

Hot in Ottawa

A burlesque revival may change the reputation of the town sex forgot

BY PHIL JENKINS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MARCH 8, 2010 8:26 AM

I don't know if I'd describe Ottawa as a sexy town. It's not an adjective that springs up when one thinks of us in a red-light sort of way; we're not known as bawdy Bytown.

Other adjectives such as clean lie well ahead of sexy, and safe (except for the embedded thievery down on the Byward Market), and placid. It's hard to imagine someone in a Rio de Janeiro or an Amsterdam bar telling the patron on the stool next to them, "Ottawa, now there's a sexy town."

In the annual national sex scandal tables, we're way down too. Which is not usually the case for a government town, but we seem to be particularly limp at generating carnal headlines. Not that the Hill doesn't have its secrets, probably it has pillow cases full of them, but the present prime minister, let's be honest, is no Jack Kennedy. The only kind of rogue he is is a proroguer. I honestly can't recall the last time the newspaper boxes on the street carried a banner headline with the word sex in them. We're not hot, we're politely tepid. Debbie has never done Ottawa.

The use of sexy here is not to be confused with prurient, which carries the hint of the unwholesome. Sexy cities find sex wholesome, and incorporate it into public life, not as an advertising come-on, or in a Soho style district, which we don't have, but as part of the cultural fabric of daily life. Ottawa currently boasts a straight mayor who has swung both ways in the past on whether to attend the Pride parade and then finally did, some outlying exotic dancer dens, a handful of clubs catering the various colours of the sexual rainbow, a block of Somerset, and there you go.

For a while, when vaudeville and burlesque were on the What's On lists in Ottawa, mainstream entertainment was spicier. Here's a splendid example from the Roaring Twenties. When the Capital movie palace opened in the winter of 1920, there were four vaudeville acts as well as a couple of D.W. Griffith's films, including one called The Love Flower.

Après show, the A-list celebrities and a bunch of the local notables decamped to City Hall (then on Elgin) and flapped their booties until dawn. At one point, apparently, an actress with the handle Texas Guinan climbed up on the mayor's chair and conducted the proceedings. The Citizen ran with the story for weeks, taking the moral high road and wondering if the booze bill at the party had come out of civic funds. In a nice sidebar, a city councillor with the bubbly name of Napoléon Champagne used the pages of the Citizen to mount a defence of his own role on the naughty night by claiming he had kept his hands only in his own pockets and he had been there looking after the married men.

Those were the days, and as it happens they might be the days again. In the last three years or so, as there already was in most other Canadian cities, there has been a mild vaudevillian revival. A couple of troupes, including one called Sexual Overtones, are attempting to modernize sexual satire for this

young century. The Overtones' much-hyphenated (e)mission statement has them aiming to "provide quality entertainment that is body-, female- and sex-positive, playful and all inclusive."

All of the Overtones are volunteers and the money they have raised so far with shows such as Indecent Exposure and Tales from the Strypt has all gone to charity. If you have a routine you think might swing and are thinking of joining you'll need to see your participation as "a fun way of expanding acceptance and love of human sexuality in its splendid variety while creating a safe, fulfilling, and esteem-boosting environment for breakthrough performance art." Show me the love.

One of acts in the Sexual Overtones roster is the Puff Sisters, Cream and Powder, and it is Cream, whose day gig is in the environmental field, who got the balls rolling here, importing the notion of sexual satire shows from steamy Halifax where she had done a little drag kinging and had taken to it. After returning to Ottawa -- where she was born and attended Glebe high school -- and putting a shout-out for acts that got a healthy response, she got semi-organized and in 2008 they staged a sexy cabaret that didn't have a dry seat in the place and convinced them to go on.

Since then they have sold out the Bronson Centre more than once, and a typical Overtones show will include some slapstick, a little stand-up from the M.C., perhaps some juicy juggling and hot hoola-hooping, pop-song parody and non-all-the-way striptease from acts with names like the Muffin Tops, the Carnal Curiosities, the Dirty Thirties, Dirk Bag and Seraphine LaSpiral.

By day, these performers go through the phone booth and come out as lawyers, accountants, IT workers, public servants, even a baker who makes cup cakes. They all have gone down with the performing bug, and are putting their mouths where the money is for a good cause, which is laudable, meanwhile serving to fun things up a bit in good clean Ottawa. If they can keep it up, we may have to open a window; it's getting a little hot in here.

Phil Jenkins is an Ottawa writer.

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