

2022

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Recommended Citation

Eddy, Chris (2022) "Why is Burlesque Still Relevant as an Art Form?," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 47, Article 22.
DOI: 10.46428/ejail.47.22
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol47/iss1/22>

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2022 Ella V. Schwing Award
for Best Essay in First-Year Writing, ENGL 1157

Why is Burlesque Still Relevant as an Art Form? **by Chris Eddy**

I was covered in sweat beneath my skimpy costume as I walked through the dingy Texas dive bar to the stage. As I stepped into the blueish miasma of cheap LED lights and cigarette smoke, the band blasted into my number with ragged aplomb. A sea of rowdy bikers, cowboys and random tourists hooted and catcalled at my silver lame shorts and football pad sci-fi armor. My dance partner, a tremendous man clad in a glittering tunic, his face smeared with black and white makeup, lumbered on to the stage. Pointing his plastic laser pistol at me, he exclaimed, "I am Lord Xanthor the Chaste! Bow before me Chest Blasterson!" The audience roared with laughter. Counting off the steps, we performed our mock battle, stripping off most of what we had on in the process. Finally, reaching the climax of the act, our characters realize they are in love and share a passionate kiss. Before the stunned audience can recover, we are out in their midst, gyrating at their tables and collecting dollars in what is left of our costumes..

It was 2013 and I was pinch hitting for a regular cast member in a touring burlesque show. Though I was already an experienced actor, having been in scores of stage productions since I was a child, I learned a lot about performing during those two weeks. Today, my burlesque career is long over, but my partner, The Vivacious Miss Audacious, is an internationally traveling burlesque performer and producer of several popular shows. As a result, I spend a lot of time in the community, watching performances and sometimes helping out backstage. I have observed these shows becoming bigger and more numerous through the years, and I have sometimes wondered; what is it that makes burlesque so relevant to the modern audience? Before we get to that though, let's take a quick look through burlesque history.

The best place to start is with the career of Lydia Thompson, a British actress and producer who revolutionized burlesque in the late 1800's. In *Burlesque {and the New Bump-n-Grind}*, author Michelle Baldwin states "Thompson and her company shocked and delighted with their brief costumes, portrayals of classical male roles, and integration of witty satire between lines of respectable text" (1). While daring in the early 1900s for the combination of risqué dances and pointed social humor, its popu-

larity waned during the 1950s and 1960s, as audiences flocked to grindhouse movie theaters and strip clubs. Historian Alan Trachtenburg, in the foreword of *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque ad American Culture*, speaks of burlesque in the 1960's and its "...decline into seamy, quasi-pornographic theater for almost almost exclusively male audiences" (xi). The 1990s revival turned this around, with an influx of female producers such as Lorelei Fuller, Michelle Carr and Billie Madley, whose focus was on reclaiming the legacy of satirical burlesque in the tradition of Lydia Scott, but with a nod to the performers of the 1950s and 1960s.

But what really happens at a burlesque performance? Let's take a look at the interaction between performer and audience in a typical show. In order to keep the energy level high, the audience at a Burlesque show is expected to cheer, holler, and toss money on to the stage during the performance. This reciprocal relationship with the dancer benefits both watcher and watched. The performer gives more to the audience creating the brouhaha, because it is exhilarating to hear the roar of approval and see money landing on the stage. The audience, given a space to express themselves with wolf whistles and ribald encouragement, is drawn in to the action. The result is a kind of entertainment that not only fulfills its purpose as a diversion, but creates and sustains a vibrant community of artists and fans. We need only to look at the recent popularity of interactive theater such as murder mystery dinners, or *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, productions that integrate spectators into the action, to see that the trend in live entertainment is audience participation, and lots of it. Yet, this is not the only way the audience and performers draw upon one another in burlesque.

When thinking about the relevance of this form, we should also explore the ways that burlesque has increasingly focused on the inclusion of Black, Latino and Asian voices. Calamity Chang's *NYC Asian Burlesque Fest* and Jeez Louise's *Jezy's Juke Joint* are examples of long running and successful showcases for performers of color. Current day producers are also curating shows to mirror their diverse audience, because they know that we love to identify with the performers on stage. Additionally, that thought that a vital American art form should represent Americans of all kinds extends to the increased visibility of transgender and non-binary people in the community. As the genre develops a greater vocabulary of viewpoints it is better able to reflect the audience. Greater opportunities for these performers to be heard and seen is essential for burlesque as we know it now to grow, both as an art form and a source of income for performers of traditionally marginalized groups.

Although there is no shortage of classic fan dance acts or amazing acrobatic feats in burlesque, the tradition of mixing humor with striptease will always keep people coming back because there is nothing quite like it in live entertainment. Where else could you see a sleazy Bob Ross, a stripping Sta-Puft Marshmallow man, and the lusty Mario Brothers in a single night? Stripping becomes a vehicle for comedy, thus transforming what we often think of as a transgressive act (stripping or watching a stripper) into a socially acceptable, even positive, activity. This is at the heart of what is so fascinating about this type of theater. As a performer, you have the ability to fuse the sensual and grotesque with slapstick comedy, as in the popular Halloween act where we see a zombie strip off their clothes and then strip off their skin. It's an intoxicating brew for adventurous artists that is unlike any other kind of performance. Like the classic film comedy, *Some Like it Hot*, or *The Benny Hill Show* television program, much of the evergreen appeal of burlesque is this playful interaction of comedy and sexuality.

So why has burlesque, as a form that has been around for more than a hundred years continued to find purchase with modern audiences? Is it the diversity of the performers, who draw a wide spectrum of people into the community? The humor that transforms a striptease act into something more? These are both important in the genre's ability to survive cultural changes, but the real magic of burlesque is the synergy between performer and audience. As a performer, the act I rehearsed so many times didn't come alive until I was in front of an audience, improvising based on their feedback and interacting with them. As an audience member, I found burlesque to be fulfilling because the energy at these shows was unlike anything I had ever experienced. This is an art form whose stock in trade is outrageous humor and over the top glamour, so the fans match that intensity, filling dive bars and theaters with cacophonous roars and sending dollar bills raining down on the stage. Between watcher and watched, a space is created for adventurous improvisation and risk taking that constitutes more than the sum of its parts or the subtraction of its clothes.

Work Cited

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