

Oh, *Lala!*

Confessions of a Burlesque Dancer

SaraAnne Fahley was immediately drawn to burlesque, and decided at that moment she would start her career. She combines her skill as a dancer with the art of burlesque with her routine with The Lalas, a burlesque group based in LA.

By Adelina Sarkisyan

As I looked around the intimate gathering of fans at the House of Blues, all huddled around the stage like moths to a flame, I couldn't help but notice that a majority of the people were women. The stereotype of men drooling over dancing women suddenly shifted in my mind to something else, something a little more fantastic and invigorating. Then the lights dimmed, and out came Dita Von Teese. The next few hours I spent standing in heels, looking up at this sirenic woman expressing herself in her movement and costume flashed like light bulbs in my eyes, dazzling and dizzying me simultaneously.

She was beautiful, brilliant and classy: all the things I longed to be. I imagined that if I stared at her long enough, I too could be like her. Alas, I am not the pale-skinned, red-lipped Von Teese. And although that night didn't transform me into an image of her that felt so empowering, I left that show feeling a little bit more myself, and a little bit more like magic had been brewing inside me and I had, in one way or another, finally said the right words to the incantation I had been searching for all my life. I had been lit up inside.



Credit: Alice Kuo Shippee

The art of burlesque has undergone many significant changes throughout history. The art form I saw on stage is a far cry from its origins. Originally, the word burlesque was used to describe a movement of parodies and imitations, often of artists or authors, in the 16th and 17th centuries. The modern “striptease” version of burlesque only arrived in the late 19th century and became predominant in the 1920s and ‘30s. Burlesque had its revival in the 1990s through the “neo-burlesque” movement, which paved way for newcomers to the art form to mold and create burlesque in their own unique ways. And boy are they molding!

As “L.A.’s Hottest Burlesque Show,” The Lalas are a lush and risqué burlesque dance troupe created and choreographed by Erin Lamont. I had the chance to interview one of the talented dancers from The Lalas, SaraAnne Fahey, and got her opinion and advice on topics ranging from burlesque and feminism to self-love and self-acceptance.

Sarkisyan: How did you first get into burlesque and The Lalas?

Fahey: I first started burlesque about five years ago. I was out at a venue and saw a cabaret-style burlesque show and thought, “Uh oh, I HAVE to do this.” I started doing small shows here and there and started learning about burlesque and what it’s all about. Then I found the Lalas and did my first show with them. I loved the Lalas right away because of how Erin brought in comedy to the show. I also loved how unique the soundtrack to the show was: each number is set to some amazing classic rock song by Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, etc. I also loved the Lalas because it’s a burlesque group that uses professional dancers, so

along with doing a show where we get to do burlesque solos, we are also able to do professional level choreographed group numbers, which are so fun to do! I’ve been with the Lalas a few years now and am always being challenged as a dancer and burlesque artist.

Sarkisyan: The Lalas claim to be “L.A.’s Hottest Burlesque Group.” Why do you think that is and what is it like being a part of it?

Fahey: Well, they claimed that once I joined the group. BAHAAHAAAA! All of our girls are professional dancers, which means that we have very clean and precise choreography, along with having each of the girls do solos. I don’t find other groups that master both arts; yes, dancing and burlesque-ing are separate and unique arts. They can be used together, but they are separate art forms. The Lalas are unique because we have mastered both art forms in one show. All of our girls are educated on burlesque and how it’s different from “sexy dance.” Other groups I have seen are generally great at one form. Also, we’re always changing our show to be exciting and hot, and our host, Tonya Kay, does some really awesome, unique things in the show that sets us apart.

Sarkisyan: What does burlesque mean to you and what do you enjoy the most about it?

Fahey: I fell in love with burlesque the first time I saw it. Burlesque is approachable to both men and women, and using comedy alongside sensuality and other expressions that every woman has really makes it fun for all people to experience. I think one of the biggest reasons I really fell in love with bur-

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lesque is because it celebrates women and everything they experience on a human level.

Women aren’t just sexy; we are funny and silly and we mess up and sometimes we’re sad or other times ecstatic. We experience every emotion and deal with so many things every day, and that’s what’s exciting to see on stage: real women, encouraged and re-

spected to be themselves in front of an audience. It’s funny how it can be so hard to do sometimes; to just be yourself on stage. And really, when I do a burlesque show, I tend to feel much more connected to the women in the audience than the men. For me, it’s not about putting a show on for all the men—although I do love you men!—it’s about expressing the power as well as the struggle I hold as a woman, and uplifting all the other women in the audience because they get it. I love getting compliments from women at the end of the show because really, a happy woman at the end of the night means a happy partner!

