is designed for myself as well! Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve been in love with lingerie as a symbol of femininity and womanhood. My lingerie collection is for those of us who revel in being a woman. I believe a woman should honour herself with nice lingerie that makes her feel sexy and confident; it shouldn’t be something to be put on for a man. I believe in the everyday cultivation of sensuality... If you want to be a seductress of the highest level, you have to understand what it really is to be sexy... it’s not about aiming to please other people, or thinking about what pleases another. A great seductress surrounds herself with beauty and pleasure, and others are seduced by this world that she creates and long to be invited into her world. I have always believed that lingerie can be a great tool of seduction, but the wonderful thing is that we are living in a time where we don’t have to choose between everyday lingerie and lingerie for seduction.

Who or what inspires your designs?

I am inspired by vintage details from my vast collection of vintage lingerie. I adore lingerie from eras gone by, but I also appreciate modern shapes and technological advances in the construction of lingerie. I am inspired to capture the beauty of retro style, but I believe in reinventing it in a modern and functional way. I’m also sometimes inspired by things I see in fashion; for instance when I go to the couture shows in Paris, I might see a beautiful and

⁴ Gow, Gemma. September 25, 2015. “Dita: My Boyfriend Thinks Suspensers Are Totally Normal!” *Look*. <http://www.look.co.uk/fashion/dita-von-teese-interview>. Accessed February 14, 2016.

priceless gown, and I might create lingerie that is inspired by the colour, or the lace, or design details. I also love to post photos on my Instagram account and ask people what their favourite colours for lingerie are, or which colour I should design next in the most popular styles, like my Madame X collection.

Underwear as outerwear has become such a big trend. Are there any pieces from the range that would work for this? If so, how would you style them?

I do love lingerie as outerwear... I am especially fond of my Dahlia bodysuit as a statement piece. I love to wear bustiers with high waisted pencil skirts and cardigan sweaters. It's chic to wear a fetishistic bra peeking out of a tuxedo jacket... I love a touch of something ultra-feminine with menswear. Lingerie allows you to have a secret persona that can be totally different from your usual fashion style... and I love letting a bit of contrasting lingerie showing. It adds interest and intrigue...

Describe the Dita Von Teese lingerie girl...

I guess she's like me! She believes in the power of glamour to transform and give confidence; she doesn't wait for someone to give her glamour, she makes it for herself, and finds ways of infusing glamour in her everyday life... like with lingerie and red lipstick, for instance. She also knows that glamour has nothing to do with wealth, age, size, shape or ethnicity. Glamour is for anyone who wants it. If you desire it, create it!

The *burlesque* revival can be explained by understanding the importance of different cultural factors, such as the vintage trend that has recently impacted fashion and the significant reaction to pornography dictated by the search for greater femininity. The success of *burlesque* is also due to its use of costume, in which Dirty Martini has been one of the greatest champions, supporting *New Burlesque* as well as New Feminism: freeing women from an aesthetic standard, from the dictates of fashion, and from a codified femininity. Her story is an example for so many ordinary women (who are not artists), who are now requesting performers to give them lessons in *burlesque* to express their femininity and teach them how to be seductive in an amusing way.

Initially a niche product, *burlesque* has exploded as a mass phenomenon, impacting female aesthetics, including brands of lingerie, accessories and clothing that have seen an opportunity for good business. Consequently, speaking of *burlesque* today no longer refers solely to a show *genre*, but to an well-defined fashion trend. Chantal Thomass and Agent Provocateur, as well as the Italian firms Moschino, Yamamay and Intimissimi have devoted several collections to *burlesque* style, enhancing brassieres and panties with

feathers and sequins; reintroducing corsets, suspenders and garter belts; it is a phenomenon that has been transformed into a business for firms and performers alike.

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