

# Life is a cabaret old chum

If you thought burlesque was all busty women in basque and suspenders you'd be right. But only partly, says **Eugene Costello**



**I**T'S 11pm on a Saturday night and the party atmosphere is ratcheting up a gear or two. Dinner has given way now to unbridled drink, cocktails being ferried from bar to table by scantily-dressed waitresses in bodices or basques. It seems to be mainly couples – smartly suited men and elegantly robed and coiffed ladies. Well, for the most part, though there appear to be plenty who have ventured out on this sharply cold night in little more than their underwear. They'll catch their death... The tables are all turned towards the stage and runway, and the air is thick with smoke.

A Chicago speakeasy in the 1930s, perhaps? Not a bit of it – the delightfully decadent Proud Cabaret in London's trendy Shoreditch, this month. And the smoke is not tobacco smoke, but a cunningly deceptive stream of synthetic stuff that is being pumped out of a variant on a dry ice machine.

Suddenly the lights – already low – are dimmed even further and the crowd hushes to a murmur, a palpable sense of anticipation sweeping the crowded room. 



**“BURLESQUE IS ALL ABOUT SUGGESTIVENESS”**



**“DON’T  
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Bathed in blue and green light, a fantastic creature picks her way towards the stage with exaggerated steps, arms and head held at awkward angles, as though an off-world beast encountering Earth for the first time. That she looks like some exotic being in, say, *Avatar*, only serves to underscore the ethereal, fey nature of her piece – she is adorned with tattoos and wearing a skimpy elfin costume that could conceivably have seen her cast as an extra in *Lord of the Rings*.

She continues to deliver, stepping and marvelling to the ambient beats until, after an electrifying, engrossing, arresting several minutes, the performance comes to a close and the audience erupts into wild cheering and clapping. Leah Debrincat knows how to

put on a show.

When I arrived earlier, I was a burlesque virgin. The mood is set from the get-go – Rebecca, the gorgeous Canadian brunette in the ticket booth, is wearing a vintage corset, pillbox hat and a deep, ruby-red, lipstick-enhanced smile, looking for all the world like a Fifties pin-up. “Don’t worry, we’ll be gentle,” she purrs – and so it proved. For burlesque may flirt around the edges of titillation and sexual allusion, but it is never so crass as to be explicit – you won’t see any nudity, for example.

This is not simply due to licensing laws – burlesque is all about suggestiveness. If you are looking for something more biological, you’ll find plenty of other venues in Shoreditch that cater to that market. 

## “WE’RE NOT SEX WORKERS WE’RE PERFORMERS”

In the world of burlesque, you don’t have ‘acts’, you have performers – confuse the two at your peril.

Says well-known ‘whiplash act’ Diva Hollywood: “As a group, we have massive respect for these girls – they work bloody hard for their money, and it is physically gruelling work. But burlesque is about suggestiveness, not straight sex or similar – we are not in the sex industry, we are in the performance industry. And much of burlesque involves humour that underpins the whole ethos.”

I am speaking to Diva after her turn at Volupté, an esoteric afternoon tea show that takes place in a City basement bar on Sundays, when the financial district is deserted. Attended by devotees whose love of vintage and burlesque extends to wearing appropriate outfits – lots of pearls and original Forties and Fifties clothing – the offer here is that you will enjoy afternoon tea (cakes and finger sandwiches), and alcohol served in fine bone china teapots, speakeasy-style “in case the police do a raid.”

That’s not to say that dressing up doesn’t happen at the slightly more mainstream Proud Cabaret. Back in Shoreditch, the beautiful and glamorous Marilyn Monroe-alike Banbury Cross has just given a pulse-racing performance that got the room to its feet demanding more.

A table of raucous women are enjoying themselves, all dressed in stockings, basques and feather boas. Spokeswoman Sarah, 37, a City trader, says “We’re all Essex birds. We go to Green’s gym in Chingford and go out en masse.” So, what’s the special occasion? “Well,” replies Sarah, “It happens to be someone’s birthday. But we don’t really need an excuse generally. It’s a laugh, isn’t it?”

Yes, Sarah, you can say that again. It certainly is a laugh... **A**

