



Known as the hip swinging fox with fiery locks, Randi Rouge, is seducing the audience with a classic burlesque number

Hoots, cheers and heckles were loud from a small yet rowdy crowd standing in the dimly lit Rainbow Bistro. It got louder as the first performance began and the audiences made the ground shake as the performer onstage teasingly took off their see-through negligee.

Sounds familiar to a typical strip joint but it's not what you're thinking—it's An Evening of Sin, a burlesque show that happens twice a month.

"Burlesque is a classy form of dancing and a way [for performers] to tell their story," Sam Smith, a frequent

Hoots, cheers and heckles were loud from a small yet rowdy crowd standing in the dimly lit Rainbow Bistro. It got louder as the first performance began and the audiences made the ground shake as the performer onstage teasingly took off their see-through negligee.

Sounds familiar to a typical strip joint but it's not what you're thinking—it's An Evening of Sin, a burlesque show that happens twice a month.

"Burlesque is a classy form of dancing and a way [for performers] to tell their story," Sam Smith, a frequent burlesque audience member said. "It's very inviting and accessible that nobody has to fit a certain way," she said.

Smith said she felt nervous the first time she went to a burlesque show two years ago because her friend was performing.

"I was nervous because I was going to see my friend naked in front of everyone," she said.

Aishu Ravishankar, an audience member who watched her first burlesque show at the bistro, said burlesque was not what she was expecting.

"I thought there was going to be more striptease," she said. "It was a sexy but cute and funny performance."

Trouble with the Law

While the show's audience saw burlesque as a non-sexually arousing art form, not everyone agrees. This includes the licensing bylaw officers in Hamilton, Ontario.

In August, the city's bylaw officers charged two burlesquers—Ashley Keefer and Kayla Kunkel—as adult entertainers for stripping as part of their burlesque act at Hamilton's Ten Decades bar.

Hamilton's licensing bylaw "prohibits adult services appealing to or designed to appeal to erotic or sexual appetites, or inclinations" and includes entertainment advertised as "sexy," and services principally featuring "nudity or partial nudity of any person" and this includes stripping.

“Burlesque is a classy form of dancing and a way [for performers] to tell their story.” – Sam Smith, a frequent burlesque audience member

Tyrell Sutherland, a burlesque audience member who’s seen other Canadian burlesque shows outside of Ottawa said the charges against Keefer and Kunkel were unfortunate.

“It is unfortunate people in Hamilton couldn’t have a more open mind,” said Sutherland.

He said burlesque isn’t just about stripping but instead depends on how the performer intends to perform.

“Some of the performances are more like a story, other times it’s more like a talent show so you never really know exactly what you’re going to get,” said Sutherland.

He said some people enjoy burlesque because it’s inclusive and is a safe space for everyone.

“People like Don Jovi (a male burlesquer) who I’ve known for years, likes getting naked,” Sutherland said.

“Burlesque gives him an avenue where he can do this safely.”





Don Jovi shaking things up with some reverse strip tease.

Don Jovi, a former male stripper but now a boylesquer (male-identified burlesquer) from Ottawa, said the laws are prudish because they state that women can't reveal their nipples in bars legally whereas men can.

"It's ridiculous because that part of the body (nipples) isn't a sexual organ necessarily," he said. "I think it's just silly details of the laws and hopefully society will become a bit more egalitarian in how we treat men and women's bodies and then bit by bit, we'll come up with a law that actually make sense."

Wett Willy, an Ottawa burlesquer, said while it's not mandatory for men to wear pasties, he wears it out of solidarity for women burlesquers who have to wear them.

"Male performers tend to not wear pasties and I wear pasties solely out of solidarity for female performers because I feel it's unfair," he said. "I'll keep wearing pasties until my burlesque sisters are allowed to not wear them onstage."

Keefe and Kunkel are arguing burlesque doesn't classify as adult entertainment, said Betty Bright-Eyes, an Ottawa burlesquer, in an email.

"These performers are arguing that the bylaw is too vague and don't agree that burlesque classifies as adult entertainment in the sense that it is only meant to be enticing or arousing in a sexual nature," she said.

Bright-Eyes said she thinks burlesque and strip club stripping have similarities but the difference is the degree of stripping.

"A lot of burlesque is comedic, political, feminism or come from a place of activism and much more," she said. "Adult entertainment establishments require a license for genital and nipple nudity and in burlesque, that is not permitted."

