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Grin and bare it

Keri Burneston, alias Trixie Little, wants to make taking your clothes off fun again.

BY FOSTER KLUG

Trixie Little, orphaned child of the circus, has a dream: To one day take her sparkly pasties and her arch-nemesis/sidekick, The Evil Tap Dancing Hate Monkey, and crash the stage of Larry Flynt's Hustler Club.

Would the audience at the raunchy strip club even know what hit them? For five glorious minutes, they'd be face to face with a wise-cracking, gymnastic whirl of impish energy, swinging her five-foot, 100-pound body from a trapeze, and dropping more jokes than articles of clothing. After a climactic and acrobatic battle between Trixie and Hate Monkey (Trixie doubtlessly wielding her "magic, love-inducing spanking powers" to win the fight), good would triumph and Trixie would reveal the message written on her pasties, visible only in black light: "THE END."

Welcome to the New Burlesque, and to Baltimore's foremost (and practically only) practitioner of that art form: Trixie Little, aka Keri Burneston.

Unlike New York and San Francisco, where hundreds of dancers feed a burlesque revival that's swept the country for the last decade or so, "here in Baltimore, Keri is pretty much it for burlesque," says Kara Mae Harris, a burlesque historian and promoter in Baltimore.

Oh, there are plenty of strippers in Baltimore. But burlesque isn't stripping. It's an entertainment form with roots in the 19th century and a strong connection to vaudeville. It incorporates dance, humor, and taking off one's clothes . . . up to a point. Stripping is a display; burlesque is a tease.

As the 30-year-old Burneston puts it, strippers may be talented dancers, but without the burlesque spark, there's "no connection to the audience in a more evolved way than just looking at hot chicks thrashing and gyrating."

Take Trixie's elbow-length white gloves: "It's never about what you do—it's how you do it," she explains. "Taking a glove off is an everyday occurrence—until you make it last two minutes on stage and have the rapt attention of everyone in the audience. To be entertaining, it takes style, creativity, personality, and charisma."

Fortunately, Burneston's abrim with all those characteristics. She was born in Richmond, but grew up in Maryland, settling in Baltimore after attending the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where she studied painting.

In 1998, she started Fluid Movement, a group specializing in what she calls "goofy vaudeville musical extravaganzas," beginning with a version of *Carmen* that used tofu hotdog puppets. Over the years, she has helped direct and/or produce Fluid Movement's increasingly elaborate productions, including its water ballets and last year's sell-out *The Great Baltimore Fire*, which retold the story

of the city's famous conflagration through flamenco dance. The appeal of such spectacles has always been largely about the way they incorporate the community—most of the performers are untrained volunteers—and a playful sense of fun, which is definitely part of the Burneston ethic.

"[She's] a wonderful, warm, cool gal, who's really contributed a bunch to creating a sense of glamour in Baltimore, and a sense of art being a fun thing that a community can get together and do," says Creative Alliance program director Megan Hamilton, whose organization co-sponsored several of Fluid Movement's productions.

But in 2002, Burneston decided she wanted to do something a little sexier than the kid-friendly Fluid Movement shows. She discovered the "neo burlesque" movement and launched her own burlesque career, sauntering onstage without any real planning and doing what felt natural. Along the way, she began studying gymnastics, tumbling, and trapeze, going twice a year to a circus camp in Vermont. She made lavish costumes and wild props and dreamed up routines that made people laugh. And, after a while, a character began to take shape: Trixie, whose circus parents died in a tragic elephant tightrope accident and whose chance encounter with a bolt of lightning transformed her into a "sassy superhero."

Ever since, she's separated herself from her peers with her "goofy, comic charm," Harris says. "I don't think anyone else is doing burlesque with her sense of humor."

"There's a wholesomeness to Keri's perspective that's fun and fresh and new," adds Hamilton. "Keri's not worried about what the latest trendy thing is. She's a passionate devotee of old-style Hollywood glamour. She likes skin and glitter and pretty sparkles and flash."

But Burneston plies her trade in a city that doesn't quite know what to do with her. She and the Hate Monkey (Burneston's boyfriend, 26-year-old Adam Krandle) perform three or four shows a month in Washington, Philadelphia, and New York. When they appear in Baltimore, maybe once a month, it's often at The Creative Alliance's Patterson or the Ottobar (though August 26 and 27, they will be at the Mobtown-Theater in Meadow Mill).

"Cabaret really doesn't exist in Baltimore anymore," Burneston says. "You've got bars and you've got rock clubs and you've got the strip places. But burlesque is missing."

It wasn't always the case. During the glory days, from the 1930s to the 1950s, the ornate theaters on The Block supported a thriving burlesque scene, Harris says—back when Blaze Starr ("the patron saint of burlesque," in Burneston's view) performed regularly at the Two O'Clock Club.

We bet Blaze would have loved a tap-dancing evil hate monkey. ■

Blazing a trail: Keri Burneston is at the vanguard of the New Burlesque movement in Baltimore.