

HURLY BURLY

**AFTER A BRUSH WITH CITY HALL, THE BURLESQUE REVIVAL
STEPS BACK INTO THE LIMELIGHT.**

WRITTEN BY SARAH SHEEHAN



Cadence Machry, who performs as Miss Cadence, is also the founder of the Hamilton Burlesque Society.



The night of the fall equinox, at the Casbah in downtown Hamilton, a raucous crowd has gathered for Season of the Witch, an evening of burlesque presented by the Hamilton Burlesque Society. On-stage, the mood is dark, with the odd glint of metal. The first riff of Rob Zombie's "Living Dead Girl" gets a deafening welcome. Enter a five-foot Catrina carrying a skull. She prowls the stage, wild-eyed, blood dripping from black lipstick. Colourful glitter skulls gleam from her headdress. Jumbo insects cling to her bra. When she removes it, she reveals pasties sprinkled with maggots.

The living dead girl is Cadence Machry (née Macmichael), the founder of the Hamilton Burlesque Society. Machry, who performs as Miss Cadence, had assembled a burlesque supertroupe from Hamilton and Toronto for the society's inaugural show. Dainty Smith, the evening's chthonic MC, is the founder of Les Femmes Fatales: Women of Colour Burlesque Troupe. Ms. Chaos Divine was co-founder of Hamilton's Vaudeville Tattoo Badass Burlesque, and Tanya Cheex founded Skin Tight Outta Sight, the Toronto troupe that just celebrated its 20th anniversary. Dolly Berlin is the producer of Sinful Sundays, the weekly drag/burlesque/cirque night at Cherry Cola's. (More on Dolly later.) Making their Hamilton debuts were Loretta Jean, who is a founding member of Nerd Girl Burlesque, side-show performer Bella M. Eurta (*aka* Bella Magic), and classically trained dancer Genie Emerald, "The Golden Legs of Burlesque."

Season of the Witch was an unofficial celebration, and not just of the equinox. As followers of the new burlesque would know, it was Hamilton's first burlesque show since the city amended its adult entertainment bylaw two months before. Machry had founded the Hamilton Burlesque Society in 2016 as an advocacy platform. In July, it won a long-awaited victory when City Hall voted to deregulate burlesque.

Burlesque advocacy in Hamilton took on a special urgency in the summer of 2016 after an incident at Ten Decades, a speakeasy-style bar in Hess Village. One is tempted to call it The Night They Raided Ten Decades, except it was less a raid and more a routine visit from bylaw enforcement. It's the story of how a retro striptease night in the student party district ran afoul of the authorities and ultimately taught the city to embrace the new burlesque.

The Ten Decades show was the second Hamilton burlesque night that summer to be presented by Dolly Berlin, a queer Indigenous performer who is a prominent member of Toronto's thriving burlesque scene. The night was hosted by her significant other, drag king Maximum Capacity, and featured four Toronto performers: Dolly Berlin, Bianca Boom Boom, Svetlana Konswallow, and go-go dancer Paige La Pearl. The Friday show was clearly advertised as a burlesque night. (*Come out for an evening of scintillating burlesque artistry... Hess Village goes bump-n-grind in the night with retro glamour and an ever-growing cocktail list!*) Although Dolly's burlesque night in July had happened without incident, that August, Bianca and Svetlana were summonsed mid-show for working as "adult services attendants" without a licence.

Machry was in the audience that night. A neo-burlesque veteran who had recently relocated from her native Halifax, she was on maternity leave following the birth of her second child but had come out "to support friends from Toronto." Machry had been a member of the Halifax Burlesque Society in the early aughts and founded a new

Right: Gypsy Rose Lee program, c.1949.

Below: Miss Tiger pinup, c.1890.



troupe, Pink Velvet Burlesque, when the first one disbanded. (The name is a nod to *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters' self-described "lesbo-Victorian romp.") She met Amanda Gaul, who performs as Chaos Divine, through Toronto's Great Canadian Burlesque, and the pair collaborated on *Glamour in the Hammer* Productions, teaching their Burlesque Basics and Make and Shake Pastie Workshop at a local pole-dancing studio. (Machry now offers these classes at her new studio on Main Street East.) But she didn't found the Hamilton Burlesque Society as a troupe. "I wanted it to be more open than that," she says. "It will probably never be a set troupe of performers; it's more of a platform to help the Hamilton burlesque scene grow and rebuild."

No fines were waived for the summonsed performers, but otherwise the pro-burlesque campaign seems to have encountered little resistance. Ken Leendertse, the city's director of licensing, told the CBC, "There's no doubt our bylaws are antiquated. They were written many, many years ago." Then-Ward 3 Councillor Matthew Green echoed Leendertse this past summer when he spoke of "reviewing what was an antiquated bylaw that perhaps put two very different things together." Bianca and Svetlana's fines were paid with the help of a Too Hot for Hamilton fundraiser at Sinful Sundays, and the Planning Committee revised the adult services bylaw to exclude "burlesque entertainment."