"Some of the performances are more like a story, other times it's more like a talent show so you never really know exactly what you're going to get." – Tyrell Sutherland, An Evening of Sin audience member.

In Ottawa, similar bylaws pertain to the licensing of adult entertainment that are meant to prohibit "establishments providing live entertainment or services appealing to erotic or sexual appetites without a license," but so far no bars that have hosted burlesques shows have been charged.

Bella Barecatt, a pioneering member of the Ottawa burlesque community, said she thinks these bylaws are archaic and need updating.

"Why punish somebody when nobody is getting hurt for showing some skin in a provocative manner?" she said. "That to me is very outdated."

Barecatt said burlesque is more innocent compared to media's sexual advertisements.

"When you go back to the history of burlesque, burlesque was meant to be a way of making fun of politicians and the bourgeoisie in a theatre setting," Barecatt said.

Headmistress Holly Sin, the organizer of An Evening of Sin said burlesque is an artistic form of stripping similar to Dr. Sketchy—a live drawing event in a bar where models can be mostly nude with underwear.

“There are all sort of laws specifically pertaining to the arts and it’s ridiculous those laws don’t pertain to burlesque,” she said. “In Dr. Sketchy, the women can [legally] be mostly nude with underwear because it’s an artistic event.”

Not Sex Workers

While burlesque supporters try to explain burlesque, there always seems to be misunderstandings. Burlesquers have said they’ve often been compared to sex workers like strippers or that their art is focused solely on stripping and nudity.

Bright-Eyes said it’s inaccurate and unfair to compare burlesquers and sex workers as they are very different in style and purpose of service.

“Sex workers have a much more intense and intimate relationship with their clients and they face a lot more challenges for their rights and their safety,” Bright-Eyes said. “What we (burlesquers) do can be sexual in nature but we do not provide any services other than to entertain you with our art.”

“Some people say we rely on nudity instead of talent but I know so many performers who don’t just look sexy onstage,” she said. “They also make their own costumes, do their hair and makeup, sing, dance, make you laugh, do magic and circus skills.”

“When you go back to the history of burlesque, burlesque was meant to be a way of making fun of politicians and the bourgeoisie in a theatre setting.” – Bella Barecatt, Ottawa’s pioneer burlesquer

Jovi said the reason he got into burlesque was because of the way burlesque was perceived.

“Burlesque is more sensual and stripping is sexual,” he said. “The point of stripping is straight-up arousal whereas burlesque is more playful [stripping].”

"A lot of burlesque is comedic, political, feminism or come from a place of activism and much more," she said. "Adult entertainment establishments require a license for genital and nipple nudity and in burlesque, that is not permitted."

"Some of the performances are more like a story, other times it's more like a talent show so you never really know exactly what you're going to get." – Tyrell Sutherland, An Evening of Sin audience member.

In Ottawa, similar bylaws pertain to the licensing of adult entertainment that are meant to prohibit "establishments providing live entertainment or services appealing to erotic or sexual appetites without a license," but so far no bars that have hosted burlesques shows have been charged.

Bella Barecatt, a pioneering member of the Ottawa burlesque community, said she thinks these bylaws are archaic and need updating.

"Why punish somebody when nobody is getting hurt for showing some skin in a provocative manner?" she said. "That to me is very outdated."

Barecatt said burlesque is more innocent compared to media's sexual advertisements.

"When you go back to the history of burlesque, burlesque was meant to be a way of making fun of politicians and the bourgeoisie in a theatre setting," Barecatt said.

Headmistress Holly Sin, the organizer of An Evening of Sin said burlesque is an artistic form of stripping similar to Dr. Sketchy—a live drawing event in a bar where models can be mostly nude with underwear.

"There are all sort of laws specifically pertaining to the arts and it's ridiculous those laws don't pertain to burlesque," she said. "In Dr. Sketchy, the women can [legally] be mostly nude with underwear because it's an artistic event."

Not Sex Workers

While burlesque supporters try to explain burlesque, there always seems to be misunderstandings. Burlesquers have said they've often been compared to sex workers like strippers or that their art is focused solely on stripping and nudity.

Bright-Eyes said it's inaccurate and unfair to compare burlesquers and sex workers as they are very different in style and purpose of service.

"Sex workers have a much more intense and intimate relationship with their clients and they face a lot more challenges for their rights and their safety," Bright-Eyes said. "What we (burlesquers) do can be sexual in nature but we do not provide any services other than to entertain you with our art."

