



THE LEAGUE OF EXOTIC DANCERS

Legends from American Burlesque

KAITLYN REGEHR
MATILDA TEMPERLEY

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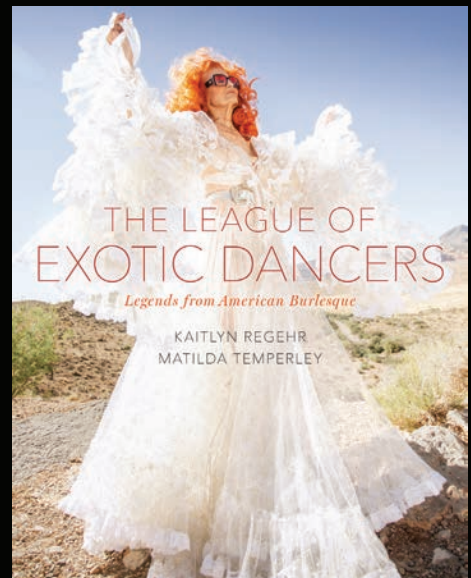
EVERY YEAR IN DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS, often called “Old Vegas,” The Burlesque Hall of Fame reunion brings together members of the League of Exotic Dancers, one of the earliest unions for women in exotic entertainment, to perform their half-century-old routines. In this annual tradition, performers from the golden age of Vegas burlesque rally counter-culture neo-burlesque fans who both keep the tradition alive and add new meaning to it.

Over the past four years, documentarian Kaitlyn Regehr and photographer Matilda Temperley have embedded themselves within this community—a group, which like Old Vegas itself, continues to survive and thrive sixty years past its supposed prime. Here, in a smoky, off-strip casino, they found women, at times well into their 80s, subversively bumping and grinding away preconceptions about appropriate behavior for a pensioner.

This collection of interviews and photographs is drawn from the backstage dressing rooms, homes, and lives of this aging burlesque community, as well as the young neo-burlesque community who adore them. The authors present an inter-generational sisterhood that is both unique and socially significant.

Through a range of experiences—from discussing struggles for wage equality, to helping stabilize an 85-year-old as she steps into a sequined G-string—the authors describe the complexity of the lives of these performers and the burlesque history from which they come. Regehr and Temperley present multidimensional portraits of this community and conclude that they are at their most vital when read with all the nuances, troubles, trials, and triumphs that they formerly and currently experience.

by KAITLYN REGEHR &
MATILDA TEMPERLEY



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GRIT AND GLITTER

AN INTRODUCTION

AT THE TITANS OF TEASE Legends of Burlesque showcase at the Burlesque Hall of Fame Annual Weekender, 75-year old Tammi True glides onto the stage and performs one of her traditional striptease numbers. She beams as she slowly caresses and sways her hips from side to side. She swivels, turns her back to the audience and attempts her signature move, bending over and looking between her legs while shaking her beaded panties. Although True's range of motion and ability to actually get her head between her legs was simply a nod towards what the move used to be, the burlesque enthusiast audience of 800, mostly young women, cheers in anticipation of Tammi's big reveal. Finally, after removing her bra, Tammi stand with her arms in the air, belly out, joyously bouncing her pastie-clad, stage-veteran breasts and anything else that cares to bounce with them.

Perhaps out of gratitude for the expression of freedom and defiance of common preconceptions of women's bodies, particularly ageing ones, or perhaps viewing the performance as a means to undermine the shaming that has been, or often still is, directed at sexually expressive women, or perhaps because they just really liked it, the crowd leaps to their feet in outright celebration. One woman beside me dabs tears from her eyes; another, in front of me, pounds her fist in the air and exclaims, "Fuck, yah!"

The Burlesque Hall of Fame has its roots in the Exotic Dancers League (EDL), a group started by Jenny "The Bazoom Girl" Lee.² Their first meeting, which the *The Los Angeles Times* described as being "colourful but well-balanced" with "three redheads, three blonds, and three brunettes"³, was held in June of 1955.⁴ Initially, the League's primary concern was to raise the minimum wage for strippers in Los Angeles from 85 dollars a week, a rate lower than that in any other major American city. As a form of protest, the EDL threatened a "cover up" strike⁶ to obtain the goal of wage equity. Eventually, however, the group took the form of a society for dancers, which



Fremont Street, 2015

included a softball team named The Barecats and an annual meeting (now reunion), instituted in 1958.”⁷

Situated five miles and fifty years away from the tourist strip, is downtown Las Vegas, or “Old Vegas.” Iconized by its decrepit casinos and vintage neon signage, this once run down and forgotten enclave is now home to both a hipster driven rejuvenation and the current Exotic Dancers’ League headquarters—renamed The Burlesque Hall of Fame. The Burlesque Hall of Fame reunion now operates as a social gathering and support group, where these late life dancers perform their now, half-century-year-old routines from the golden age of burlesque to a rally of counter culture fans.