But just how antiquated was the old bylaw? Hamilton drafted its adult business bylaw well before the burlesque revival of the 1990s—hence bylaw's misrecognition at Ten Decades. Yet despite the whiff of moral reform, licensing erotic entertainment is more vintage than Victorian. It grew from cities' desire to regulate the strip clubs that started proliferating after the Sexual Revolution.

Burlesque began as a popular, albeit fully clothed, genre of live entertainment—a subversive brand of comedy that became increasingly risqué. On York Boulevard, not far from the Central Library and Farmers' Market, is the site of what may be Hamilton's earliest bur-

The Palace Theatre, 1944:



lesque house. Built as a Scottish Presbyterian church in the 1840s, the Star Theatre stood at the north end of the old marketplace, beside Stroud's Hotel. The Victorian city was a mass of contradictions. For the vice-suppression crowd, disreputable dance halls provoked moral panic. Meanwhile, football fans could root for the Hamilton Tigers with a voluptuous "Miss Tiger" pinup. The Star Theatre presented vaudeville and what was known as turkey (indie) burlesque. When it developed a reputation for impropriety, the Stroud brothers tore it down to build the Savoy, a high-end vaudeville theatre.

The Strouds were onto something. During the first few decades of the 20th century, Hamilton was enjoying a theatre boom. Located mid-way between Toronto and Buffalo, the city was well placed to attract all the best touring productions. (Mae West caught the gripe here, but praised our health care.) Many theatres used a cine-variety format, alternating films with live stage acts, and shows were generally all-ages, even when they included burlesque. In 1918, 22 Auto Girls played the Savoy in what was billed as "high class burlesque." Sally Rand did her world-famous fan dance at the Capitol, and Gypsy Rose Lee played the Palace — the last of Hamilton's old theatres to host live stage shows. Gary Smith, the dance and theatre critic for *The Hamilton Spectator*, first met Gypsy at the Palace in the 1950s. "I was way too young to go to a burlesque show," Smith recalls, "but Gyp didn't do anything vulgar or coarse. She was a class act."

When Pierre Trudeau said, "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation," he was referring to the Criminal Code, which, up until the late 1960s, included provisions against things like

homosexuality and birth control. But the state did have a place in the nation's pleasure palaces. Police morality squads monitored burlesque shows closely for nudity and obscenity, while censors at the local and provincial levels used age restrictions to limit access to adult entertainment. Dubious coin-operated peepshows, found here in theatres like the Gayety, prompted an early version of the 14A rating: the 1911 Theatres and Cinematographs Act barred unaccompanied children under 15 from entering a motion picture house. (The machines in question were likely Mutoscopes, a cheaper, sleazier version of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope.) The following year, the Toronto Vigilance Association successfully lobbied for a bylaw restricting admittance to burlesque houses to those 21 and older. With no dedicated burlesque theatres, however, Hamilton seems not to have addressed the issue before the 1970s.

Go-go and topless dancing overtook burlesque in the '60s, with the decade's steadily loosening inhibitions. After one last Toronto-Buffalo circuit, the iconic Tura Santana retired from striptease to pursue acting, citing "her daughters and the present state of the business." (Santana — née Yamaguchi — had a small role in Billy Wilder's *Irma La Douce*, but attained cult immortality in Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*) Burlesque nostalgia became a thing, with memoirs, how-to recordings and the musicals *Gypsy* and *The Night They Raided Minsky's* celebrating the form's heyday in the early 20th century. On the Gore, across from the Royal Connaught, the old Mills Hardware building became home to Diamond Jim's Tavern, a Vegas-style nightclub complete with showgirls on swings. Diamond Jim's didn't host the more tasteful burlesque, only "go-go dancers and the more in your face sort of shows,"

recalls Smith. Like a Steeltown Tony Soprano, the notorious Mafioso Johnny Papalia kept a table there after his release from prison.

It was not until 1979 that Hamilton City Council, led by the conservative Mayor Jack MacDonald, passed its first adult entertainment bylaw. Shows featuring "all-nude burlesque" started popping up in the early '70s, when club owners could capitalize on the old venues' theatre licences. In 1971, police shut down a burlesque show at the International Cinema on King William Street, telling the performers — who were, again, from Toronto — they must wear pasties and bikini bottoms. Nonetheless, the next year, total nudity reigned when three new strip clubs opened in the lower city. First came a Starvin' Marvin's Burlesque Palace in the former Delta Theatre (later in the Capitol downtown), then the Pussycat Theatre in the International Cinema, and finally Cadillac Jack's Millionaire Burlesque, operating without a licence in a former bowling alley on James Street North. All three had closed by 1974, victims of red tape and low attendance. The Toronto-based Starvin' Marvin's even sued the city for obstruction, eventually winning an out-of-court settlement under Mayor MacDonald. But with the new erotic services bylaw, the city settled into the long game of regulation.

