

The BOLD and the *Beautiful*

Celebrating femininity and empowerment,
burlesque dancing is making a big comeback

by Christie Judson



Diamonds and feathers and leather! Oh, my! Add some BeDazzled pasties, a healthy dose of parody and a little (or a lot of) jiggle, and you've got a recipe for burlesque – an old-time art form known for its classically styled strip “tease” and often-riotous humour.

No, this isn't your average “bump and grind.” Though, it's safe to say, you will find a lot of shimmy, and a considerable amount of shake.

While later adding the playful element of peeling away glittery costuming to songs like Jelly Roll Morton's *Sidewalk Blues*, burlesque originated in the 1840s as a form of satire that mocked the day's political and social landscapes, as well as the more established forms of entertainment, such as Shakespearean plays and opera.

We are all flawed, but we get up there in spite of our flaws...

With its flashy pageantry – met by audiences with both excitement and disdain – burlesque grew in popularity throughout the late 1860s, particularly with the arrival of burlesque troupes such as Lydia Thompson's “British Blondes.”

Paris's famous Moulin Rouge cabaret, known as the spiritual birthplace of the modern can-can dance, was built in 1889 and soon became a fashionable hot spot for French society. The classic interpretation of striptease, which emphasized the act of undressing (not the state of being undressed), originated about the same time.

Eventually, modern burlesque developed its own distinguishing characteristics, which included minimal costuming; sexually suggestive dance, plot lines and staging; quick-witted humour laced with puns; and

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Danielle Swanson, a.k.a. Lola Frost

short sketches or routines.

While audiences loved the simplicity of the playful entertainment, the roots of burlesque can be traced back to important shifts in North American culture.

In his book, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Robert C. Allen writes: “Without question, however, burlesque's principal legacy as a cultural form was its establishment of patterns of gender representation that forever changed the role of the woman on the American stage and

later influenced her role on the screen... The very sight of a female body not covered by the accepted costume of bourgeois respectability forcefully if playfully called attention to the entire question of the ‘place’ of woman in American society.”

“Burlesque is both an empowering and embracing art form,” says Danielle Swanson (a.k.a. Lola Frost), member of the Sweet Soul Burlesque troupe, co-founder of the Starlet Harlots and a burlesque instructor at Tantra Fitness, with locations in Langley and Vancouver.

“There are many different layers. It's a philosophy – an attitude. It's about finding your own style and owning your own art.”

While Swanson says her shows – which can be seen at the Keefer Bar in Vancouver every Thursday night – give people an opportunity to explore their sensual side, they are rooted in comedy and theatre.

“It's not a stereotypical (performance),” said Swanson. “Everyone is unique. We are all flawed, but we get up there in spite of our flaws and (celebrate) the beauty of our bodies and ourselves. It gives us an opportunity to combine all the elements and present a truly unique form of expression and entertainment that engages us and our audience.”

Though its popularity hit a pinnacle in the 1940s, burlesque began to lose its mass appeal in the 1950s as many of the shows were beginning to focus on increasingly risqué performances and less on the genre's theatrical heritage.

However, a modern revival began in the late 1990s. Again, focusing on emphasizing costuming, performance and the “tease,” versus overt sex, burlesque continues to experience a big comeback among both male and female audiences.

continued



Lola Frost performs

We let our butts shake, our tummies jiggle and our boobs go...

This May 5-7 will mark the sixth annual Vancouver International Burlesque Festival (VIBF). With performances taking place at the Rickshaw Theatre, the Vogue Theatre and the Biltmore Cabaret, the festival will feature six productions and 21 showcase performers from Vancouver and beyond.

Known for their light-hearted body humour, lavish costumes and spot-on comedic timing, the Victoria-based Cheesecake Burlesque Review is just one of the popular troupes that has applied to perform at the high-energy festival.

"In burlesque, we draw a lot on history, parody and humour," says Champagne Sparkles (who preferred not to give her real name), director of production and bookings for Cheesecake Burlesque Review. "Some of our acts contain silly double entendres or some type of a twist. They're a mini vaudevillian show where we sing, act, dance and tell a story around the classic art of striptease."

An environmental consulting company owner during the day, "Sparkles" was first introduced to burlesque at a friend's 28th birthday party. As part of the festivities, the all-female party goers learned about the history of burlesque, then choreographed their own "show." Eventually, the living room act turned into a packed house at the Victoria Event Centre.

Today, her sought-after troupe performs nearly 40 shows each year throughout Canada and the United States.

"Burlesque is about accepting yourself as you are and embracing the way your body moves," says Sparkles. "We let our butts shake, our tummies jiggle and our boobs go. It feels good." 

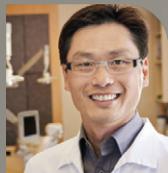


Champagne Sparkles (second from left in back row) and fellow members of the Cheesecake Burlesque Review

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