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burlesque

Crowd-esque

Portland's burlesque scene is bursting at the seams

COVERAGE BY AARON SPENCER

When burlesque first hit the Portland stage in 2006, the city had only a handful of performers. That number has since exploded to more than 50.

The glut of acts is encouraging for a scene that still has room for growth, but local producers and performers say that burlesque has blossomed more quickly than its audience. This disparity is spreading crowds too thin and hurting new shows' chances for survival.

"Sometimes we're just performing in front of each other," says Isaiah Tillman, a performer with the boylesque troupe Burlesquire.

Burlesque in Portland has close ties to the LGBTQ community. The first troupe of the city's burlesque revival, the Rose City Sirens, played to the lesbian community at the former Egyptian Room in Northeast Portland. Acts have also popped up at Red Cap, CC Slaughters, Crush and other gay haunts.

"Burlesque and the gay community, it's just a natural crossover—the rhinestones, the glitter," says Rayleen Courtney, owner of SinnSavvy Productions, which produces several Portland burlesque shows. "A lot of girls will tell you they're bio queens [women who perform as drag queens]."

The LGBTQ community has played a large part in burlesque's growth, with contingents both on stage and in the audience. Seven monthly shows are scheduled now in Portland, as well as weekly performances and several shows that are produced on a less frequent or ad hoc basis.

"I think the scene is getting a bit saturated," says Frankie Tease, a performer and producer

who canceled two events because of dwindling audiences. "Other shows had to raise rates, but I decided to take a break."

The shows are springing up largely because of the increased number of performers. As the scene becomes more popular, more people leave their chairs for the stage, and more people from neighboring cities—even Seattle, one of the biggest burlesque locales in the country—venture to Portland. Courtney jokes that it's "the stripper exchange program."

But the biggest catalyst for growth is a school, the Rose City School for Burlesque, that's been churning out performers since 2008, when the scene was still fledgling.

"I felt kind of alone in the scene when there were only seven girls," says Holly Dai, the founder of the school and a three-year burlesque performer. "So I thought we'd not only create performers, but we'd create an audience because the performers' friends and family would become burlesque fans."

The school charges \$200 tuition for a seven-week class in hair and makeup, costuming, dancing and persona creation. The school has graduated more than 60 performers, 40

of whom are still active in the scene, Dai says.

She admits audiences haven't kept up with the growth but doesn't believe that should hamper her students' desires to perform.

"The competition will be—and it has to be," she says.

Dai says the real battle is finding a new audience, not targeting the people who are already interested in burlesque.

Take one new producer, the Mad Marquis de Maltease. He and his wife, Sophie Maltease, a graduate of the Rose City School of Burlesque, created a stir this summer with their show Geeklesque, an event themed around all things nerdy—performers dressed as characters like Sailor Moon and Batgirl.

"Geeklesque tapped into a completely unaware market," says producer Zora Phoenix. "The geek community didn't even know they liked burlesque."

De Maltease used the buzz from Geeklesque to create two new shows: Marquis' Mad Agenda and Burlynomicon, both debuting this month. The new shows are giving new performers a venue to gain experience, de Maltease says.

"Lots of people I didn't know anything about were asking to be in our show," he explains, "so I thought I could take a risk on a performer on a smaller show."

And these risks are what could make or break the future of burlesque in Portland.

"If the performers don't get an opportunity to go on stage," Phoenix says, "they're going to find something else."



Charlotte Treuse performs in Viva Las Vegas

Charlotte Treuse: Can't Knock a Classic

Charm can get a girl a long way. The bat of a lash, the perfectly timed flounce, the exaggerated removal of a stocking—when a woman masters these, who cares about dancing?

That's Charlotte Treuse's modus operandi. Through all the reinterpretations of burlesque—from circus burlesque to heavy metal burlesque and nerd burlesque—Treuse, 33, has remained "a classic." That's not gushy descriptor, either. It's her burlesque-defined style, and it has helped make her one of the top-billed performers in Portland.

"There aren't a lot of people in Portland who are doing the classic thing, so it sets me apart a little bit," she says.

Treuse, who'd rather her real name not be published, sticks to the traditional burlesque style of the early 20th century. She draws inspi-

ration from the famous dancer Miss Zorita, who made a name for herself in the 1940s dancing with boas and pythons (Treuse, however, prefers feather boas). She also has a mentor in Toni Elling, one of the first black burlesque performers in Portland in the 1960s.

"I love the time period, that golden age of burlesque," she explains. "I love the vintage glamour, the feather fans and the gloves and gown teases rather than going a little more modern and edgier."

She also admits that she is not the best dancer, despite doing theater and Middle Eastern dance when she was younger. Instead, during her performances, she just sells it.

"If you watch me on stage, I basically just strut around," Treuse says. "I think that's why people relate to me as well as they do. I really

make a connection with the audience."

Treuse has been booked to perform twice at the New Orleans Burlesque Festival and will perform there again this year. She was also chosen to compete at the 2011 Miss Exotic World Pageant in Las Vegas, along with fellow Portland performer Angelique DeVil.

Treuse hopes to soon get enough work performing and making costumes that she can quit bartending and do burlesque full time, describing herself as "obsessed" and "addicted."

"If you're giving yourself to the crowd, they'll love you, and they'll give it right back," she says.

Charlotte Treuse performs with *Orchestre L'Pow!* Fri., Oct. 14, 9:30 p.m., and every three months; *Bossanova Ballroom*, 722 E. Burnside St.; \$10-\$15, VIP available; find Charlotte's full performance calendar at charlottetreuse.com.