



This photographic essay would not be possible without the support of every Burlesque & Vaudeville performer that I have encountered over the past five years. Briefly, I would like to thank Miss Astrid and the entire staff of The Va Va Voom Room for their unending trust - no less the productions of: Miss Bonnie Dunn and the staff of Le Scandal, The Bombshell Girls, Bunnie Love, Ixion Burlesque, The Pontani Sisters, Tease O'Rama, The Velvet Hammer, The New York Burlesque Festival, and Miss Delirium Tremens. The sound recording was made live at The Va Va Voom Room and engineered and edited by Thomas Jung Productions



Tanya, Queen of Magic

Gallery Talk with John Patrick Naughton
Saturday, April 2nd at 1pm
A tour with the artist.
Free with Museum Admission

Two lively panel discussions:

The Burlesque Revival
Wednesday, April 13th at 7:00-9:00pm
View VAVALESque exhibit at 6:30
Learn more about today's burlesque entertainment revival from the performers and special guests.
\$2./members free

Crossover: Burlesque and Legitimate Theatre
Tuesday, May 17 at 7:00-9:00pm
view VAVALESque exhibit at 6:30
Performers and theatre historians discuss how the burlesque has influenced mainstream venues.
\$2./members free

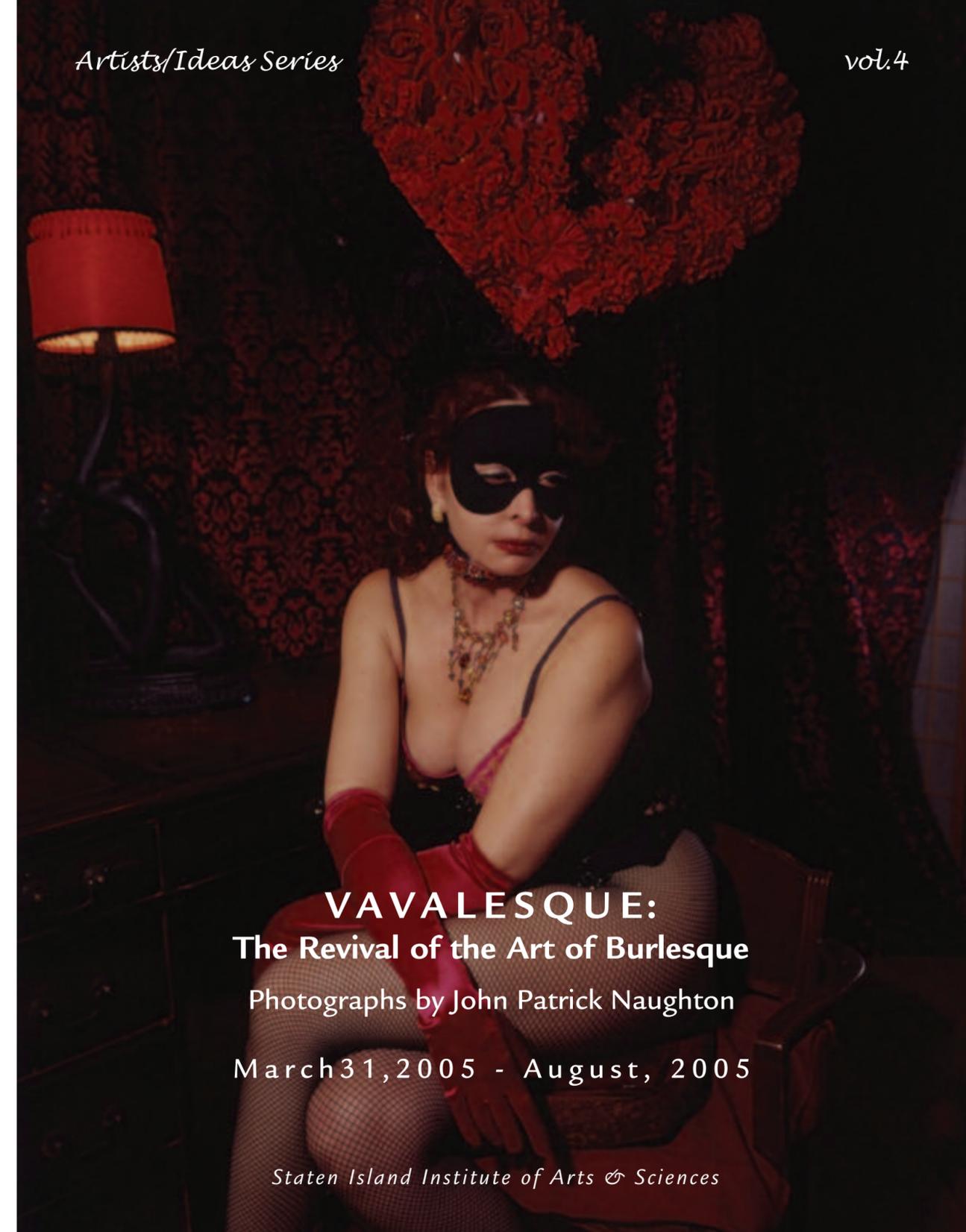
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STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM

