

Hed: Doing Burlesque in Bushwick Takes Courage, Talent, and Lots of Girl Power

Dek: An exclusive look into the lives of three local burlesque performers.

By Alyssa Fisher

It's quite easy to catch a burlesque show in Bushwick; last Wednesday, I made it to two. The first was a classic performance, set in the back of tiki-themed Dromedary Bar, with a mermaid and a sailor among the dancers taking the stage to enchant the intimate audience with sultry eyes and moves to match. Later I took a 10-minute Uber ride to Bizarre Bushwick for a packed fetish show set to run until 4 a.m. I probably could have made it to a third, a raw-and-raunchy circus variety show with aerialists and who knows what else at House of Yes, but I didn't learn about it until the next night. There's always this week.

Burlesque, a predominately female branch of variety show that features striptease, among other acts, has become a nightlife staple within Bushwick. From classic to takeover nights — such as sex-positive, transgender, people-of-color, plus-sized and political burlesque — there's often an opportunity to see something new, beautiful and radical.

"That's the one thing I do like about the saturation," said Darlinda Just Darlinda, the burlesque maven responsible for its growth locally. "You have all types of shows."

Darlinda met me last Thursday at Bizarre Bushwick wearing a yellow hoodie and painted face. Long, spidery lashes framed her hazel eyes, which popped under bubblegum-pink eyeshadow lined with a dramatic cat eye. A pink cloth, fastened with glitter clips, held in her mahogany locks. She chose a cozy corner booth to catch her breath and nosh on a cheeseburger sans bun, about an hour before she was due to perform. It wasn't shaking up to be a week for optimal of sleep: Just that day, she had a photoshoot for her upcoming venture, currently called "Untitled Rainbow Project," and following her routine at Bizarre (an opening number, if you will, for the venue's RuPaul's Drag Race viewing party), she was headed to Manhattan to perform in two more shows, the last at 3 a.m.

A burlesque performer for 14 years, Darlinda performs about three to five nights a week, averaging 15 to 20 shows a month. Local performers have her to thank for Bushwick's prolific scene; in 2011, seven years into her burlesque career, she lived in the city (and still does; she's based on the Bushwick-Bed Stuy border, a 5-minute walk from Bizarre) and was tired of lugging her costume and makeup bags on the subway to shows in Manhattan. She wanted to be able to walk out her door and hop on stage.

Bushwick Burlesque was born that year at The Morgan (it was soon replaced by Tutu's, which also closed, in November). In January 2013, around the time The Morgan closed, Darlinda and her production partner discovered Bizarre, formed a partnership and produced shows there for the next four years. Ready to take on new projects, she passed the torch to performers Fancy Feast and Zoe Ziegfeld, who created the monthly show, Fuck You Revue.

“Literally anything goes [at Bizarre], and that’s why it’s so beautiful here,” Darlinda said. “You can see someone do a beautiful classic striptease, you could see someone do a lip synch, you can see someone pull something out of their pussy.”

Since then, she has seen burlesque grow tremendously in Bushwick.

“Bushwick is having this artistic renaissance. People want to see it, people are present for it,” she said. “I remember the first time I produced a show here, and The Morgan, I noticed a vibrancy that I hadn’t seen in audiences since the early 2000s, when I started. This excitement...they had never seen anything like it. Excitement that is infectious.

“We don’t have to go into Manhattan to do things,” she continued. “And also, Manhattan is getting a little bit boring. No one can afford to live there, so the artists don’t live there; they’re living here.”

While they all work, play and perform in Bushwick, each entertainer differs greatly in her (or his or their) approach to the art form. Three of them — Darlinda, Betsy Propane and Lucy Buttons — shared with me what it takes to make it professionally. What they all agree on, however, is that burlesque can’t simply be reduced to stripping; as with any kind of performance art, it is made up of several complex layers.

Finding Herself

Betsy Propane was a year into burlesque dancing when she realized she didn’t actually know what she was doing.

