Burgeoning Burlesque

Written by Justin Bell
Photos by Selena Philipes-Boyle

It's almost midnight before the troops finally go on. Seven women climb onto stage wearing what looks like purple, sequined, pleated costumes and shiny silver helmets, acting confused and disoriented. But as the music comes to a crescendo, they all remove their helmets and, one line while the crowd starts booing.

The audience knows what's coming as the girls move into their next number, the first can-can of the night. It won't be the most provocative number of the evening, as the most complicated. But Capital City Burlesque is just warming up, and there's plenty more to come on the Friday night before Halloween.

But how did burlesque make a resurgence after lying dormant for so many years? According to Kim Rackel and Marissa Meekins, two of the Capital City Burlesque dancers, it boils down to one word: sparkle.

More accurately, it's the glitter and the glamour of the form that attracted the two troops leaders. A few hours before the Halloween show, Rackel and Meekins sit in the group's storage area on the fourth floor of a building in the west end of the city. Sewing machines sit on a large table, filling most of the room, and there are tables, plates, and chairs against the wall, with many of their ideas and put together the crazy costumes seen on stage.

Empty beer bottles are scattered throughout, and the start-point warm beer as they talk about how they got involved in burlesque and what Capital City is all about.

"I saw a show about it when I was really young at my Grandma's house," says Rackel between sips. "I just really liked the sparkle.

That documentary about the glamour years of burlesque coincided with the resurgence of the form, sometime in the early 1990s. Burlesque, originally from the Italian word for joke, gained popularity in North American in the 19th century and remained popular until the middle of the 20th century.

But in the 1990s, burlesque started a resurgence. Now a massive annual festival in Las Vegas, the Miss Exotic World Pageant brings together dancers from around the world. Members of Capital City Burlesque make the trip every year.

Rackel started Capital City Burlesque eight years ago after leaving a different troupe in town that eventually closed down. Now, with 10 dancers and alumni of about 30, it's the largest and oldest burlesque group in the city.

"Everyone has their own story," says Meekins. "But everyone shares a love of rhinestones and feathers.

The sparkles, the glitter, the feathers and the glamour are both what gets Meekins and Rackel onto the stage. And the dancing must have something to do with it as well. While the dancers are able to come up with their own costumes, Rackel has the final say on what goes into the show.

It's a line, line between what's sexy and back's overly raunchy. But the line is often tempered by humour, which burlesque uses to keep it from devolving into a sex strip tease. And while strippers, at least in Canada, get naked, there's no full nudity in Capital City Burlesque shows. The most audience will see are breasts covered with pasties.

Rackel takes a call at one point while sitting in the storage area before the Halloween show. It's a troupe member calling to ask what size lingettes they need for a member. They will pull the trays from their underwear at one point and throw them into the audience.

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Jenn Kowton
Formerly of Capital City Burlesque

"If we weren't dressed up as big comic book pin-ups, people might be offended," Meekins says. "More than a few of their numbers play in humour, and they always manage to get a reaction from the crowd. At one point during the Halloween show, Meekins is joined on stage by the troupe's lone male dancer who goes by the stage name of Normie Manhandler. As Meekins describes it, "he thrashes around a lot on stage."

On Halloween, he's dressed as Nofarata, an early representation of vampires made famous by the German film of the same name. Wearing a full-length coat, a bald cap and the 'creepiest' grin, he seduces Meekins and then "exposes" himself to both her and the audience. But because this is burlesque, there's a joke to be had — attached to this underwear is a plastic bat that Normie manages to jump with his dancing.

Rackel loves the funny numbers and spends a good deal of time coming up with hilarious dances. But other are attracted to the throw-back to grand culture and the more feminine costumes. For Jenn Kowton, it was the elaborate costumes and makeup that drew her in. She spent four years photographing and working with the dancers of Capital City Burlesque before she took the plunge herself, performing for a year before leaving to go back to school.

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Kowton makes an appearance at the Halloween show, showing support for the dance troupe she was recently a part of. Even though she's too busy to make the twice-weekly practices and the innumerable hours spent making costumes, she still wants to support the friends she worked in the troupe.

The popularity of burlesque has been growing in Edmonton for the past decade. Capital City Burlesque performs four major shows per year and countless other smaller shows. But there have been other groups popping up.

Both the Hook Em Revue and Send in the Girls put on shows at this year's Edmonton International Fringe Festival. Burlesque as fringe theatre is a trend that's been going on for a number of years in Edmonton.

"In my tenure here, every year there's always someone that puts in a show that has a burlesque, whether it's actual burlesque, or a cabaret burlesque," says Thomas Scott, the program director for the Fringe.

Scott says its popularity could have something to do with the unseasoned nature of it, which is a perfect fit for the Fringe.

"As long as you're not breaking any laws, you've allowed to put any type of show on. The public is allowed to decide what's a hit," says Scott.

It's a fitting description of both Fringe and burlesque. After eight years of performing, people are still turning up in huge numbers to see Capital City Burlesque.

Though they go on late on Halloween, the crowd is still excited and cheers loudly when the dancers get down to their pasties. Two dancers take the stage dressed in shorts, brightly coloured tights, aviator sunglasses and massive afro wigs — the ensemble looks like disco zone from the grave and its reanimated corpse is on stage at the Starlite Room.

As the number winds down, the girls down to their panties and pasties, they both reach into their underwear and pull out corsets. The crowd roars as the two start parading around stage using the corsets on their hair, a seeming odd combination for two women who are mostly exposed.

But it's hilarious while at the same time remaining sensual, the exact mix Capital City Burlesque goes for.