

# Fantasies

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## The resurgence of 50s-style **BURLESQUE** in Canada

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throughout history, according to burlesque legend and mainstream performer, Dita Von Teese, in her recent book *Burlesque and the Art of the Tease*. One life was its form as a theatrical satire in ancient Greece and all over Europe, and the other making it known as striptease in America.

"Some like to tell me that America guttered burlesque, that it was a well-intentioned visitor to New York City promptly debased by horny blue-collar workers with drinking problems," Von Teese writes. "But if you look more closely, you'll find that the father of burlesque was really a playwright of fifth-century BC Athens, who had his head in the proverbial gutter long before there was anything but forests and teepees in America."

Throughout history, burlesque of one kind or another has flourished in society, and Canadians

also played a large part in bringing burlesque back into the mainstream.

"I think the burlesque performer Dita Von Teese has had a huge influence in the mainstream and media, and burlesque is becoming more popular as a result. People like the Pussycat Dolls and Christina Aguilera have also been making burlesque more public," D'Vine says. "I think that this is for the best, because influencing society to appreciate something different from how women are normally portrayed in this type of industry has to be a good thing. I would think that it would be a lot more logical and ideal for people to idolize someone like Dita rather than Britney Spears."

Burlesque in the 21st century, often referred to as "neo-burlesque," is a mix of a wide range of performance styles, with its basis rooted in traditional

performers throughout the 50s, like Evangeline the Oyster Girl, set the stage for burlesque making headlines in mainstream media.

"[Her] rivalry with an underwater 'peeler'—the girl held her breath and disrobed in a tank of water onstage—led her to hack at the glass with a hammer until it shattered; the stripper inside sunk to the floor, and the audience were drenched," Von Teese writes. "Wily Evangeline was thrown off the stage and on to the cover of *Time*."

Burlesque theatre is often looked down upon and considered sinful by feminists, or shrugged off by those who can't distinguish the performance art from stripping. D'Vine, however, sees burlesque as an expression of empowerment for female sexuality, and an opportunity to bring otherwise taboo women's issues to the forefront.

embraces burlesque as an empowering experience for both the performer and the female audience members.

"[I think] a sexualized female who is in total control of what she's doing and what she isn't doing is ... what feminism is about. There are women of every shape and size doing this and it's totally liberating," D'Vine says. "Our crowds generally draw in about 70:30 females to males. We represent every woman and I think that is totally empowering."

Ann Duffy, a women's studies professor at Brock University, agrees that burlesque provides a venue for women to be open about their sexuality, and explores different avenues to allow the topic of sex and women's issues to become more acceptable in society.

"Burlesque, it seems to me ... allows for a playfulness about women and their sexuality, which is often absent from both hardcore and mainstream society," Duffy says. "The 'stripper' in the documentary *Not a Love Story* used her strip act to make fun of stereotypes of female sexuality and in this way her act would likely fit into the burlesque tradition—making fun, but in a good-natured fashion, [and] being open to sexuality as exploration, as both serious and funny."

"One could argue that women have a vested interest in an approach to their sexuality which is less serious and dramatic and obsessive, since it is in these forms that women may find themselves victimized."

From its origins to its transformations into the 21st century, the burlesque performance genre has raised controversy, provided entertainment, dealt with significant issues, and brought women's sexuality into the spotlight without being trashy.

As described on the website for Magnolia Movies' 2003 burlesque documentary, *The Anatomy of Burlesque*, "Of all the arts, burlesque may offer the truest likeness of ourselves, the real picture in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*—grotesque, libidinous, fleshy, irreverent—and immensely watchable."

Though it may never be accepted by everyone in society and may always remain somewhat of a taboo genre, it's that lingering air of mystery and naughtiness that makes burlesque what it is, anywhere from Minsky's to Miss Mitzy Cream's Kitten Revue.

"I would love for burlesque to be my way to make a living but that is just not something that is possible—I don't even make enough to pay for my costumes. But I love theatre and I love performing, and so that's why I keep on going," D'Vine says.

"I love and appreciate the dingy underground nightclub feel and the somewhat taboo social feeling that burlesque seems to carry. It gives a sense of mystery; a sense of sensuality like it might have had at Minsky's back in the good ol' days."

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***—Virginia D'Vine***



seems to be staying true to this tradition. There has been a recent resurgence of burlesque over the years, with over ten burlesque troupes forming in Toronto alone since 1998.

Vancouver just finished celebrating its International Burlesque Festival, which brought Vancouver's burlesque community and performers from around the world together.

"I feel that modern burlesque represents a very healthy and positive change for women and sexuality. We are in no way your average pornstar-like bleached-out blondes with fake breasts, spread-eagle for a quick dollar," D'Vine says. "We are everyday women with curves, bellies, tattoos, hips—you name it. We are the anti-media females and I am so happy to be part of bringing back the fact that every woman is beautiful and anyone can be sexy without being exploitative."

Many burlesque performers today are combining the performance genre with issues like politics, feminism, and gay and lesbian rights, by expressing these significant topics through dance, lyrics and comedy. Popular musicians and performers have

burlesque, and an emphasis placed on the "tease" in striptease.

Von Teese notes that there's something lacking in modern burlesque that would be very difficult to regain: the shock factor that made the act so taboo in the first place. In today's largely desensitized and highly sexualized media, it would be nearly impossible to have the same powerful impact that burlesque legends had during their reign in the 50s.

"If you ask me, publicity stunts are regrettably lacking from today's scene. When I read the histories—and rediscover the stories of burlesque's great characters—I cannot imagine that life was ever so silly, so colourful, so fun," Von Teese writes. "It seems to me that every great burlesquer was at one point arrested on obscenity charges. Maybe it's time burlesque renewed the art of the stunt. The world would be a brighter place."

Burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee, who made a name for herself performing in New York City's Minsky's Burlesque show in the early 20th century, may have been the first to introduce the art of the publicity stunt. Later,

"To me burlesque expresses empowerment for female sexuality. Without women coming out as sexually empowered and creative females during the early eras of burlesque, there would be no sexual revolution; there would be no stepping forward for women's rights," she says.

"In my opinion, you simply cannot work with issues like rape, prostitution and AIDS without talking about it. If something like women's sexuality isn't expressed and taken seriously, then it becomes taboo. If something is taboo then it isn't acceptable to talk about. We need to talk and we need to be in control of ourselves, not only just sexually but in every possible way."

"To me, this is the only way to work towards a better environment for women—a place where rape can be openly discussed and a woman isn't embarrassed, and a place where a woman can carry condoms without being called a whore."

Burlesque's revival is often referred to as a new form of feminism, although not everyone is convinced—some continue to see burlesque theatre as an exploitation of women's bodies. But D'Vine