Four years ago photographer Matilda Temperley and I headed to Nevada to begin photographing and interviewing this community—a group, which like “Old Vegas” itself, continues to survive sixty years past its supposed prime. Here, in a smoky, off strip casino, we found women, at times well into their 80s, subversively bumping and grinding away preconceptions about appropriate pensioner behaviour; and, by way of their young adoring burlesque enthusiast fans—who loving refer to their burlesque elders as “legends”—a rare inter-generational support group and sisterhood.

Over the past twenty years burlesque—a mid-twentieth century, working class entertainment—has been embraced and reclaimed by a counterculture movement, known as neo-burlesque, for purposes of artistic, sexual and personal expression. In the last ten years, burlesque dance or striptease, has moved further into the mainstream in the form of women’s fitness trends (even Oprah tried striptease aerobics), hen nights, and Hollywood blockbusters, starring the likes of Cher and Christina Aguilera. The rhetoric that surrounds most of these striptease themed entertainments and activities is often one of female empowerment and sexual liberation. This narrative positions dancers of the mid-twentieth century as feminist icons; and situates burlesque as an inclusive, liberated safe space, which—in contrast to (low brow) modern day strip clubs—is (and always was) art.

From the time of its inception, a common feature of the burlesque revival has been the concerted effort made by many individuals to dissociate burlesque from contemporary stripping. As Michelle Baldwin states:

❖ *The question asked most in the early days of the new burlesque was. “Are you a stripper?” to which many answered emphatically “No.” They were dancers, striptease artists, burlesque performers, but many wanted nothing to do with the term stripper. Many still hold this position ...*

From this perspective, the neo-burlesque movement has often positioned burlesque as nostalgic, feminist, and separate from claims of exploitation that sit at the heart of much of the discourse regarding contemporary exotic dance and the sexual entertainment industry at large. A frequent narrative regarding the history of American Burlesque posits its death at some point in the middle of the twentieth century (1930s, the 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s), only to be succeeded by a re-birth or revival some 50 years later. This death narrative places burlesque in a time capsule and thus removes it from the evolution of the modern strip club, as well as from the contemporary sex industry.

[. . .]

My hope is that this project will offer colour and complexity to this relatively untold women’s history. A sense of personal agency, independence, excitement and sexual freedom is present in some interviews; while physical, substance, and sexual abuse are also common threads. It is in this supposed death period, that this project lives. The stories reflect a period of transition, when many dancers moved from decrepit burlesque theaters, to tiered traveling shows, to gaudy nightclubs, to sometimes soulless strip clubs and at times, back and forth again. With this project we do not put forward one correct answer but rather show that these late life exotic performances, and the burlesque history from which they come, in the multidimensional forms in which they were presented to us, with both their trials and triumphs—their grit and their glitter.

(excerpted from the introduction)





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Baroque Hall of Fame
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AGING, STAGING, SPARKLE, AND STRUGGLE

FRAMES OF CONTEXT

Exotic World and Archiving Erotica

THE BURLESQUE HALL OF FAME, formally Exotic World, founded by tassel twirler Jenny Lee's strip club *The Sassy Lassy*, in San Pedro, California. As oral tradition at the Burlesque Hall of Fame states, Jenny began collecting "stripper droppings"¹—an old pastie, a shoe, a G-string—and "began tacking them up"² on the wall of the club.³ Upon moving to a goat farm in Helendale, California, for health reasons, Jenny Lee brought both the collection and the annual reunion with her and encouraged dancers to make the pilgrimage and basically bring their "stuff."⁴ The Helendale property has been described as "every cliché of the dirtiest part of the desert possible," complete with tumble weeds, dust blows, Joshua trees and a general void of vegetation.

