

Risque business - With heels, pasties and little else, neo-burlesque dancers get cheeky onstage



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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

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Backstage at Miss Kitty's Saloon in downtown Little Rock, a dozen performers ready themselves for Kinky Geeky Burlesque. Many are dancing for the first time tonight, and panic swirls among glitter, hairspray and an unsettling scent wafting from the nearby lavatory. Model-types, bony in bras and tutus, slurp Jell-O shots and snap cellphone selfies. Other women, some meatier - costumed as Tank Girl, Pikachu from Pokemon and the dethroned princess Dany Targaryen - adhere pasties and false eyelashes. The sole "boylesque" performer, Scott Waller, 43, known as Puss Powerbottom, dots lime shadow under a brow, while the Diamond Dames' Ro Manic (Tonya Estell, 37, in real

life) bustles about with a clipboard. "I need everybody to tell me special sound instructions," she calls over thumping electronica.

Allie Tisdale, 24 (MiMi Meow of the Cabaret Kittens), says, "Can we do lighting instructions? Because Dr. Who had blue lighting."

The Diamond Dames are the longest-running Arkansas troupe, but they weren't the first neo-burlesque in town. From 2006 to 2008, there were Little Rock's Finest Assettes. And when the Dames formed in September 2010, Fort Smith already had the Girlie Show, which ran from early 2010 to 2012. Bree Schrader, 32, founder of the Dames, and Sarah Curtis, 27, founder of Hot Spring's Foul Play Cabaret, credit their initial inspiration to Brooklyn-based Pretty Things Peep Show, which first stopped in Arkansas in 2009.

Another troupe, Eureka Springs' Violetta Lotus, began in the summer of 2011, birthed from a burlesque class that Melanie Pierce, 32, taught at a local dance studio. Violetta started as traditional striptease, but the troupe has morphed into a carnival of scantily clad hula hoopers, belly dancers, robot acts, fire performers and ballerinas. It counts veterans of Fayetteville's Blossoms Burlesque, disbanded in early 2012, among its members.

Fort Smith has a three-person troupe, True Grit & Grind, founded in May by a 29-year-old former Dame, Beatnic Betty (real name withheld to protect her day job). Since North Little Rock's Cabaret Kittens are too nebulous to tally, that brings Arkansas' current roster to four. But if there was an original burlesque scene here - something before the mid'90s revivalist movement - it's well buried.

A BRISK HISTORY OF THE SLOWTEASE

According to Merriam-Webster, the word "burlesque" dates to 1667 and was a literary term, meaning "mockery, usually by caricature." By the 19th century, the word was also used for musical theater parody. Burlesque became synonymous with striptease around the turn of the 20th century, when dancers in skimpy outfits performed with minstrel and comedy shows. American burlesque peaked in the 1930s, offering its earliest dancers financial independence in a time of limited opportunity. Orval Allbritton, Hot Springs historian, says that legendary performer Sally Rand brought her fan dance to

the now defunct Palms Club across from Oaklawn racetrack in the early 1950s. But by the 1960s, burlesque had succumbed to go-go, exotic dancing and home television.

Neo-burlesque began with near-simultaneous troupes in New York and Los Angeles. Since 1991, international performers have competed for the form's most prestigious title, Miss Exotic World, Reigning Queen of Burlesque, at the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas. A tiny percentage of these performers make a living, but primarily, neo-burlesque is a time-consuming and expensive hobby.

"We always say this isn't our job," says Pierce, who was once part of a professional modern dance company. She performs as Venus Love and has a day gig at a spa. Violetta Lotus is booked a few times a month in Northwest Arkansas and Missouri. Sometimes the group accompanies bands. Once there was a wedding reception, and recently, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art commissioned a burlesque interpretation of some paintings.

"We drive our own cars. We make our own costumes. If it's an out-of-town show, we get our own rooms," Pierce says. She juggles about 15 hours a week of troupe duties with her job and caring for her 5-year-old son. Violetta has 30 members, but only a handful perform at most shows. The group is paid anywhere from \$100 to \$2,000, which they split between the night's performers. Pierce says she never breaks even.

And for Curtis, who dances as Ruby Lead with Hot Spring's Foul Play Cabaret, burlesque is a full-time job. She dedicates about 40 hours a week to the troupe and tends bar to pay bills. Other members include a tattoo artist, a photographer, a pole dance instructor, restaurant servers and clothing store cashiers. But they're angling for careers in burlesque.

SPA CITY SWEETHEARTS

Foul Play came out of an informal group called the Spa City Sweethearts. In November 2010, Curtis emailed 50 women, requesting their help with a community burlesque show to raise money for the annual rock festival, Valley of the Vapors. Eleven women agreed to perform. "Some of us had never even worn high heels for a long period of time. And we were walking around in high-heeled shoes, on a stage that was rickety, trying not to break our face and remember dance routines and sew our first costumes," says Brittany Thompson, 27, who dances as Violet D'Vine.

Performers with high school drama experience taught the others "how to turn your inner thigh away from the audience so that they don't see that extra jiggle, how to

bend over without looking like a blob," Thompson says. They borrowed moves from YouTube, Moulin Rouge and classic cinema and had a few preliminary socials, "to get the jitters out, because we were about to get naked in front of each other and complete strangers."

Roughly 200 people attended the first Sweethearts show Feb. 12, 2011. It went over so well that afterward Curtis, Thompson and a few others began producing monthly burlesque revues at Maxine's as the Foul Play Cabaret. They also held a 2013 Sweethearts show and are planning a 2014 show, open to anyone who wants to perform.

