

Queer Femme Follies

These queer burlesque dancers are fighting their own sexual revolution, where dykes are proud to be flirty and feminine in fishnet. **By Lauren Marie Fleming**

Queer women's events are being taken over by fishnets, feathers and follies. Everywhere you turn there are round rumps shaking, beautiful breasts twirling and luscious ladies dancing. Not that I'm complaining; it's about time the queer world embraced the burlesque renaissance that's happening, and I'm tickled lavender that queer dancers of all varieties have teased their way into both the straight and queer performing worlds, leaving audiences begging for more.

Of course, the hardest part of writing about queer women in burlesque is defining "burlesque." Most dancers couldn't even give me a solid definition. Members of Vancouver's gender-bending troupe Stilettoes and Strap-Ons laughed at me sardonically. "Do you have four hours?"

Vidalia Paradise, of the San Francisco-based Diamond Diggers, offered a little more help. "Burlesque has a historical context ... it's a certain kind of artistic expression that is born of a vaudevillian performance era that has components of a ribald humor, an irreverence, fun-loving and sometimes political nature."

That's not what *Webster's* says, but every dancer from every troupe I interviewed seemed to fit into this definition. The Von Foxies of Seattle called themselves "erotic comedy," Stilletos and Strap-Ons called their performances "comedic interpretations of sexuality onstage," and Jen Gapay of Thirsty Girls Productions said that the performances at her event, the New York Burlesque Festival, contain "a mixture of comedy, sexuality and vaudeville all rolled into one." No matter how they're shaking their tail feathers, they do it to make you laugh.

And laugh you will. The comedy begins before the show has even started. I can't count how many times I giggled while talking to Pussy Liquor of Stilletos and Strap-Ons, or Alotta Boutré of Harlem Shake Burlesque in Oakland, Calif., and believe me, the names are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to absurdity in queer burlesque.

Case in point: Sir Loin Strip of Boilesque, a queer bearded lady burlesque troupe that holds the title of *Misters Trannyshack* 2005 in San Francisco, joined the Diamond Diggers in tickling comic fancies at the National Center for Lesbian Rights and Bay Area Community of Women's 2005 New Year's Eve party. With routines that invoked Buster Keaton, Sir Loin Strip entertained the audience while the Diamond Diggers made costume changes. When the gals returned to the stage, their sheer enthusiasm alone put a smile on my lips. With creative routines and perfect comic timing, their fabulous femme follies made sure the audience's last moments of the year were filled with hysterical laughter.

The Von Foxies also pride themselves in finding "the attraction and sexiness in absurdity." Their variety act, which often includes tricycles and fezzes, keeps the audience wondering what may be next and delights them when they find out. New York's Darlinda Just Darlinda calls her variety show a "Polyester Performance," a mix of burlesque, faux modern dance, psychedelic happenings, comedy sketches and drag queen ballet, often including headresses that resemble teddy bears. Dottie Lux, who performs with Red Hots Burlesque in New York, clowns around in her performances, literally. She says that "the world seems a little less serious when you're wearing grease paint." In this time of war and recession, it's nice to see some people aren't taking life too seriously.

Despite all this silliness, they take burlesque careers seriously. In their

upcoming documentary, *Gurllesque Burlesque*, Chicago's Sissy Butch Brothers examine the history and current revival of burlesque in the United States. To raise funds for their film, Red Vaughn Tremmel and Gwen Lis put on burlesque shows in Chicago to audiences of more than 1,000 people. They say they hope to use their documentary to "tell a moving tale about an irreverent and powerful entertainment form that continues to raise important questions about women, their sexuality and their public power in American culture."

On the West Coast, the members of the Diamond Diggers are some of the most organized and professional people I've ever met. Their hard work shows in expertly choreographed numbers and extravagant costumes, all designed by members of the troupe. Likewise, Miss Indigo Blue, founding member of Seattle's BurlyQ, has started both the successful Academy of Burlesque (also in Seattle) and TwirlyGirl.net, a Web site that sells titillating pasties. The Red Hots Burlesque troupe also has their own School of Shimmy, which enables people of all sizes, genders and colors to get a "Ph.D. in Take It Off-ology." At the end of their four-week program, students join their teachers onstage at one of the Red Hots' weekly performances. Nearly all do it in addition to holding "regular" jobs.

They take their sexuality seriously as well. Many have backgrounds in sex work, and dancers are often interested in debunking female sexual stereotypes with performances that also turn political. "Burlesque dance is a powerful form for the expression and articulation of ideas about sexuality, gender, class and politics," Blue says. She and all the other founding members of BurlyQ are queer former sex workers, something they feel no need to hide. The members of Stilletos and Strap-Ons say that a sexual woman can be an empowered woman, and they use their visibility to promote safe sex by passing out condoms to their audience members from the stage. Heidi Von Haught of the Von Foxies said that she "always liked the fantasy of being a stripper, but the realities of being a stripper were different than my own fantasies." She says burlesque doesn't objectify women the way stripping can.

And in many ways, burlesque provides a way for these women to embrace their own sexiness, no matter what size, shape or color. BurlyQ's Chica Boom is proud to be Xicana and holds the title of Miss Gay Latina 2005. Alotta Boutré of Harlem Shake Burlesque, this century's first African-American burlesque troupe, says that she's "determined to show my audience that not only is this size-22 body feminine and my mocha skin delightful, but that I'm a sexual, sensual being, no shame, no hiding." At the 2005 Miss Trannyshack competition in San Francisco, her bold and brash personality handled her wardrobe malfunction so well she left a hall full of queers screaming for more Boutré. Harlem Shake Burlesque, which also includes Missy Marmalade and founding member Simone de la Ghetto, makes it their goal to "pay homage to all of the Black burlesque performers that have graced the stage" and remind audiences that burlesque indeed has Black roots.

Still, the women must occasionally fight off discrimination and accusations. When Stilletos and Strap-Ons first appeared onstage, they faced a backlash within their own community for their performance choices and for inviting non-queer people into their audience. The Diamond Diggers have had to explain many times to fellow queers that they are neither objectifying women nor going against years of feminist movements. Instead, as one member said, they are "proud to have the luxury of being queer and feminine, and [we] respect those who have come before us, but we need to keep changing and moving forward." Viva la feminist revolution! ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: Darlinda Just Darlinda, Sissy Butch Brothers, Diamond Diggers, Harlem Shake, The Von Foxies, Chica Boom, Dottie Lux in clown drag, Jen Gapay, Dottie Lux, Stilletos and Strap-Ons, Indigo Blue.