

Shaboobie, boylesque and skull-and-crossbone pasties

With 'crunking grannies, singing pornstars, dirty magicians and a giant banana split,' burlesque ain't what it used to be

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 8, 2010



Ms. Shaboobie Boobarella, who says her grandma taught her how to shimmy at age three, is flanked by Valentina Virago and Eric 'Eroc' Carbery at the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, PNG, Vancouver Sun

On Thursday night, Ms. Shaboobie Boobarella, star of this week's Fifth Annual Vancouver International Burlesque Festival at the Rickshaw Theatre, kindly agreed to an interview before the 9 p.m. show.

She was, longitudinally, a petite thing, standing short even in her high heels, while latitudinally, her Tropic of Cancer had a circumference of breathtaking proportions. It measured, she estimated, around a 40D, and it billowed over the top of her corset like twin loaves of rising bread. She had big lovely eyes, which were set off by false eyelashes the size of hay rakes, and her long blond hair was held back from her face by two large peony-like barrettes, the look of which recalled Princess Leia's hairdo, if Princess Leia were going to a Halloween party. Her skin was ivory. Her lipstick was scarlet red. If the art of burlesque is about the more lurid colours of sex and comedy, Ms. Boobarella was its pale canvas.

She was 34, hailed from Melbourne, Australia, and has lived in Vancouver for the last six years. Burlesque is her birthright, one that began right here.

"There's a fabulous cabaret scene in Melbourne. And my father was a cabaret entertainer who

always had crazy bands mixing, like, '60s Bollywood music with go-go guitars, and my mother was a model and choreographer, so I was brought up in this sort of socialite world with a lot of strange characters."

It was her grandmother, though, that trailblazed her way to burlesque.

"My grandmother was Misty Morningstar. She came out of a reservation in Saskatchewan in the 1950s to Vancouver, actually, and became a burlesque dancer on Hastings Street in its heyday when it had all those great nightclubs. She married an Australian sailor and moved over to Australia -- which is how I came about, eventually -- and she taught me to shimmy when I was three."

Why burlesque? Why stripping?

For someone with a physique as generous as Ms. Boobarella's, the stage was a liberation. It allowed her to be what she was. Zaftig.

"To me, it's a bit of a statement for me to be, like, 'Hey I exercise as much as you and eat less, but I'm bigger than you and I'm going to put it out there on stage, and why should I be ashamed?'

"To me, it was empowering because I came from a situation where people were saying, 'Hey, you're a fatso,' and it was very unjust. And I came here, and it was like, So what? I'll show them. And I certainly did."

She joined what was a burgeoning burlesque scene. Vancouver is among the centres of burlesque in North America, but it is not the old burlesque of Tempest Storm and Gypsy Rose Lee and the Penthouse Cabaret. It's what some call neo-burlesque, an edgier mix that ranges from a campy reverence for the old burlesque fan-dancing to routines that draw upon the more modern, and sometimes seamier influences of cinema, sado-masochism and pornography.

Saturday's 10 p.m. show, for example, will feature the Best of The Taboo Revue put on by the Screaming Chicken Theatrical Society, with, to quote the show bill, "Crunking grannies, singing pornstars, dirty magicians and a giant banana split." Sunday's 10 p.m. show will offer the Corrupt Cabaret, featuring "TV, Movie Themes and Jingles with hilarious interpretations of Little House on The Prairie, Charlie's Angels, and Save-On-Foods to name a few." And the Sunday midnight show will present the Vyntage Noir Fetish Burlesque, "a dark and twisted bump and grind."

On Thursday night, the night I was there, the lobby filled up with a fun crowd -- girls with hairdos the colour and shape of candy cotton, women hourglassed into lace-up corsets, men in fedoras. Kiosks were selling black sequined pasties embossed with skull-and-crossbone insignia, and T-shirts printed on the front with, among other things, drawings of speculums. One of the revue's performers, who identified herself as Little Miss Risk, stood off in a corner of the lobby by herself in her street clothes, wearing a pillbox hat, an elegant pink Chanellike suit, ivory stockings with black embroidery stitched up the back of the leg and, on her face, what appeared to be Hannibal Lecter's mask. She was slim and,

people who knew her told me, pretty behind that mask, and she looked at once gorgeous and menacing. Her routine, she said, could be characterized as "Erte meets Alice Cooper" set to the music of "everything from Debussy to Rammstein."

Why the mask?

"It's for your own good," she said. "Believe me."

The theatre filled up. The crowd was raucous and happy and mostly young. One of the evening's more intriguing performances came from Tigger! -- the exclamation mark is part of his stage name -- a pioneer in the art of "Boylesque." He was known for his unpredictability. Of the five Golden Pastie Awards he has received, one was for "Most Likely to Get Shut Down by the Law."

While the Pink Flamingo Orchestra struck up a bump-and-grind version of The Clash's Should I Stay or Should I Go, Tigger!, a small compact man, came out on stage dressed as a clown in white face and bulbous red nose. His character was supposed to be struck by a severe case of stage fright or some kind of trauma, and several times he tried to run off the stage. To the crowd's urging, he finally started to strip, rigid with fear, first taking off his shirt to reveal red sequined pasties on his nipples, and then taking off his shorts to reveal a construction of more red sequins that defies description in a family newspaper. On his bum, he had written, "HELP ME." It was disturbing, funny and oddly riveting all at once. It could not be said to be sexy in the conventional sense. The crowd roared.

At the end of his show, there was a short interval in which Ms. Shaboobie appeared, and she came out wearing an Aztec headdress, a low-cut corset and bikini briefs fringed with feather boas. She danced a bit to the music with a happy smile on her face. Then, as her grandmother had taught her, she shimmied vigorously.

Everything went into motion. Whole worlds moved.

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