

Going Out

TORONTO BURLESQUE FESTIVAL

The big tease

A racy new event isn't merely about taking it off, the organizers say. It's all in how you do it

BY PAULA CITRON

By day, they are a mental-health worker, a stylist, a marketing co-ordinator and a teacher. By night, they are the naughty ladies of nouveau strip, and in the trade they are known by the delicious names of Sauci Calla Horra, Tanya Cheex, La Minouche and Coco Framboise, respectively. They are also on the organizing committee of the first-ever Toronto Burlesque Festival: Northern Exposure 2008, which runs this weekend.

When we met up at a downtown watering hole, it wasn't surprising that the drinks they ordered were the colourful, fruity ones; these striptease divas think in Technicolor. Collectively, they represent three of the city's top take-it-off troupes, called Skin Tight Outta Sight Rebel Burlesque, Les Coquettes Nouveau Burlesque and the Voulez-Vous Peepshow. The inaugural festival they have put together represents all things wonderful about New Age striptease.

The inspiration for the Toronto fest came to Sauci when she attended the New York Burlesque Festival in 2003. "It was a real eye-opener," she says. "I saw a whole other level of performance art, humour and creativity that combined dance and stripping in new ways." Tanya adds: "Seeing international performers raises the personal bar because you become more innovative as a result."

First and foremost are the shows. There is the Friday opening gala at the Gladstone Hotel, the Saturday Burlesque Ball at the Mod Club and the Sunday Tiki Brunch at the Cadillac Lounge. Each features a who's who of striptease talent from across North America. Among the U.S. entries are four former Miss Exotic Worlds, the St. Louis pole dancers Gravity Plays Favourites and Tigger, the king of New York's "boylesque" - male strip - scene. All good burlesque shows need variety



La Minouche: 'We want neo-striptease to be taken seriously as an art form.' TORONTO BURLESQUE FESTIVAL

acts, and the committee has put together a stellar lineup that includes Vancouver's The Wet Spots, a sex comedy duo who write risqué songs, Windsor aerialist Roxi Dlite and Toronto's own Mysterion the Mind Reader, Sketchy the Clown, Flarington King and his infamous drag act, and three performers from Zero Gravity Circus. The only things missing are trained dogs and performing seals.

To give Toronto's burlesque fest a unique flavour, Coco has organized Take It Off, a striptease-related exhibit of photos, illustrations and paintings at the Gladstone. There is also a silent auction of seven bras created for the occasion by top designers. The money will go to Boobalicious, an organization that raises funds for breast-cancer research.

A series of daytime workshops, under the umbrella of Burlesque University, include classes in choreography, nipple-tassel twirling, advanced use of rhinestones, and "building a larger-than-life persona." And a strong persona is critical, the divas agree, to becoming a good striptease artist. "It's like a cartoon version of yourself," Tanya explains.

"It's not just being an exhibitionist," Minouche says. "You have to sell what you're doing. You have to titillate the

crowd." Coco adds: "You also have to know how to work the power dynamic. You need the confidence to stay in control of the room."

There is real skill involved in choosing music, creating the choreography and designing the costumes. One nouveau stripper they cite as an inspiration is New York's Miss Saturn, who makes witty use of hula hoops that are filled with sand and coated in reflective paint. "It is unbelievably sexy the way the light plays off the hoops," Coco says, "and hearing the sensual sound that the sand makes as she twirls them by undulating her body, all the while doing a striptease."

Ultimately, the goal of the festival is to draw attention to that sort of artistry. "We want to legitimize what we do," La Minouche says. "We want neo-striptease to be taken seriously as an art form and not relegated to a subversive subculture. We'd love to broaden our audience by seeing a marriage between the bar crowd and the theatre crowd." And Tanya adds: "We want everyone to have a raucous good time - bring your best wolf whistle."

» Toronto Burlesque Festival: Northern Exposure 2008 runs from today to Sunday. For ticket information, visit www.torontoburlesquefestival.com.

What's new on the strip

In burlesque's heyday in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the genre was an earthy variety show that combined comedy, skits, song, dance, animal acts and striptease. The burlesque revival that began in the 1990s was led by an interest in strip - with its mandate of a tongue-in-cheek, playful, artistic exploration of sexuality that harked back to more innocent times. Pasties and G-strings are de rigueur, but complete nudity is regarded as vulgar and fawdry. "It has to be a turn-on," says nouveau strip diva Sauci Calla Horra, "but there must al-

so be a sense of irony. It's not just taking off clothes. It's taking them off in an artful, sexy manner." Her colleague Tanya Cheex adds: "Neo-burlesque is anchored in storytelling. There has to be a reason behind the striptease, but always with a sly wink and a nod." Sauci adds: "An important feature of the revival is that there are all shapes and sizes of strip artists. Women see their own bodies reflected in us, which is why nouveau burlesque appeals to a wider audience than just straight men. It's a feminist statement." » P.C.