

Behind the Burly Q : “Revealing” documentary revisits golden age of burlesque

Written by Kam Williams



With roots in 19th Century vaudeville and minstrel shows, burlesque enjoyed its heyday in the United States in the 1930s when it emerged as the country’s most popular form of live entertainment until the advent of television, porno films and the women’s movement would signal its demise. The genre originally featured both comedians and dancers backed by a live band, although eventually the striptease acts came to be the only things the audiences wanted to see.

The curvaceous cutie pies who plied their trade as ecdysiasts are proud members of “America’s Greatest Generation,” that rapidly-disappearing set whose ranks are thinning at an alarming rate as they pass away due to old age. But thanks to actress-turned-director Leslie Zemeckis their contributions to the culture have been preserved for posterity, recounted in fascinating fashion in *Behind the Burly Q*, a revealing documentary cobbled from a combination of file footage and dozen of interviews with historians, surviving strippers and may of their offspring.

Although these aging senior citizens may just be a shadow of their former selves physically, the life stories they share here show that time has not diminished their inner beauty one iota. Most, we learn, adopted colorful stage names like Blaze Starr, Tempest Storm, Evangeline the Oyster Girl, Little Egypt, Sally Rand, Lady Midnight, Alexandra the Great, White Fury, TNT Red, Kitty West, Gilded Lili, The Sexquire Girl, The Ball of Fire, Gypsy Rose Lee and Bingo. But sadly, behind the glamorous facades were mostly sad tales about how they had basically been driven into the profession by dysfunctional families and/or money woes caused by the Great Depression.

Evangeline the Oyster Girl says she turned to the relatively-easy money of burlesque after watching her mother work herself to the bone in the cotton fields. Coal miner’s daughter Blaze Starr started taking her clothes off after her dad developed Black Lung disease. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, Tempest Storm can now see that in her case she pranced around in her birthday suit because she was looking for the father she never knew.

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Regardless, it seems that one of the occupational hazards of the job was unstable relationships, as some subjects bemoan never tying the knot while others report marrying four or five times. Then there were those who had mental problems, drank or were addicted to pain killers, the ostensible fallout of a career spent on the road traveling from town to town to get next to naked for perfect strangers.

Apparently, each woman tried to include something memorable in her routine to attract repeat customers. For example, one says she got skin poisoning from dyeing her hair green. Another did yoga on stage, while Sally Keith’s claim to fame was having such control over her pectoral muscles that she could send her tassels swinging in opposite directions and in perfect time to the musical accompaniment.

A fun-filled tribute which elevates the Golden Age of Burlesque to its rightful place in history while belatedly restoring a little dignity to its underappreciated, socially-ostracized performers.

Excellent (4 stars)

Unrated

Running time: 98 Minutes

Distributor: First Run Features

To see a trailer for Behind the Burly Q, visit:

http://firstrunfeatures.com/trailers_burlyq.html