

More tease than tawdry

Burlesque fest to feature more than 80 acts

By John Owens
TRIBUNE REPORTER

She begins one of her signature acts dressed as a marionette, posing seductively on an ornate, movable stage.

She begins dancing to some rockabilly music, slowly removing articles of clothing. She ends up topless except for some strategically placed tassels, before concluding her act with an aerial performance on a hoop hanging from the stage.

"I call it 'The Temptress in Her Box,'" says Angela Eve, veteran burlesque artist. "I open a lot of my shows with this act."

For the past six years, Eve has done her part in reviving the burlesque tradition in Chicago, performing striptease acts like "Temptress" in at least 60 such shows in the area with her troupe Eve's Parlor Burlesque.

Now Eve—Angela Eve Freese—is helping produce Chicago's first burlesque festival.

"Angela Eve's Twisted Tassel Burlesque Festival" begins Tuesday at Chicago's Admiral Theatre. More than 80 acts are scheduled to perform during the event, which continues through March 25. There will also be after-fest performances at the Debonair Social Club (1575 N. Milwaukee Ave.) in Wicker Park.

The "Twisted Tassel" lineup is classic burlesque, an American entertainment scene staple during the early 20th Century—particularly in Chicago.

Long-gone theaters such as the Gem and the Rialto (on State Street in the South Loop) featured local stripteasers and national legends like Tempest Storm and Lili St. Cyr, who performed along with risqué comedians and small jazz bands. But this type of variety show died a slow death during the 1950s and '60s, when television and the modern porn industry helped kill it.

By the mid-'90s, however, the art form was back in urban areas like New York, New Orleans and, eventually, Chicago. There are now at least eight local troupes in the area, including Eve's Parlor and Flesh Tones, Belmont Burlesque and Michelle L'Amour's Big Sexy Show, which recently had a Valentine's Day performance at the Lakeshore Theater.

The upcoming festival will include live bands (Chicago rockabilly/R&B groups "The Del Moroccos" and "Sophia Wolff and The Cubs"); comedians and MCs (Norm Holly from Second City); and of course, the striptease acts, which include locals like Miss Maya Sinstress and Krysten Corruption, along with national and international acts like Dallas' Angela Ryan, New Orleans' Trixie Minx and the United Kingdom's Miss Von Livid.

The striptease acts definitely will accent



Veteran striptease dancer Angela Eve is helping to produce Chicago's first burlesque festival.

'ANGELA EVE'S TWISTED TASSEL BURLESQUE FESTIVAL'

Bringing back burlesque's glory days

When: Tuesday through March 25

Where: Admiral Theatre, 3940 W. Lawrence Ave.

Price: \$20-\$25, 773-478-8111

the "tease" more than the "strip." This is burlesque—it isn't like your average exotic dancing or gentleman's club, where full-frontal nudity is the norm and nothing is left to the imagination.

In burlesque, dancers rely more on suggestion. They never show all; at the most, performers will strip to pasties and G-strings, and leave it at that. Humor is a big part of a burlesque performance; and so is showmanship.

"You can be cute and funny in burlesque,

From the Dead to Ozz to Eve

Angela Eve Freese, one of the pioneers of the burlesque revival in Chicago, got her start in a roundabout way.

The self-proclaimed "hippie chick" used to follow bands like the Grateful Dead and Phish in the 1990s, and eventually started selling jewelry and hemp-related items at their shows. This led to more of the same at Ozzfest in the late '90s, which morphed into "sideshow" performances consisting of burlesque-style dancing.

"I had already dabbled in exotic dancing in clubs—I knew it was something I could always fall back on to make money," Freese says.

But Freese isn't your typical exotic dancer. She has a BFA in painting from Chicago's Art Institute, and has studied acting at the Second City's Conservatory program. She has done performance art at small Chicago clubs and trained at Lou Conte dance studios.

Freese decided to use all these disciplines when she started Eve's Parlor Burlesque in 2002, although she still dances at strip clubs and gentleman's clubs to make money.

"I just love burlesque," Freese says. "There's a lot of things that go on in the exotic dancing world that's sensual and wonderful. But burlesque is special because it allows for stage presence and expression and showmanship."

Part of the proceeds for "Angela Eve's Twisted Tassel Burlesque Festival" will go toward the "Make It Right NOLA" organization, a charity group dedicated to rebuilding New Orleans' 9th Ward, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

—J.O.

IN THE WEB EDITION



A video preview of the festival at chicagotribune.com/burlesque.

and stage presence goes a really long way," said Freese, who also performs as an exotic dancer in clubs around the country. "In exotic clubs, there's just too much bumping and grinding, and not enough tease."

Freese said the Admiral shows will be "more like vintage burlesque shows," while the after-festival events at Debonair Social Club will be "more hard edged," with sideshow acts and members of the Eve's Parlor troupe administering spankings and other forms of "corporal punishments" to willing participants.

Freese and Cathy Russell (a.k.a. "Maiden Sacrifice") are co-producers of this festival as well as featured performers. They say

"Twisted Tassel" is an attempt to rival similar events like the New York Burlesque Festival, which debuted in 2003, and the London Burlesque Festival, which started in 2007.

"There really hasn't been a major burlesque draw in the Midwest, so we figured this was a way to bring Chicago back onto the national stage," Russell said.

"This city has a lot going on in terms of burlesque," added Freese. "But it's not always seen by the outside world. So this festival is a good way to show people that there's a thriving scene here."

onthetown@tribune.com