

TODAY



MUSIC // MARIN SOP TO HAVE VOICE IN BSO'S 2006-2007 SEASON, WHICH WILL BE ANNOUNCED TODAY. PG 4E

The Art of the Tease



Or how, in three easy burlesque lessons, to tell a bump from a grind, solve the geometry of the tear-away skirt and strip away all inhibitions



Christy Clark (left), Kristen Meckel, Erin Colliau and Spoon Popkin (bottom) check out the house at the Creative Alliance's Patterson theater before they and the other burlesque novices, ranging in age from their early 20s to mid-50s, perform their routine Saturday (top).

PHOTOS BY MONICA LOPOSSAY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

BY ABIGAIL TUCKER
[SUN REPORTER]

BEFORE THE BACKSTAGE MIRROR, BARELY DRESSED DANCERS fret about limp curls, gooseflesh and uneven panty fringe. But Catherine Bohne stands apart from them in her four-inch-high Mary Janes, contemplating a more serious problem: Her cat ate her pasties.

It happened about 11:30 p.m. Friday, the eve of this, her first-ever burlesque performance, when the two red, sparkly stars were to be all that stood between her and total toplessness. She discovered their mangled remains on the floor of the spare bedroom, cursed out the cat and despaired. There was no time to order more online. She stayed up half the night making new ones, tracing the bottoms of soda cans onto fabric.

"Then I just started slapping these little jewels on them," says Bohne, a 48-year-old veterinary technician from Montgomery County, gazing down at her creations. "I think they look so junky."

BURLESQUE TEACHER TRIXIE LITTLE, AKA KERI BURNESTON

"IT'S PROJECTING CONFIDENCE AND SEXUALITY, KIND OF BRAZEN AND BOLD, THE WAY A LOT OF PEOPLE AREN'T IN ORDINARY LIFE."

But her fellow performers "ooh" and "ahh" over the homemade pasties, which glitter like disco balls. The women of Trixie Little's Burlesque Boot Camp know when a girl needs an ego boost. And everyone needs to be feeling beautiful at this moment, because they are here at the Valentine's Day Cabaret to — in Trixie's words — create "a wall of sexiness, an absolute wall of sexiness," a united front of semi-nude femininity. Until tonight, they have constructed this wall in private, at three giggly January classes and a dress [Please see BURLESQUE, 2E]

They learned the fine art of stripping to a tease

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rehearsal. Now, at the Creative Alliance's Patterson theater, they will face a whooping audience of more than 200 and the obscene *whhaaawhhaaawhhaa* of a French horn.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though: Burlesque is all about the tease. Let's linger here a moment more in the strange backstage half-light, watching the still-clothed women, who are also watching each other from beneath fake eyelashes as thick as pine boughs. They are computer network administrators, artists, bartenders and moms. Their ages range from early 20s through mid-50s, their figures from coltish to Boticellian.

None of them have ever stripped in public before, and at the moment, a few are wondering why they volunteered — nay, paid — to do this.

As they straighten their sheared-off miniskirts and mix a little more glitter into their lip gloss, a New York City dancer named Jo Weldon — one of tonight's professional burlesque performers — snaps a picture of their nervous faces.

"Break an eyelash," she calls out to them, before they take the stage. "Pop a pasty."

Free expression

Believe it or not, publicly removing your bra and swinging it, laso-like, above your head can be considered a feminist activity. So can crawling around on all fours, sewing your own rhumba shorts and learning how to apply Caribbean-blue eye shadow and Pepto-Bismol-pink blush, just so.

Burlesque — an early 20th-century form of striptease — has enjoyed an irony-infused comeback since the mid-1990s, when it was revived in small clubs in San Francisco and New York. Enthusiasts promote it as a celebration of all body types, from the waifish to the watermelon-breasted, and as an empowered display of female eroticism that is different from run-of-the-mill strip joint gyrations. The makeup and costumes are over-the-top, the nudity is partial (panties usually stay on), and the body is revealed slowly, with lots of teasing and comedy bits and tugging off of elbow-length gloves, one finger at a time, so the performer stays in command.

"Basically, it comes down to sexuality and who is in control of what," said Trixie Little, aka Keri Burneston, one of Baltimore's best-known burlesque artists, who has performed across the country. "It's only positive. It's projecting confidence and sexuality, kind of brazen and bold, the way a lot of people aren't in ordinary life."

So it was with ordinary women in mind that Burneston, 31, or-



Top, Trixie Little (center) leads a burlesque routine. Above, Nona Marlo dabs on lipstick. Right, Kristen Meckel has an appreciative audience: her boyfriend Peter Regan, his mother Ann Regan and grandmother Gaile Blair.

MONICA LOPOSSAY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

»» **ONLINE** For a photo gallery of Trixie Little's Burlesque Boot Camp, visit baltimoresun.com/burlesque

ganized her first local "boot camp" through the Creative Alliance in January, a series of three classes that ended in a cameo appearance in last weekend's cabaret — which also featured Burneston and several other professional burlesque performers.

The class was supposed to be limited to 12, but about 20 women signed up — so many that they had to rehearse and perform in two shifts. A retiree. An oncology lab technician. A 47-year-old mother of a ballerina and a Boy Scout.