With the assistance of her friend and successor, Dixie Evans—known as the Marilyn Monroe of burlesque due to the fact she impersonated the star allowing audiences to imagine Monroe without her clothes on—Jenny Lee looked to build the property as a safe haven for ex-strippers. It was to be a place that could house and support former exotic dancers, where they could live in mobile homes on the property and assist at the museum. In its envisioned idealised state, the museum would create revenue to support

Opposite page: Pasties for sale at the Burlesque Bazar, 2015







*Tempest Storm in
Las Vegas, 2014*

TEMPEST STORM

AT VIVA LAS VEGAS, a vintage car show held annually in the parking lot of the *New Orleans Hotel* two months before the Burlesque Hall of Fame reunion, Tempest Storm sat at a wooden table selling photos from days gone by. Her sales booth was surrounded by a sea of 1950s-attired attendees, mid-century hotrods, as well as retro-enthusiast vendors peddling memorabilia and nostalgia. Tempest Storm, who dated Elvis Presley from 1957 to 1959, was offered contracts by MGM and had a high profile relationship with John F. Kennedy,³⁶ is generally considered one of the most famous burlesque dancers of the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷

Born Annie Blanch Banks in Eastman, Georgia, Storm's ambition and perfect "bust," also named the "best props in Hollywood"³⁸ by Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, enabled her to escape abuse imposed upon her on a rural cotton farm and "become a star".³⁹ At the age of 20, with two marriages behind her, Banks moved to Hollywood and began working as a chorus girl. Banks adopted the name Tempest Storm in 1950 and changed it legally in 1957, shortly after her breasts or "money makers" were insured by Lloyd's of London for one million dollars.

Standing on the hot asphalt of the New Orleans parking lot, I helped Tempest's manager, Harvey Robins organise the well-thumbed piles of 60-year-old promotional photographs depicting Tempest in various stages of undress at various stages of her career. A sign tacked to Tempest's table read: "Black and White Photos: 20 dollars, Color: 25 dollars; Have Your Photo Taken with Tempest: 20 dollars". As I added extra sticky tack to the back of the peeling Bristol board in an effort to combat the heat, Harvey explained:

For me, if a person, at some point in life is a star, I always feel that they will always be a star. A person can make a hit record in 1957 and then by the time 50 years go by, that record is a memory; some people might know the song but the artist is relegated to the background. To me, they're always a star. If you earn that quality and you earn that title, then you continue to possess it.

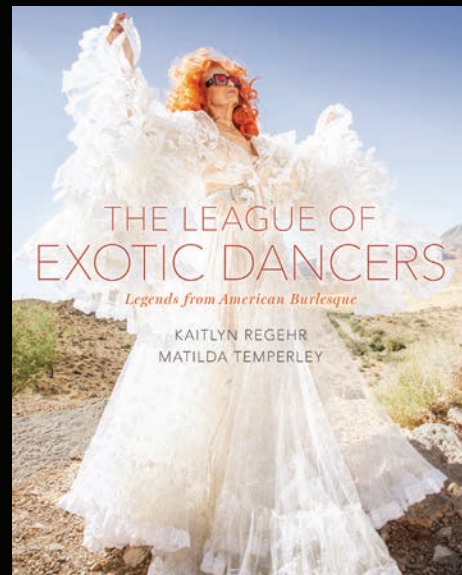
ABOUT THE AUTHOR & PHOTOGRAPHER

DR. KAITLYN REGEHR is an ethnographer and documentarian. Her work has appeared internationally in academic and popular print outlets including the BBC, *Variety Magazine*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. In addition to serving as a topic specialist for BBC World, Regehr has created documentary content for networks such as Super Channel (CA), SWR (DE), and ARTE (FR).

MATILDA TEMPERLEY works as both a fashion photographer and a photojournalist. Her personal work is inspired by marginalized societies. In September 2015, Matilda won the Royal Photographic Society's Vic Odden award for her bestselling book, *Under The Surface: Somerset Floods*. In September 2016, the RPS and *The Guardian* awarded Matilda the Joan Wakelin Bursary to document leprosy treatment in Ghana. At times confrontational, Matilda's portrait work is an empathetic nod to the self-expression of her subjects. She has also been a finalist for the prestigious SONY World Photo Awards for her work in Africa.

KEY FEATURES

- ★ Provides unparalleled access to this unique group of individuals
- ★ Includes over 100 images taken by renowned photographer Matilda Temperley
- ★ Features portraits of performers from the golden age of burlesque as well as neo-burlesque performers in original costumes



National Marketing and Publicity Campaign

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