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Cover image: *Homage to Storyville*
Inside full panel image: *Dancers, Club National*



**VAVALESQUE:
The Revival of the Art of Burlesque**

Photographs by John Patrick Naughton

March 31, 2005 - August, 2005

Staten Island Institute of Arts & Sciences



Miss Astrid, Tigger and Miss Bonnie Dunn

Burlesque As Antidote **By Diane Matyas, Director of Exhibitions and Programs**

Over the desk in the curator’s office hangs a Cecil Bell drawing of Minsky’s Union Square burlesque hall. Drawn in 1932 it depicts a dancer on stage and the artist and his lascivious cronies enjoying an inebriated evening in that famous New York burlesque theatre. Despite this noted example, the Staten Island Museum is better known for its stellar collection of beetles, beautiful rocks, 19th century paintings, and deep drawers of historic documents, rather than darkened clubs with scandalous variety acts and tantalizing dancers. Today artists like John Patrick Naughton help us investigate such places, but with a different emphasis than Bell.

VAVALESque: The Revival of the Art of Burlesque is fun, sexy, and -when compared to today’s headlines or our mass entertainment racket- a breath of fresh air. Armed with appreciation of jazz, humor, beautiful dancers, and yen for the forbidden, both Bell and Naughton give their subjects a museum venue to strut, strum, and tease. Naughton’s recent photographs go a step further, honoring the performer rather than characterizing the scene. Those of us who do not get out to nightclubs get a lesson too; yes Virginia, there is a burlesque revival. Today’s burlesque performers are also apt to present themselves as artists- they are knowledgeable of the history connected to their branch of theatre, and find new venues and performance grants to support their work. Smart mainstream performers frequent the clubs picking up material for their own use, at no cost to them.

This late night world of staged seduction, jazz music, and ribald slapstick is back and growing in popularity, but why a revival now? I submit that audiences are eager for something in opposition to the increasingly vulgar and banal world of mass entertainment. And therein lays an unexpected irony; dark burlesque halls

promise a curious antidote to the growing ennui courtesy of reality TV, uninspired music, political correctness, and slick Broadway disappointments! Could it be that burlesque might save us from vulgarity? Can the tease of striptease offset the coarseness of cable? I am gleefully curious to learn that the variety show is not dead, but flourishing in risqué clubs and performance spaces all over the world, once again.

John Patrick Naughton: VAVALESque **by A. D. Coleman**

Ever since cameras became portable and film emulsions fast enough for use in varied lighting conditions, photographers have used their medium to examine the ways in which people live. Sometimes those ways are familiar and the people close to home; in other cases the locales are distant and the people exotic. Yet, collectively, such photographers seek to achieve what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposed as the purpose of his own discipline: “to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement ... to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise ... to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers.”

Although assignments and commissions frequently point photographers toward such microcosms, no less often they simply follow their own noses to them or even stumble across them. Such a coincidence--responding out of curiosity to a small newspaper advertisement for a burlesque performance--brought John Patrick Naughton to the alternative universe of contemporary burlesque, where he has spent much time over the past five years, and to which he introduces us in *VAVALESque*, his first report on what he has found there.

For those old enough to remember the heyday of its earlier incarnation, or even its declining years, the word *burlesque* evokes names like Minsky’s, the *Ziegfeld Follies*, Mae West, Gypsy Rose Lee, and “Little Egypt”--the smoky atmosphere of grind houses, kooch dancers, snake charmers, “vavavoom,” a territory somewhere between vaudeville and the circus or carnival sideshow. Definitely a bit lurid, more than a little tawdry; not exactly strip joints or specifically an aspect of the sex trade, but (in the minds of many) only a step or two away from those at best. Certainly not respectable and in no sense connected in any meaningful way to what we’d consider serious culture, much less *art*.

Yet, while the form’s earlier performers and producers have died or long since gone into retirement, and its original venues have been mostly demolished or dedicated to other purposes, the peculiar cultural process that eventually creates nostalgia for every older form of entertainment and turns it into performance art appears to have occurred. Burlesque is back, as Naughton shows us, revived by a new generation of performers who bring an early 21st-century sensibility to a genre whose roots go back into antiquity.

Naughton has done what any savvy photographer would do upon discovering such a community: He has earned its trust by creating a responsive, responsible description of and commentary on its members and their activities. Their acceptance of him clearly hinges on his acceptance of them; as with most documentary projects, that’s a two-way street. Don’t we all yearn to be clearly, respectfully, and affectionately seen, even at (especially at!) our most eccentric? What won’t we reveal of ourselves to such a compassionate, supportive witness?