One woman was there courtesy of her boyfriend, who gave her the \$75 class as a Christmas present.

Jessica Cassidy, 23, of Odenton was doing it "because I got fat for a long time, and now I want to reclaim my body for art," she said the first day of class in the Creative Alliance's upstairs studio, when everyone stood awkwardly in a circle and introduced them-

selves.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," said 55-year-old Anne Plempel, a demure administrative assistant from Baltimore, when her turn came. "I guess you could say I'm crazy."

Many of the women had their curiosity piqued by a short advertisement for the class; most didn't realize that they would be performing and at least four of them would drop out before Saturday's show.

The first eyebrows went up almost immediately, when Burneston — who was attired in a midriff-baring khaki uniform — unveiled her vision for the number: a saucy military parade, featuring all the women dancing together, dressed to resemble sexy soldiers, with lacy undies underneath.

"The show will involve actual pasties," Burneston concluded.

"Do they make padded pasties?" someone asked in a small voice. Burneston appeared not to hear.

"Now, the first thing that's coming off is our skirts," she said.

She proceeded to demonstrate the first half of the routine, set to a vaguely fascist-sounding march. The lesson came to an end with a move that involved getting down on all fours and crawling around on the floor. But, in her tight-fitting fatigues, Burneston didn't look like she was begging. She looked like she was wriggling beneath the barbed wire of enemy lines, with a bayonet.

Shimmy and swizzle

Each class began with dancing. The women learned the difference between a shimmy, a bump, a grind and a swizzle. They learned to gracefully remove a glove, and to slide their hands up their legs for a full 16 beats — although, especially in the beginning, some of them looked like they were clutching a sprained ankle, or fending off an infesta-

tion of fire ants.

All the while, Burneston called out commands:

"Belly in, chest out!"
"Roll around, do what feels good!"

"OK, we'll take it from the twinkle fingers. Shoulder, shoulder; wink, wink!"

At the end of the classes, the dancing done, the women would gather around in a circle on the floor and listen raptly to Burneston, who sat like a Buddha, with her legs crossed, dispensing old-fashioned feminine wisdom that would have made Betty Friedan's eyes roll: how to "strike like a cobra" with liquid eyeliner, for instance, and how to apply foundation as thick as a geisha's. Where to paint on a fake cleavage shadow. What kind of hairpiece works with a sailor's hat. How to control the earthquake effect in your belly when you shake your behind.

Because the women were making their own costumes, the

boot camp occasionally assumed the tenor of a home economics class, as students discussed the best way to add sequined fringe to the elastic lining of underwear, or how a tear-away camouflage miniskirt is really just a series of stitched-together trapezoids or how zippers and fishnets just don't mix.

"I wasn't really counting on the whole arts and crafts aspect of this," said Jessie Newburn, a 42-year-old project launch manager from Columbia.

Or the shopping. The empowered, free-to-be burlesque cadets discussed shopping quite a lot, and some went on excursions together. They raided Army-Navy surplus stores for uniforms, Walgreens for eyelashes, and Love Craft in Canton for red silken boy shorts. The mother of the Boy Scout and the ballerina found some killer fishnets at her daughter's dance store. Other women bought Boy Scout shirts.

But for Newburn — the reluctant seamstress — all of these girly activities jibed with her reason for joining the striptease class, which was "to be courageous."

"I mean, I'm the queen of tomboys," she said. "I've never even owned high heels before. I never really learned how to put on

makeup. The allure of this is that it is so the opposite of anything I ever thought I would be doing, and my way of saying that I can be brave about anything."

Wearing almost nothing.

The show must go on

So, enough with the teasing. We're back to the big night, and the air backstage is thick with spray-on body glitter and anticipation. The women keep sneaking peeks at the packed house, which seats many significant others — one of whom plans to have the image of his wife in her burlesque get-up tattooed on his back. Another boyfriend has brought his grandmother along. They are seated in the front row.

Not all the dancers have made it this far, though. The woman who planned to "reclaim [her] body for art" dropped out after the first class. The mother of the ballerina and the Boy Scout hurt her knee the week before. A third woman quit after the third class, citing sheer embarrassment, and a fourth just didn't show up for the performance.

But some of the shyest have made it all the way through. Anne Plempel — the 55-year-old secretary — is there, though she has decided to wear a bustier be-

neath her pasties.

Burneston inspects her cadets for the last time.

"You guys look amazing," she says. "I'm so proud of you."

Now the music starts. Cue the wall of sexiness! The women stomp on stage in their stilettos. True to form, the skirts come off first and are twirled overhead like helicopter propellers. Then the gloves, finger by finger, first one, then the other. The cadets bump, grind, body rub and — at the finale — turn away from the crowd to unbutton their shirts. Then *whhaaawhhaaawhhaa* — they swing back around, and all is revealed. The goods! The treasure chest!

It's over in a flash. After their farewell salute, the women troop backstage, where they remain mostly naked for a while, congratulating each other. They lament the end of their burlesque careers until someone brings up the possibility of a revival tour. The idea is widely cheered.

Afterward in the theater lobby a radiant Plempel poses for her husband, a long-stemmed rose between her teeth. Her empowerment is palpable.

"Dear," she says to her husband, her voice confident and strong. "I think you better take me to a drink."

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