

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bettie, The Bourbon Mary

Putting on a Franchise While Taking Off Your Clothes

by Ella-Gabriel Mason

I'm sipping on a whiskey soda in the crowded upstairs of Tabu when HoneyTree EvilEye takes the mic to introduce the penultimate "episode" of the [Philadelphia Burlesque Battle Royale](#), PBBR for short. Though a live event, "episode" is the right term. Decades of watching competition reality shows have prepared me to take in what I've heard described as "burlesque boot camp" and "burlesque grad school." Much like *Drag Race* or *Project Runway*, each week of PBBR has a theme. This week is Nerdlesque and each artist chooses a character from pop culture to interpret.

Nerdlesque can be a challenging theme. Guest Judge Vonka tells the contestants: "A lot of people will have ideas about the way the character 'should' be." But she encourages them to stick to their vision and take ownership of franchised characters. And truly, what I see over the next two hours is a delicious claiming of the corporate controlled stories and characters populating our modern lives. It feels transgressive and liberatory, hilarious, and sexy. It is true play.

We start with Cinnamon Chéri's take on the [Tootsie Roll Pop Owl](#). In a red be-jeweled beak and round glasses, she strips out of her feathered cape and then takes to Tinder, displayed on the screen upstage. After rejecting the Temple Owl she matches with Duo, the perky Duo Lingo mascot. Last year's reigning PBBR champion Blue Jean joins her onstage in a picture perfect Duo costume. Their tumultuous relationship ends with what else, but a lick, lick chomp - Chéri clutching Duo's severed penis between her teeth.

We are served two vampires, one by Calliope, a lip-syncing, disdainful Vampyra, and the other by Core Elysian, portraying Lady Dimitrescu from the game *Resident Evil*. Both communicate power through slow, sustained movements. My eyes follow every extension and twitch. In these acts the strip tease functions in the traditional manner. They display confidence in their desirability with self-assured facial expressions and a movement quality that makes me hungry to see more of their bodies. The other acts of the evening, more like Cinnamon Chéri's Tootsie Pop Owl, use the format to tell jokes, the reveal of each punchline more satisfying than the revelation of flesh.

Raven Nightingale's portrayal of Rose from *Titanic* is still less about the reveal of her body than the moments she reveals each iconic pose from the movie. She teases us at the prow of a cardboard ship, extending one fluttering arm at a time and curling in on herself before finally stretching both arms straight and powerful to full-throated cheers from the audience. In a satisfying meta moment, she hits her final pose, lounging on a chaise while the resident quick sketch artist draws her from just in front of the stage.

A nonbinary Janet from *The Good Place* is portrayed by Enbie Deecie. Lip syncing with the audio they remove their bra to reveal succulent pasties and the room breaks into cackling laughter. Georgia Peach appears creepy and unhinged as the killer Art the Clown from *Terrifier*. With a black and white painted face and a smile, they saw apart a cardboard version of HoneyTree EvilEye. Ginger Puss performs right after, clearing the mess as Mr. Clean. What begins as a cute dance among floating bubbles escalates in lewdness and strangeness until Mr. Clean is dipping his giant, gleaming white testicles over and over into a cleaning bucket.

Leila Delicious makes even more of a mess than Mr. Clean could face. Portraying Winnie the Pooh in yellow fuzzy ears and a red crop top, she teases us with tiny little shuffles and perfectly timed grinds and twerks, all set to a trap remix of the classic Disney cartoon theme song. It carefully walks a line between silly and sexy. She discovers a pot of honey and dips her fingers in to taste. Her eyelids flutter. She gasps. A stern-faced Rabbit comes and pours the whole thing over her. Leila spreads the honey across her thighs and ass as friends come to lick it off. It maintains the innocent sweetness of Pooh while also being the most pornographic image of the night.

Jewelissa holds a similar tension in her portrayal of Steve Irwin, the [Crocodile Hunter](#). She climbs onto the stage in hiking boots and beige shorts and a button-down with a red snake biting her neck, which she pulls off and shows to the audience before fellating it. She channels Irwin's earnest enthusiasm and I honestly believe if the Crocodile Hunter were to perform a strip tease, this is what it would be like.

The final performance of the night is an ode to Dungeons and Dragons, in which Lily a la Mode enters as a half-elf character and shifts her body language and energetic presence as she transforms into a sexy demon after putting on a cursed scarf. The rest of the cast joins her onstage, posing with sultry expressions and gently caressing each other.

The judges name the week's winners: Jewelissa takes the big prize for her Steve Irwin number and Leila Delicious is awarded a smaller prize for her sticky Winnie the Pooh. But the judges have a surprise. Rather than cut the number of competitors in half for next week's finale they've decided to have the full cast compete for the championship. While each performer has their own strengths and weaknesses, it is truly anyone's game.

Philadelphia Burlesque Battle Royale, produced by HoneyTree EvilEye, Jaeda, Connor Michalchuk and Flirt Vonnegut, Nerdlesque Week, Tabu, May 3.

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