

VEGAS BURLESQUE



Las Vegas' Kalani KoKonuts performs at the 2007 Miss Exotic World Pageant, held at Planet Hollywood in June. The trained competition hula and Tahitian dancer is backed by Japanese *taiko* drummers.



THE BIG TEASE

Sometimes, less is more.
At least that's the case when the
Miss Exotic World Pageant
comes to town

BY E.C. GLADSTONE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOMAS MUSCIONICO

While your average "adult entertainer" may navigate to nothingness in a matter of seconds, it doesn't quite capture the heart like vintage burlesque striptease, where dancers offer a much slower, sultry disrobing, at times not even getting fully nude. That explains the popularity of Las Vegas clubs Ivan Kane's Forty Deuce, Tangerine and the Pussycat Dolls Lounge, to say nothing of the full-blown burlesque revival that seems to be happening everywhere else.

New Burlesque's "world series" came to Vegas (where else?) in June with the 2007 Miss Exotic World Pageant and Striptease Reunion at

What was once symbolic of sleazy sexploitation has slowly been reborn as a platform for feminine self-expression.

Planet Hollywood's Krave club, hosted by El Vez (the "Mexican Elvis") and a plus-size dominatrix called Miss Astrid. Like *Best in Show* on Viagra, the Miss Exotic World competition presented every imaginable version of the female form, from statuesque to robust (including three-foot-ten burlesque star Selene Luna), all shedding their clothes in the name of Narcissus.

What was once symbolic of sleazy sexploitation has slowly been reborn as a platform for feminine self-expression. Though there were some seasoned professionals, many of these women

not only don't make money in this endeavor but also spend substantial amounts to pursue their art. Among the offerings in four competitive categories, some ran through traditional fan dances and *boogaloo*-accented bump-and-grinds (Desiree Diamond's flaming tassels surely wowed the crowd), while others took the tease in newer, edgier directions. Last year's

MISS EXOTIC WORLD



Above left: Kalani KoKonuts.



Above right: Harvest Moon (New York).

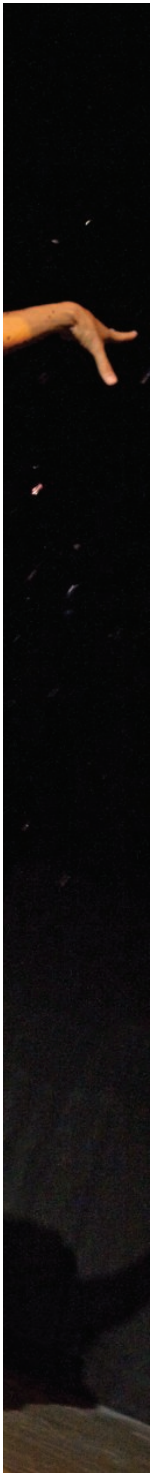
Best Troupe winners, Minneapolis' Foxy Tann & the Wham-Bam Thank You Ma'ams (three African-American girls in Afros lip-synching to Marilyn Monroe), reasserted their soulful seniority; Vegas' own Kalani KoKonuts, backed by seven Japanese *taiko* drummers, performed a production number that was so creatively and tastefully conceived it could appear in any of our high-budget Strip revues; and no doubt the Catholics in the room are still saying their Hail Marys over Diamondback Annie, who came on-stage dressed as an altar boy, using a jock strap instead of a G-string.

Several sirens sang as they danced (some had written their own songs), while others performed trapeze tricks or Cirque-level acrobatics. Many played for laughs, including winning troupe The Von Foxies (if sales of confetti-shooting pasties don't skyrocket, I'll eat my hat) and the pair that appeared as an iceberg and the doomed *Titanic*. Seattle's Heavenly Spies duo and debut dancer Violet Eva from Tokyo—both category winners—simply went straight for the core of male fantasy. Then there was the "boylesque" male category, which mostly satirized Chippendales and similar male entertainers.

The annual pageant is the showcase event for the Burlesque Hall of Fame,

Several sirens sang as they danced, while others performed trapeze tricks or Cirque-level acrobatics.

formerly the Exotic World Burlesque Museum. Exotic World began in tiny Helendale, California (between Barstow and Victorville), as the memorabilia collection of Jennie Lee, the founder of a strippers' union known as the League of Exotic Dancers and proprietor of San Pedro's Sassy Lassy bar. Septuagenarian Dixie Evans (once dubbed the Marilyn Monroe of burlesque by impresario Billy Minsky) has carried the torch since Lee's demise and plans to move the homespun museum, like the pageant, to Vegas, where it will no doubt take its rightful place cheek-by-jowl with the Liberace Museum and Pinball Hall of Fame as one of our



Above: Vima Burlesque (San Francisco).

Left: Violet Eva (Tokyo) won Best Debut.

must-see attractions.

Evans was actually one of a number of retiree-age former burlesque performers at the pageant—some even in wheelchairs (the 50th Annual Striptease Reunion had taken place downtown on the previous night; the weekend also included a bosom “casting” party in the name of breast-cancer awareness). In fact, the hooting and hollering audience, many of whom were as (un)dressed up as the performers, showed an impressive range, as well, from 20somethings far upward, equally male and female and racially diverse. Sexual orientations also undoubtedly ran the gamut. It’s hard to imagine any entertainment attracting a

It’s hard to imagine any entertainment attracting a more colorful and enthusiastic crowd.

more colorful and enthusiastic crowd.

In the end, after England’s Immodesty Blaize—arguably the classiest and most classic of the performers—took the Miss Exotic World 2007 title from a judges panel that included Russ Meyer vixen Tura Satana, the mood was no less festive backstage.

Career? Hobby? Obsession? It’s hard to know for sure, but when all these burlesque girls lighten their lingerie load, their loss is certainly our gain. ♠