

Entertainment

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REALITY CHECK

MOVIE/TONE NEWS

AMERICAN IDOL

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[GENERAL MOTORS](#)

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Vaudeville Vixens Get Fit With 'Burlesquercise'

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By Sara Bonisteel

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FOX NEWS

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NEW YORK — The old bump and grind is the new way to tone abs and thighs.

That old vaudeville staple, burlesque, is fast becoming a workout of choice for women across the nation as the lost art of the striptease finds renewed popularity in clubs from [New Orleans](#) to Los Angeles.

The art form, once made famous by the likes of Gypsy Rose Lee and fan dancer Sally Rand, is gaining a following of female fans sized 0 to 18.

"Burlesque attracts a real wide demographic," said Bombshell Betty, a 28-year-old "burly-Q" dancer who teaches "burlesquercise" in the San Francisco area. "Everyone wants to be [Jessica Rabbit](#), and this at least gives them an opportunity to play at being that."

Betty's students range from women in their early 20s to middle-aged suburban moms, who come to learn the basics of a striptease and maybe kick-start their own dancing careers.

"We teach the classic moves, like the bump and grind, the Jell-O-on-springs kind of [Marilyn Monroe](#) walk," she said. "I teach people how to develop their own persona or character based on what they find sexy."

Around 20 women turned up earlier this month at the Museum of Sex in midtown Manhattan to learn burlesque basics from a three-year veteran, Peekaboo Pointe, a perky modern dancer who performs

on the New York burlesque circuit.

After recounting the genre's history — from Little Egypt's scandalous performance at the 1903 Colombian Exposition in Chicago to the Minsky Brothers' mid-20th-century stripping empire to the most recent revival — Peekaboo Pointe pulled out a rainbow of feather boas and taught her giggling pupils how to shimmy and shake like a pro.

Most of the women attended to learn a few lessons for the boudoir. They peppered Peekaboo with questions on everything from who made her glittered lipstick ("drugstore red and red glitter") to where she buys her undergarments (all over).

Marni Halasa, a 39-year-old ice-skating coach from Manhattan, took the class after seeing a burlesque show and being wowed by the differences in the dancers' body shapes and their theatrical gimmicks.

"It was great learning about the basic shimmy, bump and grind, and how to make pasties gyrate to the left," said Halasa, who is now inspired to create her own ice-skating burlesque act. "But really the class was an exercise in freedom and unabashed exhibition. The moves were fun, flirty and very 1960s Americana — you couldn't help but get in touch with your own inner goddess."

[Dita Von Teese](#), a burlesque dancer from Hollywood and wife of rock star Marilyn Manson, attributes the rise in burlesque's popularity to dancers creating bigger and better shows.

Her new book, "Burlesque and the Art of the Teese/Fetish and the Art of the Teese" (ReganBooks), documents her own 16-year career as a stripper as well as offering up tips on everyday glamour.

"Natural beauty is not glamour. Glamour is something that you make and something you create," she said. "We all can't have natural beauty, so I created glamour. I created this character for myself."

Von Teese wrote the book, she says, to paint a more complete portrait of the genre.

"I just feel like some people in the neo-burlesque scene want to paint it to be too pretty of a picture," Von Teese said. "The truth is they weren't all Gypsy Rose Lee and they weren't all Sally Rand. There were a lot of other burlesque dancers and a lot of them were quite racy."

"Times haven't changed that much," she continued. "People have always been interested in sex or have always wanted to push the envelope."

Today there are burlesque dancers who dress as roosters to re-enact cock fights in New Orleans; a plus-sized troupe, the Glamazons, in New York; and Von Teese and Catherine D'Lish, California dancers renowned for their dueling routine in gigantic martini and champagne glasses.

Von Teese recommends that future burlesque dancers play their roles close to home.

"If you're going to do a striptease for the public or even for yourself, the most important thing is to kind of play up your own personality in your show and not try to have an overnight, instant makeover," she said. "It's important to let your personality shine through and to feel comfortable and to look natural even if it doesn't feel natural."

On Chicago's north side, the women who take the burlesque classes at the Arabesque Dance Studio learn the basics of the tease, but they strip off boas and gloves that they wear over regular workout gear.

Studio owner Sonya Hohmann has offered the classes since opening the studio 16 months ago. Taught by Michelle L'Amour, the 2005 winner of the Miss Exotic World burlesque competition, the classes include a "Tease N Tone" workout that combines burlesque moves with aerobics.

Bombshell Betty says the routines tone leg muscles, among other things.

"It's more of a toning workout than high-energy calorie burning [one] usually," she said. "The whole bump and grind is really good for toning all of your core muscles."

Students of both L'Amour and Bombshell Betty have gone on to perform in the amateur burlesque circuit. But for the majority of participants it's an excuse to "get out of the house with a girlfriend and work up a sweat for an hour or so," Hohmann said.

Von Teese isn't sure that a strict burlesque-dance-only regime is the way to perfectly toned curves.

"The burlesque stars that I admired felt it was important to take care of your body and exercise

and eat well," she said. "And they had regimens that they followed."

Von Teese and D'Lish maintain their own toned bodies by swimming and biking "like madwomen" five or six nights a week.

"We believe in the whole idea of the glorified girl, meaning that when you're in really good shape, you're a better performer, and that's a fact."