"Some people say we rely on nudity instead of talent but I know so many performers who don't just look sexy onstage," she said. "They also make their own costumes, do their hair and makeup, sing, dance, make you laugh, do magic and circus skills."

"When you go back to the history of burlesque, burlesque was meant to be a way of making fun of politicians and the bourgeoisie in a theatre setting." – Bella Barecatt, Ottawa's pioneer burlesquer

Jovi said the reason he got into burlesque was because of the way burlesque was perceived.

"Burlesque is more sensual and stripping is sexual," he said. "The point of stripping is straight-up arousal whereas burlesque is more playful [stripping]."

Willy said he thinks burlesquers are strippers too, although stripping is not mandatory but expected in burlesque.

"We are strippers as well and a lot of burlesquers forget that," Willy said. "I think the main core of burlesque is about the tease."

He said strippers present a more intimate show, but in burlesque, it's more about the crowd.

"As a stripper, the goal is to make money so you'll go onstage to try and get private dances," Willy said. "In burlesque, there's not a lot of one-on-one contact and it's mostly just entertaining the crowd."

Barecatt said she thinks this negative impression of burlesque stems from sexual repression and this idea gets passed down to each generation.

"You know [it's from] growing up and being told sex is bad and your body is bad," Barecatt said. "It sort of gets ingrained in you and then you put it on your kids and your kids' kids."

An Inclusive Art



An Inclusive Art



Ruby Devine and Wett Willy, facing off each other in a comedic act.

Burlesque has also been seen as a feminist movement in terms of body positivity. Every burlesquer in the bistro that's been onstage is unique, not only by their craft but their appearances, age, sexual orientation and gender. They don't necessarily fit the idealized image of a young, skinny and flawless performer.

Performers came and went with various costume changes and different acts throughout the night. Some of the performers sang, others stripteased to melodic tunes or performed comedic acts.

Sin said the Ottawa burlesque scene has changed to be more inclusive since she first started in 2006.

"When I first started doing burlesque, there wasn't much going on but now there's so many people in the community," Sin said. "It's not just women performing, there's boys, and drag [burlesque] performers."

Willy said burlesque is a unique art form that's created by combining other art forms into a performance.

"There's many ways you can include your side talents into burlesque," he said. "If you're a ballet dancer, you can use ballet dances for your act on stage."

Bright-Eyes said she's happy to be known for her burlesque talents and not her appearance.

"A true joy to me is knowing that I don't have to fit a specific description to be a good performer," Bright-Eyes said. "My acts and my skills speak for themselves."

Sutherland said he believes burlesque is very inclusive to every community.

"If you go to any of the activities that the burlesquers do, there's every type of community represented—the gays, straight, heterosexual, transgender or transsexual," he said.

Ravishankar said she was happy to see that burlesque wasn't limited to one gender.

"I find that we're used to seeing women in burlesque and so it was nice to see men and potentially non-binary people performing," Ravishankar said.