Call this documentary photography, or ethnography, or sociological inquiry--whatever the label, it’s never a neutral,

objective process. The observer always has biases; the observer’s mere presence changes the event observed; and the introduction of a camera into any social situation affects people’s behavior. What you see here is a mix of the way Naughton sees these people in their own milieu and the ways in which they’ve chosen to reveal themselves to him and, through his lens, to you.

So step inside these photographs, ladies and gentlemen. John Patrick Naughton presents ... *VAVALESque!*

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VAVALESque **The Revival of the Art of Burlesque** **By John Patrick Naughton**

Five years ago as I was leafing through the pages of the Village Voice, I saw an ad - perhaps the smallest ad that this newspaper rents space to - no photograph only type. The headline for the ad read; “The Va Va Voom Room” followed by a sub headline of “Your Den of Iniquity for Vaudeville & Burlesque”. As a child growing up in Pittsburgh my father would tell me stories of burlesque and vaudeville, stories laced with affection for this form of entertainment now passed, the memory of this epoch was passed on to me. I read, and re-read this smallest of ads several times, thinking that burlesque was dead, vaudeville was dead - and who could these people be. Then I read the small type, it’s always good to do - this show was to take place at “Show World”- 8th avenue and 43rd street. At first I thought, that’s a porn theatre - but then I thought - no, who would produce a show in a porn theatre.



Dancer, New Orleans



Molley the Doll

I called several of my friends and asked them to go with me, when I told them where it was, the answer was always the same. No! So, off I went to “Show World”, walking past these creepy guys (their skin, a blueish tint of over exposure) watching videos or each other or both - up to the second floor where the performance was to take place. During the late 90’s and the year 2000, Mayor R. Giuliani would begin a city wide re-zoning law (quality of life program) that would affect the adult entertainment industry, these new laws would affect “Show World”. You might call it fate, the morals that brought on the closing of Minsky’s in 1942 now evolved into recent law, these new laws would make available additional square footage to variety or performance driven acts. Burlesque and Vaudeville came back to Time Square. Not as glamorous as in the 30’s or 50’s - but a movement was under way. Miss Astrid, both the Host and the Director of “The Va Va Voom Room”, speaking in a tarnished Weimar accent, introduces the first act - Mr. Spoons. I could hardly believe my eyes, dressed in a red suit and hat and carrying four large spoons in each hand - he started playing - tapping his body to create such a great sound. There was one great act after the other, Molley the Doll, Tanya-Queen of Magic, The Great Fredini, Bonnie Dunn, Diamond Redd, Julie Atlas Muz, Tigger, Dirty Martini, Julia-Queen of the Nile and Ukulele Louie. Names as exotic as their performance, I was hooked. I knew I had to photograph this group, I knew that this was fresh - television once helped facilitate the end of burlesque, now the nature of television has people going out. “Show World” was packed, standing room only.

The following day I phoned Ms. Astrid, told her of my interest in both the show as well as photographing the cast - she did not have much interest. I’m sure she thought, “Another photographer who wants to photograph scantily clad women”, I asked her to look at my web site - I’m legitimate. The next day to my surprise,

she called - liked my work and asked when would I like to start this project. That was five years ago, I have not stopped - like many artist I have drawn from their performance an inspiration to record this theatrical experience. The success of shows like “The Va Va Voom Room” has increased the popularity of shows such as: “Le Scandal”, “Ixion Burlesque”, “The Bombshell Girls”, “The Red Hots”, “Burlesque on the Beach”, “World Famous Bob”, “The Wau-Wau Sisters”, “The World Famous Pontani Sisters”, “Bindlestiff Family Circus” as well as the annual New York Burlesque Festival and the International Tease O’Rama. This culture, and its history have left a huge impact on both our society and the fashion of it’s laws.

Artist and photographers who have worked and portrayed this genre of performance, whether it be the Can-Can, Shim-Sham, Follies, Burlesque or Vaudeville - are as diverse and picturesque as the theatre they portray. Their work, both historic and inspirational is a benchmark for those that follow and can also be seen as a social commentary for the times in which they lived. No one group had more influence on me than the many artist and painters that became part of the scene - they would blend in, as if not to be noticed at all. Artist and photographers such as; Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, Henri Matisse, Brassai, Ralph Stein, Miguel Covarrubias, Adolf Dehn, Reginald Marsh, Max Beckman, Erich Heckel, Friedrich Karl Gotsch, Franz Maria Jensen, Max Pechstein, Frank Horvat and Georg Tappert, of this group - Lautrec, Brassai, The German Expressionist and Marsh would create a body of work that I, as well as many artist and photographers would draw inspiration from. The art of live performance was best expressed in song by Marlene Dietrich in the movie, “The Blue Angel.” In the smoke filled atmosphere of a small club, she would gently walk across the stage and sing, “Falling in Love Again.” At the end of the night, that is how I feel.