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## Burlesque: performance art - or stripping?

Fans of burlesque claim it is an art form, but one London council has classified it alongside lap dancing and stripping. Helen Croydon investigates

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The burlesque night at the Proud gallery in Camden, London. Photograph: PR

It's risqué, decadent and entertaining. Burlesque delights in an image of glamour, mischief and sauciness, and attracts a sophisticated following. It may come as quite a surprise, then, that in one London borough it has been categorised along with strip clubs and lap-dancing acts.

After three years of running the popular Be burlesque night, the Proud gallery in north London has been told by Camden council it needs to apply for an adult entertainment licence.

"It's unbelievable," says Alex Proud, the club's owner. "Burlesque is not about naked women. It's about the art of removing clothes. It's nearer to theatre or dance than erotica."

Since the story was picked up by the local press a week ago, it has been sparking debates over whether burlesque dancing is art or a sex act.



An acrobatic burlesque artist. Photograph: PR

Feminists have been quick to highlight burlesque's suggestive nature, claiming it is another damaging portrayal of women as sex objects.

Fans are vociferously defending their 'guilty' pleasure. "It's an acceptable way to enjoy naughtiness", says Robert Harding, a 37-year-old recruitment consultant and burlesque fan. "I could admit to my girlfriend that a burlesque dancer turns me on, but I could never get away with saying the same thing about a lap dancer."

Burlesque existed for centuries as a theatrical form based on comedy and satire. It only adopted its signature erotic tone over the last century.

It was revived in the UK during the 90s, and has seen an explosion in popularity in the noughties, with the launch of events like the London Burlesque Festival in 2007 and the birth of Club Noir in Glasgow, which can host up to 2,000 people.

With its lavish performances and extravagant costumes, it's hard to associate burlesque with the sleaze of strip clubs. Yes, it's titillating, but unashamedly so. Rarely do we get a chance to stimulate our sexual senses in such a publicly acceptable way.

It's a bold move for Camden council to go against the grain and classify burlesque as sexually explicit as a lap-dancing joint. It could be an early sign of a shift in values; a step towards a tainted image of burlesque.

Perhaps it's natural that anything slightly risqué will attract dissenting comment. Take striptease itself - today its reputation is far from cultured, but when it was first pioneered in wartime Britain it was considered an art form. The Whitehall Follies, for instance, were one of the UK's earliest acts, founded in 1942. They were a huge hit and described by theatre critics as a breath of fresh air for embattled Britain.

Or consider nude photography. It originated as a stylised depiction of the human body. The artists' aim was to show off the female form, not to make their subjects sexually suggestive. The original concept seems to have been lost on today's photographers and glamour models. Is it inevitable that anything remotely taboo declines in status over time?



Extravagant outfits are all part of the burlesque act.

Photograph: PR

Alex Proud has been forced to stop the burlesque performances at his venue. "I am not going to apply for an adult licence. It's expensive and the residents would undoubtedly object. Nor do I want the stigma of having adult entertainment status.

"What's ironic is that since I stopped the burlesque performance, I've employed normal sexy female dancers. They are far more overt, far less appealing to a female audience and far more suggestive than the burlesque dancers."

Vicky Butterfly, 25, was part of the burlesque act. "I'm a performance artist, not at all a stripper. Camden council even funded my burlesque dancing training at Central St Martins college; now they've taken the work away from me.

"I've read the legislation over and over again and I don't see how it applies to us. We are not displaying genitalia. Many of my acts have full body suits. Legislating about what we can do with our bodies cheapens the view of sensuality."

A spokesperson for Camden council said: "We are not preventing burlesque troupes from performing in the borough. Under our licensing policy any premises that want to offer entertainment involving nudity, striptease or other entertainment of an adult nature simply need to check with us to ensure they have the necessary approvals."

One local authority's enforcement of the law is unlikely to deter burlesque fans. But the row is another dent in burlesque's reputation as a prestigious art form, and provides more ammunition for detractors who associate it with sleaze.

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