

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1998

# Burlesque's Back, a Step Ahead of the Law

By ANGELA TRIBELLI

**N**O surgically enhanced Barbie clones. No overly attentive cocktail waitresses. No businessmen with \$100 bills in their teeth. Willkommen to the Blue Angel Cabaret, where crowds line up for a different kind of erotic entertainment. The weekly show, at the House of Candles, a Lower East Side performance space, is part "Showgirls," part "Broadway Danny Rose."

From behind the gold lamé curtains the other night emerged an exotic dancer in a furry Minnie Mouse costume; a dancer who poured hot wax on herself, then writhed on a stage strewn with glitter, and a chanteuse in a sequined gown singing "Cry Me a River" while stripping down to fishnet stockings and a jeweled G-string, as if out of a 1950's stag film.

Scores it wasn't. This is burlesque, he deliberately bawdy and raucous revue that was the underbelly of vaudeville in the 1930's. Banned by Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia in 1937, burlesque is enjoying a popular revival at a time when city officials are once again cracking down on the adult entertainment industry. While dancers at topless clubs are forced to lie on bikinis, tassels are spinning from otherwise bare breasts at burlesque shows from the Lower East Side to Broadway's hottest ticket, the revival of "Cabaret."

How do the shows avoid the fate of conventional adult entertainment? Shouldn't they end with a chorus of ollice whistles and sirens? By trading on kitsch appeal, burlesque is rapping itself in the mantle of performance art — more Karen Finley than Elizabeth Berkley — and escaping the current crackdown.

"I've always seen erotic dancing as an art form," said Ute Hanna, the producer of the Blue Angel Cabaret, which performs Friday and Saturday nights at midnight at 99 Stanton Street. A native of Hamburg, Germany, and a pioneer of New York City's burlesque revival, Ms. Hanna started the Blue Angel in 1993 in a club in Tribeca. The idea was to create a space where women and couples as well as single men could watch strippers perform on their own terms and in their own music, combining striptease with such diverse elements as spoken word, singing and fire-eating.

The crowd waiting for a midnight show outside the Blue Angel on a recent Friday bore a closer resemblance to experimental theater fans than to the stereotypical image of lonely men skulking around Times



Miles Ladin for The New York Times

All in the mix? At the Blue Angel Cabaret, a minimally clad sword swallower tests the limits of the new anti-pornography regulations.

Square flesh palaces. As its name suggests, the Blue Angel conjures images of the Weimar Republic, more than of 42d Street. The doorman wore a pinstriped suit and leather armbands. Since the club serves only beer, the men and women waiting impatiently for the doors to open carried bottles of champagne and margaritas-to-go from a Mexican restaurant down the street.

Although the performers are mostly women, the audience is split evenly between men and women. Fannie

**Banned by one Mayor, the 'underbelly of vaudeville' returns to tease another.**

Agri, a baker who lives downtown, was there with her husband. "At a topless bar, they're just entertaining men," she said. "Burlesque is a lot more about entertaining everyone."

Yuliy Lebedev, a production company owner, was looking for contortionists to hire for a film project. "I've been going to a lot of burlesque shows around here lately," Mr. Lebedev said. "The fire-eaters, contortionists, they make it creative. Topless bars are really boring. All they do is dance around."

In a burlesque show like the Blue Angel, the strippers range from the barely daring to the genuinely scandalous — one woman performed an explicit routine with a string of pearls. A house favorite is Bonnie Dunn, a saucy singer with a smolder-

ing voice, and her traditional fan dance, learned from Bernadette Brookes, who performed it in the supper clubs of the 50's.

Originally, the Blue Angel featured racier acts — bottomless dancers and lap dancing. In the summer of 1996, Ms. Hanna lost her lease and was forced to close the Blue Angel. When she reopened it in its current home last June, she toned things down. "I wanted to create an alternative to the exploitative strip clubs in New York," she said. "I think we're living in a time when people don't even know what eroticism really means."

Not so coincidentally, her revision of the show dovetailed with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's crackdown on adult video stores and strip clubs, which went into effect this summer. How burlesque-style entertainment fits into the world of a porn-free New York has been the subject of some debate in the Mayor's office.

"There were discussions about legitimate theatrical performances which did feature nudity but were not predominantly focused on adult entertainment," said Melanie Myers, the general counsel for the City Planning Department and a drafter of the zoning regulations that are closing adult-entertainment businesses. "I don't recall the word 'burlesque' being used, but things of a similar nature were discussed. My gut reaction is that burlesque is in the clear."

Club owners are quick to defend even the most daring acts as a form of performance art. Even so, they feel pressure to keep city guidelines

in mind when planning a program.

At the Red Vixen Burlesque, a show produced by Catherine Hourihan and her partner, David Wales, on Sundays at 9 P.M. at the Flamingo East, 219 Second Avenue, Ms. Hourihan performs a routine she calls "Kitty Kat." Her breasts are hidden by no more than a dusting of black glitter. Like other burlesque performers, she distinguishes between her act and traditional topless entertainment. "Burlesque is much more about the performance and the creative element," she said.

Before the burlesque revival many of the dancers worked in traditional topless bars. They say they prefer the new scene as much for the better working conditions as for artistic freedom.

Velocity Chyald, a fixture at the Blue Angel and the Red Vixen, has worked at Billy's Topless and the Paradise Club, conventional strip clubs, where a typical night is grueling. "They put you on stage every hour for 30 minutes for an eight-hour shift," she said. "It's like being a hamster on a treadmill."

Most entertainers at the Blue Angel perform only one or two routines nightly. The audience also appreciates performances that are not strictly erotic. "I don't think I could say half the things I do at a strip club without having tomatoes thrown at me," Velocity Chyald said. For a routine she calls "Amoeba Sack," she enters the stage draped in a translucent plastic drop cloth, recites original poetry and projects flashlight beams over her body, which is naked under the cloth, save for a pair of butterfly wings.

Despite their professed dismay at the city's increasing scrutiny, burlesque entrepreneurs may owe the Mayor a debt. His crackdown has fueled interest in their nascent industry. Tom Tenney, the producer of a revue called the Grindhouse Alternative Burlesque, Tuesdays at 9:30 P.M. at Tonic, 107 Norfolk Street, isn't sure if his show conforms to the city's statutes. But he senses that audiences are finding it all the more enjoyably subversive since the Mayor lowered the boom.

"Suddenly, without any difference in content, the show is now more political," Mr. Tenney said. "When you see bare breasts on stage, everyone in the audience knows that this is something that is no longer being tolerated in the city."

But how long will it last? The flier for the Red Vixen admonishes prospective patrons to "Rush in before Burlesque disappears!"