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The Exotic World of the Sissy Butch Brothers

By *Kay Daly*

[Intro](#) | [Fading Divas](#) | [Memories](#) | [Gurlesque](#) | [The Boa](#)

You fly into Las Vegas and embark on a 3-hour drive into the Mojave Desert. It's 112 degrees outside. The air-conditioning in your car strains to keep pace with the blistering heat. You get lost, turn back, and get lost again.

Finally, it looms before you, a sort of wind-swept, sun-bleached version of Shangri-La. The iron gates are emblazoned with the words "Exotic World Museum." Beyond the gates, you see a ramshackle garden, decorated with plaster statues and a swimming pool.

Another sign says, "Honk three times for the tour." You enter and find a world of riches in decay. With former burlesque queen Dixie Evans as your guide, you're escorted through the treasures of an almost-forgotten era. Fading posters and publicity stills line the walls; a sequined gown that once draped the shapely figure of a burlesque diva twinkles on a dressmaker's form. It's a world of glitz that's losing its sparkle under the hot desert sun.

Historian Red Tremmel and filmmaker Gwen Lis want to preserve this fading world. The duo, also known as **The Sissy Butch Brothers**, are fighting to document the rich heritage of American burlesque before it slips away. And in doing so, they've beckoned a new generation of performers onto the stage.

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[Intro](#) | [Fading Divas](#) | [Memories](#) | [Gurlesque](#) | [The Boa](#)

Fading divas

The mission to save the memory of burlesque came about largely by accident.

While visiting U.C.L.A. to do research for her dissertation on Las Vegas in the 50s and 60s, Red Tremmel heard tell of Dixie's Exotic World Museum. A grad student at University of Chicago, Red was a stranger to both the Mojave Desert and burlesque. But her curiosity was piqued, so she took the trek out of L.A. and into the past.

She was particularly riveted by the museum's proprietor. Evans, once billed as the "Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque," performed a rapid-fire history of her art form, studded with first-hand anecdotes of a campy, glittering past.

Red realized the world enshrined at Dixie's museum was passing away before her eyes. Dixie, already in her 80s, wasn't the only burlesque queen on the premises. She shared the grounds with a few of her former colleagues, some stricken with cancer. Dixie also served as caretaker for the ashes of several burlesque performers who'd already passed on.

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[Intro](#) | [Fading Divas](#) | [Memories](#) | [Gurlesque](#) | [The Boa](#)
Capturing the memories

Red was haunted by her visit to Dixie's world, but a plan to preserve the history of burlesque didn't materialize until one fateful night in Chicago.

While out on the town, Red was introduced to an old college buddy of her girlfriend. The friend, filmmaker Gwen Lis, was fresh to the city and eager for a new project.

As they talked over drinks, Red described her trip to the Mojave Desert. Gwen immediately connected with the story and became excited about creating a documentary to preserve this heritage.

"I've gone through knowing people and had them die before I could tell their stories or get enough of them on film," Gwen says. "That was part of my urgency with it. There's a rich history there, so once [Dixie and her friends] were gone, those stories would be gone."

With no funding for a documentary shoot, they borrowed film equipment and scraped together enough money to make the trek. They assumed a few days of interviews would provide the footage they needed.

But as luck would have it, their trip coincided with the Miss Exotic World Contest, an annual competition hosted by Dixie. The plan changed.

"All of a sudden, the place was flooded with older burlesque stars and younger people who are part of the revival of burlesque," Gwen recalls. "You'd have this 18-year-old full of tattoos get up on stage, and next to her there'd be an 80-year-old woman in a boa hooked up to an oxygen tank. It was so visually rich and strangely beautiful."

A simple, one-time shoot would not be enough. They would have to return.

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[Intro](#) | [Fading Divas](#) | [Memories](#) | [Gurlesque](#) | [The Boa](#)

Gurlesque burlesque

Back in Chicago, the duo planned a larger project which would require three years of filming. That time span, they reasoned, would allow them to enter the world of the burlesque queens and capture their full story.

But they still had no money. That's when a brainstorm struck.

Calling on her skills as a historian, Red created a presentation about the history of burlesque. They booked Star Gaze, the lesbian bar in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood where Red had first told Gwen about Dixie, and made their pitch.

"We were thinking, 'I hope *somebody* comes,'" says Gwen. In fact, they drew a crowd. At the end of the presentation, they asked if anyone would be willing to perform in an amateur burlesque revue which would serve as a fundraiser for their documentary. They were swamped with volunteers.

Their first revue, entitled "Gurlesque Burlesque," premiered in July of 2002. It was a smash hit. "We were completely sold out," Red recalls. "And we were blown away by the creativity of the acts."

Since then, the Sissy Butch Brothers have produced a total of five sold-out amateur burlesque shows in bars around Chicago. Each show features a never-before-seen line-up of acts, created by local amateur performers from all walks of life, as well as a few headlining acts drawn from the national burlesque scene.

With the proceeds from each show, Gwen and Red return to Exotic World to resume their work. And with each revue, the influence of the burlesque legacy spreads a bit further. "After each show, we always get a handful of audience members who want to perform in our next production."

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Taking up the boa

So why is burlesque, a relic of a bygone age, capturing the imagination of modern-day audiences and performers? Each performer has her own reason for taking up the boa, but much of the appeal has to do with burlesque's playful questioning of assumptions.

For Leah Moyers, a marketing exec and frequent "Gurlesque" performer, the burlesque is the perfect antidote for the sexual overload of modern culture. "We're in a phase of sex saturation," she says. "We're now at the point where what's unknown is sexier."

Red agrees: "In burlesque, the excitement is not about revealing, but concealing." As such, the striptease of burlesque overturns the typical power structure of sexuality. "In our culture, 'to be a tease' can be used as an explanation for why it's okay to rape," Red explains. "But in burlesque, the tease is erotic; the audience is made to feel lucky to see anything."

This playfulness allows for the free play of alternative notions about sexuality and gender. The stage of "Gurlesque Burlesque" is an open forum where performers of all shapes and sizes are permitted to express their beauty. Says Leah, "The show really makes people aware that a variety of body types are sexy."

This openness also provides a forum for raising questions about our expectations about sexuality. In one "Gurlesque" act, a sexy fem dancer clad in a bustier teases a drag king. Initially, the dancer is the object of desire, but as the strip continues, she realizes her pursuer doesn't want to get in her pants; the drag king wants to wear her pants. "The scene is very funny," Red explains, "But it also disrupts up the stereotypes that can congeal even in queer subcultures."

Regardless of the orientation or the specific questions raised, Gwen maintains that it's the act of burlesque performance that gives the art form its power.

"Any time someone gets on stage and says 'look at me,' that's an amazing transformation," Gwen muses. "A lot of these women, these people, haven't been able to look at society and say 'look at me.' They've been able to walk down the street and be invisible. And feel like their issues are invisible."

By stepping onto the burlesque stage, they join a tradition nearly 150 years old. They flaunt their bodies. They raise their questions. And like Dixie Evans and her friends of yesteryear, they invite us to play in their exotic world.

Visit the website of [Dixie Evan's Exotic World Museum](#).

Learn more about [The Sissy Butch Brothers](#) and their work.

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