Around 2011, she was singing in a rockabilly cover band on Long Island, where she’s from and was living at the time. She was first introduced to burlesque at one of her gigs, where the performers gave her a shot.

“I remember my first performance was stripping out of a regular dress,” she said, laughing. “I needed a proper mentorship.”

Under the tutelage of Jo “Boobs” Weldon, the headmistress at the New York School of Burlesque, Betsy learned about strippable costumes — “I have friends that pay for costume work, so they can take a dress off without having to pull it over their head. Or have a faster zipper, or snaps or straps,” she said. “There’s a musicality to it.” — and the fundamentals: how to play with fans, boas and gloves, and how to turn it all into a routine.

She first presented herself on stage as the floozy daughter of a cowboy, based off a fictional story written by an ex-boyfriend. The name, which happened to stick, is not to be confused with real fire, although she did dabble in fire eating.

Now, the 29-year-old Bushwick resident hosts and performs regularly, about three to four times a month, including every third Monday at Beauty Bar in Manhattan. She's done sing-and-strips, she's worked the sideshow at Coney Island.

"There's no other way to live other than creatively," said Betsy, sitting across from me at Variety Coffee Roasters, with cropped hair, bangs and an undercut, all the color of a cardinal. "I wouldn't even know what I would do if I was normal. There's no normalcy about me at all."

She gave up being a special education teacher's assistant to pursue the nightlife scene full time, as "it just didn't feed my soul the same way burlesque did." To live more comfortably, she took up a job as a barber at Hairrari in Bushwick two years ago.

"It's been really hard to manage and balance the two lives," she said. "They don't have to be separate, but there's a different level of professionalism. Being a burlesque performer has changed the way I see myself as a person ... I can't believe I'm getting choked up."

Betsy pulled out a tissue and dabbed her face, explaining that her mother wasn't present during her teen years.

"Burlesque taught me how to be feminine," she said through tears. "It taught me how to own my femininity and to demand respect. In an entertaining way and in an empowering way."

Although she didn't grow up in an open, creative home (she said her family, while supportive, isn't fond of her path), she has always been comfortable being nude on stage.

"I've never really been ashamed of my body, even if it isn't a magazine stereotype of what a female's body should be," she said. "Especially being tattooed."

While she pays homage to the beauty and glamour of Old Hollywood, and icons Elizabeth Taylor and Lucille Ball influence her character, being a burlesque performer is not as always as glamorous off-stage. There have been times when she tipped the Bryant Park public bathroom attendant to let her put on a full face of makeup. She's done her makeup around the corner from a show, at the Starbucks on Christopher Street.

"But you make it happen. Sometimes you're just naked, sitting on the toilet but not peeing, putting your pasties on. That's one of my favorite things to do after a show: Just sit completely naked and find a chair and sit down on it, just breathe or eat potato chips. I like to be the most glamorous and bizarre piece of work that I can be at all times.

As I sit here with a full heart about my performance art, and probably like \$5 in my bank account," she continues, laughing, "I can sit here and proudly smile about the life decisions that I've made and the career of burlesque."

Living a Double Life

Lucy Buttons still hasn't bared it all.

"One of my other burlesque friends used to joke that I was the most clothed stripper in all the land," she said.

She has become more courageous in the latter part of her 12-year burlesque career, switching from dance tights to fishnets, from star pasties to tassles. Her bottoms used to have a fuller back, but now she said she basically flashes her asshole to everyone.

The red-headed bombshell produces I Love Burlesque every third Wednesday at Dromedary Bar. She typically performs in the beach party-themed show, as well, as she did last week. She came out in a cheetah-print halter top, twisted at the neck, and long sarong. She called on her ballroom dance training — years ago, she moved to New York from a small town in Wisconsin to be dancer, really any avenue to perform — gracefully gliding around the stage, teasing the audience with seductive smiles and winks as she unwrapped her halter before stripping her clothing piece by piece.

