

Burlesque a la Boston

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ABSTRACT

"New York's more into vintage," explains a stalwart of the local scene who performs under the stage name Mary Widow, "but in Boston there's a lot of alt- and neo-burlesque, contemporary performance art and dance theater with a burlesque element."

FULL TEXT

I recently spent a day in Cambridge that began at an academic conference on cities at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute and ended well into the night at a burlesque show called "Strip Zeppelin" held at Oberon, the second stage of the American Repertory Theater, which is also part of Harvard. Under the university's august auspices, I encountered two communities of experts with advanced training: those who think about cities for a living and those who assembled a theatrical extravaganza around the undeniable truth that the titanic crunching blues-derived grooves of "Immigrant Song" and "The Ocean" provide excellent accompaniment for dancing mostly unclothed. Together, the two groups taught a lesson about the role that institutions like universities can play in giving shape to all sorts of creative inspirations.

You can probably picture the conference; "Strip Zeppelin" requires a little more description. The show's main force was Niki Luparelli, a robust blonde wiseacre sausage into a bustier, drink perpetually in hand. She did a fine job with Robert Plant's caterwauling vocals, and supplied louche patter between songs. She had recruited a band, all women except for the keyboard player, that rose gamely to the challenge of Zep's signature pomp and grind. Local burlesque performers in a wide variety of female shapes and sizes came on in relays to sashay, wriggle, and dangle circus-style from rings or ropes. It was all very ironic and yet curiously earnest.

It may come as news to you, as it did to me, that Boston has a burlesque scene. It does, a growing one – and, in keeping with local habits, Boston's burlesque folk are eager to distinguish what they do from what goes on in New York City. "New York's more into vintage," explains a stalwart of the local scene who performs under the stage name Mary Widow, "but in Boston there's a lot of alt- and neo-burlesque, contemporary performance art and dance theater with a burlesque element."

And, naturally, in an overeducated city like this one, the whole enterprise needs to be adequately theorized. "There's a lot of talk about whether we're 'chasing the male gaze,'" says Vanessa "Sugar Dish" White, artistic director of the Lipstick Criminals troupe and of "The Slutcracker," an adult take on Tchaikovsky that does big business at the Somerville Theatre every December. "You'll hear people asking, 'Is it a feminist thing or not? Is it body-positive?'" As that kind of seminar language suggests, even burlesque bears the marks of school in this academic company town. Between the hypercompetent Berklee-trained musicians in the band and the dancers who showed signs of backgrounds in ballet and other traditional forms, "Strip Zeppelin" offered a reminder that in Boston you're never far from the classroom. Niki Luparelli, who has had plenty of classical voice training, says, "I could have taken that degree and gone into teaching music, which would have been satisfying in its own way, but I would have been censoring myself all the time. I'm a bawdy person."

Oberon offers a club-theater setting especially suited to experimental, informal, and fringe-dwelling productions.

One of its missions is to provide a first-class venue at which local performers can put on ambitious shows, and the imprimatur of the American Repertory Theater helps them build their audiences and resumes. Burlesque is part of the mix at Oberon, right alongside Euripides' "The Bacchae," a recent production of which was directed by Widow. As an institution, a university serves as a vessel for creative inspiration. A school's endowment, prestige, accumulated expertise, and campus facilities combine to form a container into which all manner of creative people can pour all sorts of inchoate impulses – everything from the urge to understand cities to the urge to get naked and move to music. An institution can help such impulses take shape and substance in the world. Between the conference on cities, at which I learned a lot, and the burlesque show, at which I had a somewhat bemused good time, I treated myself to a long, edifying day at school.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His latest book is "Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories."

Credit: By Carlo Rotella Globe Columnist

Illustration

Caption: Niki Luparelli is the main force behind "Strip Zeppelin" in Cambridge. Vintage girl

DETAILS

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