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Such a Tease

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such a tease

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Burlesque has been seen in the movies and recently has been brought to life in the Des Moines art scene with Phoenix L’Amour’s show “Burlesque Baby.” The show hasn’t been in the attention of the public eye until the show on Sept. 30, when two performers received a citation for breast overexposure causing controversy to the Des Moines show.

The lights dim and a spotlight hits the stage where a woman stands in full costume, covered in glitter and heavy make-up. She begins to dance while slowly removing items of clothing until her curves are fully visible and the only clothes left are a small pair of underwear and a pair of decorated pasties over her nipples. This woman is not a stripper. No, she is a burlesque performer. She is Iowa State fashion design student, Erin O’Grady, now known by her stage name, Phoenix L’Amour.

Burlesque, a comedic form of theater recently seen in the movies, has now been brought to life in the Des Moines art scene with L’Amour’s show “Burlesque Baby.” The performances feature female striptease skits, but they haven’t been in the attention of the public eye until Sept. 30, when two performers received a citation for breast overexposure, causing controversy over Burlesque.

Before taking the stage at Ingersoll, L’Amour, along with host Madam Jules, performer Vivi Dubois, stage maid Sven and the newest member, Pastor Mole Hillman, transforms into an entirely different person. They wear heavy makeup to accentuate their features and even transform into the opposite gender. Their costumes range from drag to ‘40s flapper dresses adorned with a fur or feather boa. Comfortable in their own skin, all of the women have curves and are proud and happy to flaunt them in their costumes, or lack thereof.

“We are celebrating our bodies and making people feel confident by representing everyone who doesn’t have a cookie-cutter body,” L’Amour says. “That is why we do this.”

Burlesque is more in-depth than it is depicted by the media. It is an old world art form, which originated in the Victorian Era. It experienced resurgence from the 1860s to the 1940s in cabarets and theaters, most routines featuring a full band or musical act.

“A lot of people don’t realize that burlesque isn’t just about the strip tease. Abbott, Costello and W.C. Fields, those comedians were part of the Vaudevillian Burlesque scene,” L’Amour says.

Much of the controversy around the overexposure of the women comes from misconception of what the performers are trying to achieve. L’Amour says the group’s message is about acceptance of all types of people, while expressing themselves through music, dance and theater. In one performance, L’Amour shows this by starting her performance as a man and stripping down to become a woman.

A Des Moines city ordinance states that any establishment with a liquor license is prohibited from showing female breasts “at or below the nipple.” L’Amour likens this to, “telling a basketball player that he has to wear khaki pants!” Although this ordinance has been in effect for many years, the Des Moines Police Department hadn’t investigated this show until a patron filed a complaint. The police warned the performers that two undercover cops would be attending and filming the show on Sept. 30 to ensure they were in accordance with the ordinance.

The presence of the police adds stress and frustration for the performers on stage. Before the show, the performers frantically reworked their routines and costumes backstage.

The police warned the performers that two undercover cops would be attending and filming the show on Sept. 30 to ensure they were in accordance with the ordinance.
“I was in a little skirt moving in front of my aunts and uncles and I had a little whip, walking around. I don’t care, they know how I perform.”

to ensure their breasts would be covered below the nipple. They glued on rhinestones, fur, and added boas, umbrellas and other props to cover the areas that are not to be seen by the audience.

It is very restricting for the performers and Madame Jules even apologizes to the audience for having to perform a toned-down show that night.

“We are a theater group, this is our art form and this is my career. Burlesque is not trying to cover up what you have, it’s trying to be comfortable with what you have and showing it,” L’Amour says. “We were taking extra precautions because we knew the cops were there and we didn’t want the Ingersoll to get in any trouble.”

L’Amour enters the stage covered in balloons. Dancing through the classic routine, she pops each one until they are almost completely gone. Knowing the police are in the audience, she makes sure to not pop the balloons covering her breasts, but a remaining balloon slips unexpectedly, and she is exposed. She immediately turns around, finishes the routine and exits the stage. At the end of the show, she is ticketed.

In between the performances, Madame Jules makes a quick costume change off the side of the stage, thinking she is covered by the curtain. The officers see her from the far opposite side of the curtain where they are seated. She too is ticketed.

Due to the citations, there is a possibility the venue could lose its liquor license. L’Amour doesn’t want this to happen and is willing to do whatever it takes to make sure the situation is righted for all parties. The performers of the show hope to work out an agreement with the Des Moines City Council and the owners of the Ingersoll that will allow the show to be performed in its “raw artistic form,” while still allowing the Ingersoll to run
Before this incident, there hadn’t been as much controversy on the burlesque scene. L’Amour first brought the show into the eye of the Des Moines art scene four years ago. Her first troupe, St. Bitus and the Taxi Dancers, which included Madam Jules, Vivi Dubois and five other women, performed classic conservative burlesque in the Des Moines area for about a year and a half before separating, leaving L’Amour to kick-start her solo career. She began with shows around Des Moines with guest performers and eventually brought in a troupe from Michigan called Super Happy Funtime Burlesque. She chose to take a hiatus from school when they asked her to join their tour, an offer never offered to another burlesque performer in the U.S.

“[Super Happy Funtime Burlesque] is out of this world crazy,” L’Amour says. “Going to one of their shows is like, ‘Wow, I’ve never seen anything like that, I probably won’t ever again.’ They are very theatrical. They write all of their own songs and music. They actually wrote a song for me for this past tour...it’s a big honor.”

L’Amour has also opened the Iowa School of Burlesque, which offers classes to teach the art as well as hair, makeup and costume design. “I started to do the classes because I really want to educate people on what [burlesque performers] do...I just want people to come and have fun.”

She hopes to expand the school this year with an apprentice program, preparing five individuals for their premiere at one of the “Burlesque Baby” shows. [TM1]

Burlesque has become a career for L’Amour, and she plans to use her degree to continue designing costumes for shows. “I’m still a starving artist. I struggle just like everyone else. But for me, it’s more about getting through this part of it, and eventually it will pay off,” L’Amour says. For the others, it is more of hobby. They live normal lives, with family and friends, and work for a living at jobs other than burlesque. Vivi Dubois is a chef in a Des Moines restaurant, while Madame Jules is a singer and songwriter in the area. All three of the women feel supported by their families and friends without feeling judged or looked down upon for what they do.

“My family is very supportive. At the New Year’s show, I was performing at one of Pastor Mole Hillman’s shows, and I was a little bondage burlesque babe and they were there. I was in a little skirt, moving in front of my aunts and uncles and I had a little whip, walking around. I don’t care, they know how I perform,” Madam Jules says.

Phoenix L’Amour believes there is nothing to hide when it comes to her career and has the support of loved ones to remind her of that. “My mom helps me make pasties when I go home and my dad, while he doesn’t want to see anything, he is very supportive of what I do. My entire family is on Facebook; they see everything. It’s not a secret, and it shouldn’t be.”

Funtime Burlesque. She