Not everyone knows this is her life, or that Lucy Buttons exists. By day, she works in somewhat of a corporate sphere (she couldn't reveal too much), where she goes by her legal name. Her two worlds are wholly separated — she doesn't need any more workplace harassment.

"To me it's so normal [to be performing], but it's fun to remember that it's not normal to other people," she said. "My naughty secret."

Lucy, drawn to the glamour, initially thought burlesque would become her full-time career.

"Living in a place like New York City, where it's so expensive, the people — I don't want to blow off what they're creating with their characters — aren't living the most glamorous lives off-stage," she said. "I would rather have a full-time job and do some burlesque than be a full-time performer and eat peanut butter and jelly. That's what I did. I was totally broke."

She was drawn to the artistic freedom of burlesque, the way women celebrated their cellulite and kinks, the fact that everyone was unapologetically their true selves.

It changed her, a woman whose family tried to raise her as a Christian. She's always been open-minded of the strippers and drag queens and people in polyamorous relationships she is friends with today, but today she's more outspoken. Mostly about women, definitely about sex.

"Especially being where I'm from, it really opened my world," she said. "I was a feminist but in a different way, and that's evolved so greatly with the people that I've met. And issues that I've

come to know from the people I know in the burlesque world — that's a much greater gift than the stuff that I do.”

She's often inspired by music and spends a “a ridiculous amount of time [coming up with routines]” in her apartment in South Slope, where she spends time rhinestone-ing and sewing at her kitchen table.

If she wasn't doing burlesque, Lucy said she would probably have more money, maybe live somewhere else (“my apartment is totally out of control with costumes and things”). She probably would've had an easier time dating (although she is now engaged). But, it's about putting art out into the world.

“You have to do what makes you happy. Although I do try to live a double life, I can't hide much,” she said. “I wear my heart on my sleeve, I wear my sadness on my sleeve. I do that for business reasons, but I'm unapologetically myself. That includes burlesque.”

Darlinda Just Darlinda

Darlinda Just Darlinda has all but replaced her legal name. Even her mom calls her Darlinda.

It came from a joke, inspired by “Madonna, just Madonna.” She also liked the name Darlinda, which she broke up into Spanish definitions: *dar* means “to give,” and *linda* is “beauty.”

“Art is beauty and I can give beauty with my performances, whatever that means,” she said. “Storytelling is beauty, life is beautiful. That's my name.”

Darlinda grew up in the hippie town of Mendocino, California, where her parents (mom, a choreographer, and dad, a chorus singer) were on the board of the local theater. She graduated from California State University, Monterey Bay with a degree in theater and film.

“We ran around the woods naked,” she said. “Bodies weren't a place of shame, so it just came naturally to me. ‘Oh, you mean I get paid to take my clothes off?’”

A queer woman who has performed in everything from drag to fetish to classic shows, Darlinda, who often teaches at the New York School of Burlesque, said she's known more for her performance art. The piece she was about to perform Thursday was from a project called “A Year in Rainbow.” It inspired the upcoming “Untitled Rainbow Project,” which grew out of her need for a new passion as burlesque became her full-time career.

“Burlesque is a very feminist art form, in that it is whatever you want it to be. You don't have to be Dita Von Teese,” she said. “You can be whoever you want to be. That's empowering.”

On Thursday night, Darlinda was a sultry siren in a red silk robe, in the middle of the stage with her back turned to the audience. She held out her arms, the robe falling into a U-shape, exposing and outlining her backside.

Booty pop, booty pop, booty pop.

She turned around, pursing her glittery red lips at the audience, giving them her bedroom eyes as "I've Been Loving You Too Long" guided her back to the chair.

She took the pin out of hair, shook her curls and, after a few moments, whipped off her robe, tossing it above the mantle. The crowd roared.

Darlinda turned around, completely nude albeit fishnet leggings. Ungroomed, confident and sexy.

She came back to the crowd a few minutes later, suitcase in tow, to catch most of Drag Race before running to Manhattan for her next show.

She bent down to whisper, "That was invigorating."