

Burlesque: Then And Now

Burlesque is a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects. It overlaps in meaning with caricature, parody and travesty, and, in its theatrical sense, with extravaganza, as presented during the Victorian era.

A later use of the term, particularly in the United States, refers to performances in a variety show format, and this is how Americans define Burlesque. These were popular from the 1860s to the 1940s, often in cabarets and clubs, as well as theatres, and featured bawdy comedy and female striptease. Some Hollywood films attempted to recreate the spirit of these performances from the 1930s to the 1960s, or included burlesque-style scenes within dramatic films, such as 1972's *Cabaret* and 1979's *All That Jazz*, among others. There has been a resurgence of interest in this format since the 1990s.

American burlesque shows were originally an offshoot of Victorian burlesque. The English genre had been successfully staged in New York from the 1840s, and it was popularized by a visiting British burlesque troupe, Lydia Thompson and the "British Blondes", beginning in 1868. New York burlesque shows soon incorporated elements and the structure of the popular minstrel shows. They consisted of three parts: first, songs and ribald comic sketches by low comedians; second, assorted olios and male acts, such as acrobats, magicians and solo singers; and third, chorus numbers and sometimes a burlesque in the English style on politics or a current play. The entertainment was usually concluded by an exotic dancer or a wrestling or boxing match.

While burlesque went out of fashion in England towards the end of the 19th century, to be replaced by Edwardian musical comedy, the American style of burlesque flourished, but with increasing focus

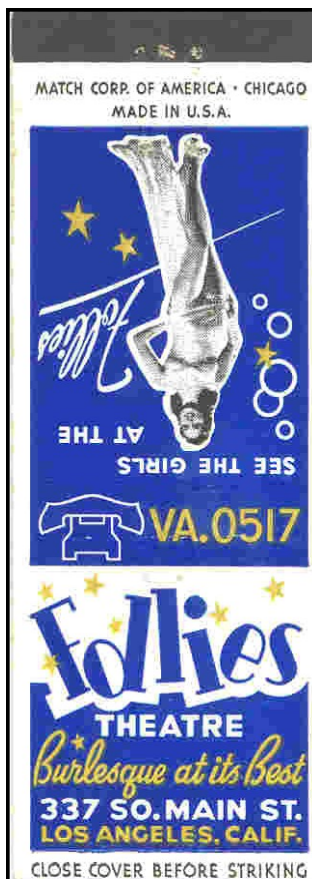


on female nudity. Exotic "cooch" dances were brought in, ostensibly Syrian in origin. The entertainments were given in clubs and cabarets, as well as music halls and theatres. By the early 20th century, there were two national circuits of burlesque shows competing with the vaudeville circuit, as well as resident companies in New York, such as Minsky's at the Winter Garden.

The transition from burlesque on the old lines to striptease was gradual. At first soubrettes showed off their figures while singing and dancing; some were less active but compensated by appearing in elaborate stage costumes. The strippers gradually supplanted the singing and dancing soubrettes; by 1932, there were at least 150 strip principals in the US. Star strippers included Sally Rand, Gypsy Rose Lee, Tempest Storm, Lili St. Cyr, Blaze Starr, Ann Corio and Margie Hart, who was celebrated enough to be mentioned in song lyrics by Lorenz Hart and Cole Porter.

By the late 1930s, burlesque shows would have up to six strippers supported by one or two comics and a master of ceremonies. Comics who appeared in burlesque early in their careers included Fanny Brice, Mae West, Eddie Cantor, Abbott and Costello, W. C. Fields, Jackie Gleason, Danny Thomas, Al Jolson, Bert Lahr, Phil Silvers, Sid Caesar, Danny Kaye, Red Skelton, and Sophie Tucker.

The uninhibited atmosphere of burlesque establishments owed much to the free flow of alcohol, and the enforcement of Prohibition was a serious blow. In New York, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia clamped down on burlesque, effectively putting it out of business by the early 1940s. It lingered on elsewhere in the U.S., increasingly neglected, and by the 1970s, with nudity commonplace in theatres, reached "its final shabby demise." Both during its declining years and afterwards there have been films that sought to capture American burlesque, including *Lady of Burlesque* (1943), *Striporama* (1953), and *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968).



In recent decades, there has been a revival of burlesque, sometimes called neo-burlesque, on both sides of the Atlantic. A new generation, nostalgic for the spectacle and perceived glamour of the classic American burlesque, developed a cult following for the art in the early 1990s at Billie Madley's "Cinema" and later at the "Dutch Weismann's Follies" revues in New York City, "The Velvet Hammer" troupe in Los Angeles and The Shim-Shamettes in New Orleans. Ivan Kane's Royal Jelly Burlesque Nightclub at Revel Atlantic City opened in 2012. Notable Neo-burlesque performers include Dita Von Teese, and Julie Atlas Muz and Agitprop groups like Cabaret Red Light incorporated political satire and performance art into their burlesque shows. Annual conventions such as the Vancouver International Burlesque Festival and the Miss Exotic World Pageant are held. [<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burlesque>]

Thus it is that collectors today are only likely to run into Burlesque covers among their Girlie covers, unless they're fortunate enough to find the occasional Pre-War issue from an actual Burlesque show.