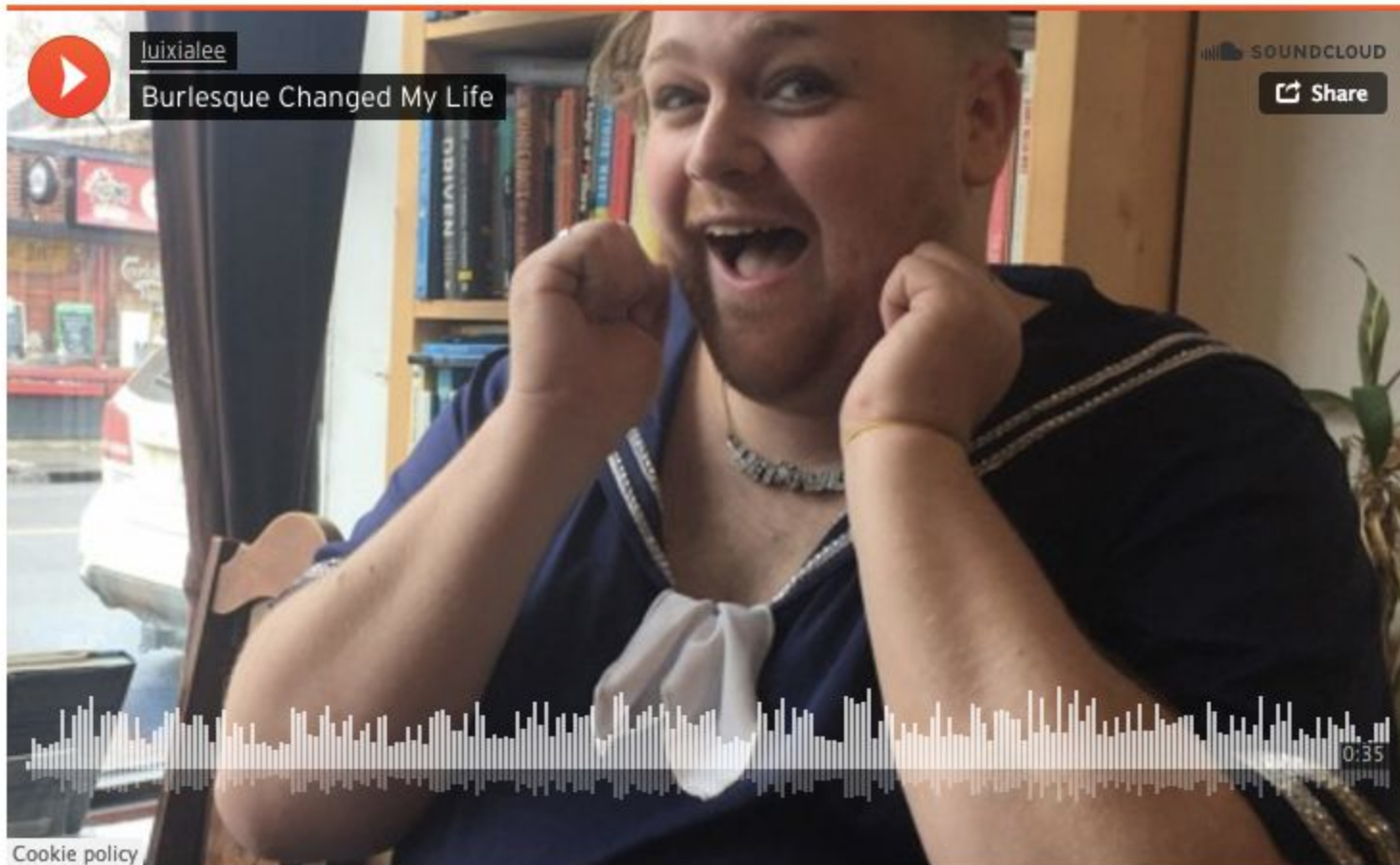
"A lot of people see burlesque as body inclusive and they'll assume everybody is plus-size but it's not," Willy said. "No matter your type, you'll eventually find a burlesquer that fits it—older man, older woman, big man, big woman, people of colour and everything."

He said it's admirable to see performers onstage having so much confidence.

"What makes a burlesquer beautiful isn't what they look like, it's their confidence onstage just like how they bare it all and look amazing doing it," Willy said.

Willy said he has truly learned to love himself after embracing burlesque into his life.

"Burlesque has empowered me to embrace my masculine side," he said. "I guess in a way, burlesque has really changed my life as I learned to love myself in my own way."



Barecatt said the Ottawa burlesque community is trying to be more diverse with genders, race and body sizes.

"Everyone deserves to be celebrated," Barecatt said. "It's good that Randi Rouge and Rhapsody Blue (burlesquers and dance instructors) are teaching so that it'll hopefully encourage more diversity."

Hope for Change

As the show ended, the hosts who were all smiling, thanked the audience for their loud cheers and then to thank the performers, they had a rollcall. Every burlesquer clapped and cheered alongside the audience as other burlesquers were called onto the stage.

The burlesquers and audience of an Evening of Sin hope people will change their mind about burlesque and watch a show.

“No matter your type, you’ll eventually find a burlesquer that fits it—older man, older woman, big man, big woman, people of colour and everything.” – Wett Willy, a boylesquer.

Ravishankar said she would definitely watch a burlesque show again.

“Burlesque performers always look like they’re having fun,” she said. “I like that they’re having fun because it makes me feel happy seeing them happily prancing onstage.”

Willy said he hopes people will come for a show and learn that burlesque is an art form of its own.

“Don’t think of it as an unmoral form of art, burlesque is its own independent form of art,” Willy said. “Don’t be shy, come out and see a show.”

Sutherland said people should watch burlesque because it really opens your mind to different things.

“Come out, experience it and broaden your horizons a little bit.” Sutherland said. “It doesn’t matter who you are, they’ll love you for it.”

The map below shows all the Ottawa burlesque events happening in December 2016.

