

# The art of teasing

Burlesque is currently undergoing a huge revival with clubs all over the country hosting dedicated nights. **Geny Caloisi** took a closer look at the trend and discovered a new way of gaining confidence and having a little “boudoir fun”

Sometimes mistaken for female striptease, burlesque is not just walking along a runway to a bump 'n' grind beat. The phenomenon started in the mid-19th century and was a source of music and comedy – and challenging the established way of looking at things. In the beginning the term “burlesque” was applied to a wide range of comic plays, including non-musicals.

These works entertained the lower and middle classes of the 1840s, both in the UK and the US, by making fun of (or “burlesquing”) the operas, plays and social habits of the upper classes. Everything from Shakespearean drama to the craze for Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind could inspire a full-length burlesque spoof.

By the 1860s, British burlesque relied on the display of shapely, scantily clad women to keep audiences interested. In the Victorian age, when respectable women went to great lengths to

hide their physical form beneath bustles, hoops and frills, the idea of young ladies appearing onstage in tights had a powerful appeal. Thus burlesque became a new way of representing the female body that went on to change the role of the women on the British stage and later influenced the role of women in Hollywood.

Jo King – or “Goodtime Mama JoJo” as she is known on stage – is a veteran of this art and she believes burlesque is a way of celebrating and appreciating the female form.

Jo started her career in burlesque by chance. As the song goes, “She was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar”, and one night one of the performers didn't turn up, so the manager asked Jo to take her place.

An extrovert at heart, Jo took to the stage as if she had been born to it. The tips after her 20-minute performance were equal to the money she would have collected at the end of a



Photograph courtesy of Jo King

**Burlesque performer and teacher Jo King shares her tips**

“Burlesque dancing can boost a dancer's confidence and provide her with tools to make her other dances more sensual”

week waitressing long hours at the private members' club. What's more she had had fun on stage. For her, it was a no-brainer.

Walking the boards of the West End, with sometimes up to a dozen shows, or “spots”, a night, Jo made her name. “The time you spend on stage has shrunk,” she explains, “these days appearances last about five minutes, but back in those days you had to fill in for at least ten minutes or more.”

Jo talks proudly about how she started over 30 years ago and one can see she still has what it takes. “I never go on stage and don't mean it,” she says looking firmly into my eyes. She has a curvy figure – and it's all hers. Not of a high stature, the glamorous blonde walks tall and sways her hips, on and off the stage.

“I can't believe how some women can walk without moving their hips,” she says with a laugh. “That way of walking makes you invisible. In my classes I teach women how to walk in a natural, relaxed, sexy way, not in a provocative but a beautiful way that will bring a smile to everyone that sees it.”

Jo started teaching ten years ago after a car accident left her with a bad back and she couldn't perform. She first set up an agency to book dancers for shows, but she missed the stage. “A friend of mine said to me: ‘Jo, you can't just stop doing what you do best. Why don't you teach?’” Thus the London Academy of Burlesque (LAoB) was born.

My experience of one of Jo's LAoB classes taught me that burlesque is a very hard thing to teach because it means a different thing to each person. It's not like



Photograph by Geny Caloisi

**Pupils strut their stuff at the London Academy of Burlesque**

ballroom or tango, where there are a set of moves and steps one has to follow: in burlesque one needs to discover the inner goddess. What's more: burlesque dancing can boost a dancer's confidence and provide her with tools to make her other dances more sensual

Knowing how to dance definitely benefits the would-be burlesque performer, but one doesn't dance as oneself. All burlesque artists have a stage name, or a burlesque

persona. Each artist creates a character that has a life of its own, and the character has none of the hang-ups of the “real” person: she is free!

While burlesque has its classic moves that are integral to a good performance “the most important thing is to be confident in oneself: to love oneself”, emphasises Jo. Curves are flaunted on stage, but women come in all shapes, and all shapes are considered beautiful in burlesque. So, contrary →

## How to dance burlesque according to Goodtime Mama JoJo

- Wiggle sideways in a figure of eight. Add in arm movements for more impact.
- Grind with a big circular rotation of the pelvis.
- Walk in an exaggerated manner with a pronounced wiggle. Head up, shoulders back and chest out!
- Poses include “Glamorous” with grand extrovert poses or “Cheesecake”, seemingly shy girlish poses.
- Steps include side-step, cross-over and kick-step.
- To shimmy your top, move shoulders tipping forwards; or bending each leg in turn very fast will result in a bottom shimmy.
- Tease by using your clothing to reveal and hide your body.
- Finish the performance with a glamorous pose.

to the size zero obsession of the media, this art form promotes a positive look at the female form.

"The women that come to my classes are not necessarily thinking about earning a living doing burlesque, but they want to learn how to tease and have fun. I have seen amazing transformations in women's confidence after taking my courses," says Jo. If you are thinking about a career change, though, Jo warns: "If you thought you might do burlesque to earn lots of money, well, I hate to disappoint but, though you can make a living out of it, the reality is that burlesque artists are not rich and most of the time the money you earn will be invested in new dashing costumes. But it's fabulous and a lovely way of expression."

The acting aspect of burlesque is very important. Facial expressions are exaggerated and so are some moves. "You shouldn't just perform for the front row: people at the back also come to experience burlesque," advises Jo. "If you walk looking at the floor, nobody wants to look at you. If you move looking at the ceiling, it looks as if you are bored and would like to be anywhere but there. Look at them in the eye, smile, and tease! Be proud."

People who go to watch burlesque are, it would seem, not looking for a dirty variety show. The majority tend to go to be teased, to laugh and to forget their troubles, and there's something wonderful about performers who make their audiences forget their woes outside the theatre. ●

[www.londonacademyofburlesque.com](http://www.londonacademyofburlesque.com)



## London Burlesque Week

"The difference between burlesque and the newspapers," said US journalist I F Stone, "is that the former never pretended to be performing a public service by exposure." Previously fairly anti-burlesque, I was persuaded to give it a chance by numerous female friends, who were convinced of its public value – in its positive representation of the female form. This demographic is reflected in the audience at Islington's O2 Academy at the Battle Royale during London Burlesque Week (April 20–25, 2010) – largely female, well-heeled, well-made-up with an inimitable sense of nostalgic style.

Before the show began, I decided I wanted to be one of the gang, envious of the scarlet lipstick, the black lace fascinators, the shapely calves; but that was until the dancers started taking their clothes off, when my envy turned to awe tinged with fear – and giggliness.

The new-to-the-scene battling burlesquers showcased

everything from a turn by an all-lady couple dancing the tango ("That's not much of a tango," I muttered to my companion, who pointed out that the tango wasn't really the point of their show) through "fluresque", where flamenco meets burlesque, to a couple of bizarre set pieces including everything from a near-naked female Stan Laurel to a naughty lobster wrestling a girl's dress off.

My conclusion: kudos is due to the ladies on stage, for bravery and style, and it was certainly an entertaining introduction to the art form, yet I wasn't tempted to join them anytime soon. Ultimately, my inner-prude and inner-feminist can't wholly approve of a phenomenon that comprises women taking off their clothes for money – or cheers – however enticingly it is framed and even if it's other women cheering them on. But I might check out a professional performance just to help me make up my mind...

[www.londonburlesquefest.com](http://www.londonburlesquefest.com)

By Nicola Rayner