The burgeoning burlesque revival — the queer lovechild of goth, punk and rockabilly with a dose of vintage camp — had reached Hamilton by the new millennium. Early local troupes included the Steeltown Sirens, founded by Ginger St. James and Jezebel Dupree



This page: Cadence Machry,
aka Miss Cadence,

Opposite page, far right: Ms.
Chaos Divine performing as
the Black Widow. Opposite
page, left: Season of the Witch
event poster by Cadence
Machry's sister, Liz Mac.



Kooji opens the show with a spoken-word prologue, alluding to her burlesque past before reading poems from her new book, *No Rainbow*. Then Dainty Smith sets a task for the audience: Here is her “heart” (she displays a prop organ); now feed and fatten it with your applause for the night’s witchy women. Bella M. Eurta juggles glowing balls in a hypnotic opening act. Dolly Berlin, in a long braid and corset, brings a joyous raunch to the ritual tease. With impeccable comic timing, Chaos does a new version of her Black Widow act to Kander and Ebb’s show tune, “Kiss of the Spider Woman.” Next door in the lounge, a goth night gets underway as Tanya Cheex — another Haligonian — dances to Danzig’s “Mother.” “Since I helped start up the burlesque revival in Canada, and have many burlesque babies, it was quite fitting,” she says.

“Cadence made sure to make all performers aware of the bylaw changes,” says Loretta Jean, who is “close friends with Bianca Boom Boom,” one of the ticketed performers. A PhD student at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, she was working on her thesis last summer and almost missed the call for performers. Set to music ranging from an ancient ode to Athena and the blues standard “Me and the Devil,” to Fever Ray’s “If I Had a Heart” (the *Vikings* theme), her Medea and Justice acts are grounded in feminist thought. “I was really impressed with Dainty Smith’s hosting — she’s always phenomenal — and the script which Cadence wrote to weave all of our acts together,” she says.

Most performers chose acts from their repertoires. Genie Emerald, the evening’s consummate dancer, created two unique to the show. “Cadence gave us the space to get a bit darker with our numbers. So I did just that,” she says. “Considering what happened a few years prior that she fought so passionately for, I definitely wanted to come out and perform for the Hamilton crowd.”

Machry reappears for a ceremonial induction of new initiates, and it’s time for the finale. Like a pregnant Khaleesi, Dainty Smith eats the “heart” then strips violently to the music of Tanya Tagaq. We exit through the goth night in the lounge. Across the street, the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple looms — the original gentlemen’s club. A little history, a little resistance: with its dark arts, the new burlesque has arrived.

(the Indigenous writer Laura Reid Kooji); Boudoir Rouge, the brainchild of Demonica de Morte; and Vaudeville Tattoo, which launched with a Valentine’s Day cabaret at This Ain’t Hollywood. Vaudeville Tattoo’s other founding member, Lisa Palmer (a.k.a. Vanity Boom), even hosted shows at her burlesque-themed diner on Ottawa Street North.

“When Cadence told me about her concept for Season of the Witch, I was so thrilled to strap on my garter in my hometown, after taking a hiatus when the bylaw was an issue,” says Amanda Gaul, a fine arts graduate originally from Windsor, Ontario. “I couldn’t be more thrilled that Cadence has taken on such an important role in building Hamilton’s burlesque community. It’s inclusive, non-judgmental, and where all of us weirdos can be ourselves.” Ginger St. James echoed Gaul, saying, “It’s exciting to see another round of a burlesque revival in Hamilton.” The bylaw change is “just what we needed,” St. James says, adding that the Steeltown Sirens were never approached by law enforcement. “There is a complete difference between adult entertainment and burlesque. Absurdity is a main ingredient. I myself would relish a comically exaggerated act complete with a bylaw officer uniform and ticket book. All the way down to my pasties.”

For Machry, the Casbah show was an act of resistance. “Season of the Witch was a response to things that have happened in the last few years, including the Hamilton bylaw issues, #MeToo movement and the legalization of witchcraft in Canada,” she says. (The House of Commons voted to remove references to witchcraft from the Criminal Code in 2017.) “It was about reclaiming space, embracing the feminine and proclaiming that those of us who don’t fit nicely into the ‘good girl’ roles in society will not back down or do what we’re told.”