Current Foul Play members (six female dancers, a male host and a male stage butler) range in age from 21 to 35. General admission is \$15, tables can be an additional \$50, and crowds routinely hit 150. Door proceeds are divided among performers, while merchandise sales (handmade pasties and fascinators) and fundraisers (car washes, pinup workshops) go to a tour-van fund and rent for a studio, where the troupe rehearses and holds weekly meetings. Promotional photos are constantly updated, and one member, Rosa Lee Bloom, has a YouTube channel.

Foul Play members haven't attended many competitions, but they have caught the eye of Diamond Jim, a Dallas promoter who booked a few of them to dance with some of the biggest names in neo-burlesque. They've also done pinup modeling published in industry magazines such as Bachelor Pad. "Career burlesque performers, that's how they make their money. They model or they make costumes and sell them to other performers. Nobody makes a living from dancing," Curtis says. Before shows, the Foul Play Cabaret members gather in Maxine's lofted green room. They lounge on a vintage sofa, pass around a spray bottle of liquid skin (meant to camouflage bruises and bug bites), sip frothy concoctions from fishbowls on stems (one drink, the Saint Sarah, is named for Curtis), and pick through retro train-cases for costume pieces. They usually arrive two hours before a show, decked in cocktail dresses and pencil skirts, makeup mostly in place and hair knotted in pin-curls and scarves. Their considerable tattoo collection and the fact that they'll soon shimmy onstage in little more than G-strings does nothing to diminish the perky, Noxzema-girl glow bathing the tiny space.

Megan Lyod, 26, has never missed a show: "I have favorite acts from all the girls. There's boas and rhinestones. Everything just gets more extravagant."

Over two and a half years, she has watched the Foul Play troupe mature: "They've always been confident ... But their presence onstage, it's more like an actual thing now."

Their personas vary, from coquettish and naughty to acrobatic and languorously sexy. But they're all classically proportioned and conventionally pretty, with well-crafted costumes and clever stage production. Sometimes they perform tributes to icons, and once, they did an entire show as characters from Quentin Tarantino movies. According to other Arkansas performers, their ambition is not misplaced. "When they take the stage, they seriously sparkle and shine," says Waller, the Dames' boylesque performer.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROCK

Little Rock's Diamond Dames are, by design, bawdier and more political. "I used to be a stripper-stripper, an exotic dancer," says Schrader, who dances as Bree Von BuxXom. "Strippers, you're shot after a few years. But burlesque dancers, they can dance in wheelchairs and walkers. Burlesque embraces all body types. In burlesque, in your 60s, 70s, 80s, you're in your prime. That's when you make the good money."

Schrader traveled to Houston for a pinup class offered by renowned performer Bettina May. When she returned, she posted a Facebook ad for dancers. For a while, the Dames had monthly shows at the rock venue Juanita's. Now the four-member troupe performs mostly at gay bars, geared toward male patrons. (Audience member Conrad Lewis, 29, explains the appeal: "I appreciate the human form, not just male or female.") Schrader is an Apple representative by day. By night, she does booking and adds dazzle to costumes, since she refuses to perform in anything straight from the rack. Estell, whom she terms "my partner in love and burly-q," helps with administration. Eventually they hope to start a regional competition along the lines of the Memphis Burlesque Classic.

At the 2012 Memphis Classic, Waller, 43, took home the 2012 title for "Most Dazzling." His trophy was a Barbie doll, spray-painted gold. "Burlesque is about making fun of something," he says. His acts are intentionally cartoonish. He twirls tassels on his pasties, tugs gloves with his teeth, peels thigh-highs and wiggles in a way that would be perfectly at home on *Toddlers & Tiaras*. It's difficult to imagine him troubleshooting the iPads of state representatives during daylight hours.

"At my old job [with another state agency], my co-workers came to a show. It did cause some issue, because there were some older people who did not like it. Here in this office, it's not a big deal," he says.

Dames performances are loose, juxtaposing jazzy numbers with humor and occasional grinding. It's less about being perfect and more about elevating the imperfect. "When women come to me and say, I wish I could do that, I say, honey you can," Schrader says. "And they say, oh, I have cellulite, and I'm like, shake it like you don't got it."

BIBLE BELT BURLESQUE

Per Arkansas law, no one can appear onstage without a degree of strategic covering. And thus far, no troupes have experienced public backlash. Nor has Maxine's, the most consistent burlesque venue in the state, received any complaints, according to office manager Miranda Jeane. "The burlesque performers, myself included, we're just so sweet and wholesome-ish We're not acting like crazy sex maniacs People seem to get upset about sexuality more so than about low level comedy," Waller says. "But there's always that worry that someone is going to get pinched about it and go, oh my God, do you know what they're doing? You can see a boob."

At the Sweethearts shows, a few performers wear masks or refuse to use their real names. Members of Foul Play say their families are supportive but most don't attend shows. However, Thompson's grandfather came to the first Sweethearts show. "He didn't judge," she says.

"We have to be really careful. There are still people out there, and they think burlesque means stripper. So we are constantly, constantly trying to invite people to our shows, to show them what we're about," Pierce says. Her troupe, Violetta Lotus, includes strait-laced professionals such as a teacher and a nurse.

Among troupe leaders, only Beatrice Betty worries. "My looks are relatively distinctive. You'd recognize me, but unless you're going to a burlesque show, you wouldn't be looking for me. If my co-workers found out, I would lose my job," she says. But she formed True Grit & Grind anyway, because, "Fort Smith needs it and I know it sounds hokey, but it really is empowering. Burlesque has given me so much confidence in my everyday life. I used to be a girl with bad skin, chubby ... It really helps you feel comfortable in your own skin. And it gives you creative outlets."

Or maybe, burlesque simply is your outlet. "If I was a normal middle-aged white guy, I would probably get a new wife or a new motorcycle," Waller says. "But I'm not into all that. Burlesque is my midlife crisis."