I was introduced to burlesque through none other than Dita Von Teese. She once said about burlesque, “It’s not about seducing men. It’s about embracing womanhood.” Are you a fan of hers and do you agree with her thoughts on burlesque?

I completely agree with what she said! It most definitely is about embracing womanhood! That’s what it’s all about because really; women are amazing! Now don’t get me wrong, I’m also a huge fan of men—I love men! But there is something just so special about a woman who loves herself and who encourages others to do so. There’s just too much negativity out there in the world regarding the way women “should” look and how they “should” act.

Burlesque is an amazing way to celebrate women as who they are, without pressuring them to manufacture themselves in a certain way so that they can fit within society’s little box. We’re all so different and that is what makes us so interesting and beautiful. I don’t need to watch a Barbie on stage;

that's just not that interesting to me. I love seeing someone shake and shimmy and let go! I love seeing them sweat and laugh, admit when they "mess up" by giving a little "oh well" face to the audience. That's what makes it all so exciting and engaging. And this is true for the kind of women I want in my life. I love surrounding myself with women who are unapologetically themselves.

Not to say they don't have self-doubts, because I think we all do, but I would much rather choose to spend my time with a woman who is honest and silly—because her beauty lies within all her flaws—rather than someone who is acting a certain way because that's how people told her to act. I like to have fun and let loose as well as have some real honest moments with those I love. It's the same on stage.

It seems to me that there is a lot of misconception about burlesque, such as some people comparing it to stripping or thinking that it is anti-feminist. How do you feel about some of these misconceptions about burlesque that are out there?

It is so not stripping! Burlesque really is such a positive expression for women to experience as the performer and as the audience. It is always about encouraging women to be more open on stage and more expressive, in all ways. When I'm on stage, I am not on my knees groveling for money; I am not doing moves to seduce people so that I make more money. When I do burlesque I really love the men and women in the audience and I'm choosing to trust them because I am bringing them into a very vulnerable moment. This is hard to do. Being honest in burlesque and simply who you are is important, I think.

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This is probably a bad comparison, but it's like the difference between having real sex and faking porno sex. I am not faking sexual acts that men like to see women do; I'm just being me. And I think that's a lot scarier than faking it sometimes because it's vulnerable. Also, I am not using men as an object to up my cash flow. I love men and I would never like to think of them as a way to make money! I have a base rate that I already know that I am making for the night and I won't make more money because I am giving someone extra attention. Pleasing a specific person won't change my rate whatsoever.

Also, I think a big difference is behind the curtain, how the dancers treat each other. I always hear burlesque artists encouraging each other behind stage when there is no audience there to hear them. I am always amazed at the beautiful women I get to dance alongside and a complement from them means the world. It's all about feminism, celebrating women of all shapes and sizes! It's about reminding them how amazing they are. When I perform, it's not about proving to other people how hot or how talented I am, it's about trying to get them to see the same beauty in themselves, reminding them that they are just as sexy, funny, exciting and interesting.

Do you have a signature style or look?

I wouldn't say that I have a signature style or look, but I'm sure other people would be able to pinpoint that for you. I just do me. Whatever I'm feeling that day tends to come out in the way I perform. Every time it's different. I am definitely very improv-based, and I think I tend to be pretty athletic. I love really interacting with the audience because they give me so much energy and they're so much fun to play off of. They're hilarious! I love the audiences that come to see burlesque. I also love bringing in different movement styles; I'm inspired by: samba, fosse, contemporary, ballet, belly-dancing, etc.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to get into burlesque?

I would first tell them to get out and see their local burlesque artists. There's probably some burlesque going on in your city, and that's the great thing—with so many people who love burlesque, it can be pretty easy to find. From there, you can decide what really

inspires you and go that route. Start making connections and start exploring what kind of a burlesque artist you would like to be, and the great thing is that there doesn't have to be only one answer! What inspires you, what do you think is funny, what do you think is sexy, what best expresses your experience as a woman? Go from there!

Are there any other projects you are working on aside from being in The Lalas?

I am always pretty much working on at least three different projects at one time. I like to call myself a juggler even though I am physically a horrible juggler. I have bruised many apples. Hah! The Lalas has been my consistent priority for a few years now because I believe in it so much!

What's your guilty pleasure?

Donuts! And cheesy '90s movies I grew up on. I prefer these two together but individually, they're still pretty awesome.

Visit The LaLas website to learn more and book tickets to a show, <http://thelalas.com/>

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