



I Was a Middle-Aged Pinup

By Diane Anderson-Minshall
Photography by Darling Propaganda

It's a rare warm, sunny day in San Francisco and I'm trotting down to South of Market with a suitcase full of clothes that can only charitably be called "slutty." I'm a die-hard power femme but by no means a real girlie girl. (Bulldagger I've been called, bombshell; well, maybe not.) But today I'm going to change all that, thanks to the help of two women: a 30-year burlesque queen slash local icon, Bombshell Betty, and her trusty rock-star photographer, Darling Propaganda. And I've dragged along two Curvettes—associate publisher Sara Jane Keskula and assistant editor Katie Peoples—who get to undergo their own transformations in front of the camera.



Like a lot of girls, I've been obsessed with beauty queens. Not the gushing guffaws of Miss Texas or the post hip-hop derriers of JLo and Jessica Biel. No, I've always been fascinated by the old-school pinup beauties, the Vargas girls, the tawdry temptresses who could brandish structured undergarments and make supportive underwire bras look like the sexiest things on earth. And I'm not the only one, of course.

"Before I ever heard the word 'burlesque,' I was a fan of the old song-and-dance movies, Mae West, Bugs Bunny and Bettie Page," says Bombshell Betty, whose first official entrance into the world of neoburlesque was in 2000, when she started a touring go-go performance troupe based in Vancouver, B.C. "So it just seemed like a natural transition to go from my modern, belly dance-based bump-and-grind take on go-go to incorporating skits, fire dancing, fan dancing, striptease and pastie twirling—including flaming tassels and sparkler tassels."

When her Vancouver roommate suggested she teach burlesque classes, "I thought that was outrageous and dismissed the idea," says Betty. But in San Francisco a few years later, and without her troupe, she did just that, beginning with her now famed *Burlesquercise!* classes and DVDs, and later with her Pinup Modeling Workshop (\$195, bombshellbetty.net), which has become, well, almost a San Francisco legend in itself.

Normally, the Pinup Workshop is a two-day operation; one day for instruction, the second for a photo shoot. But for the

Curvettes and me, it had to be condensed (we are on the clock, after all) into one afternoon of fun. We start by nervously entering Bombshell Betty's studio—a combination dance space, dressing room and girlie Pee Wee's playhouse—and getting into "body conscious" clothing for our first pinup lessons. For me, I'm nearly naked; the other girls are a bit more discreet. (I'm the only one who is over the 30 mark, mind you.) Before we start learning how to move in front of a camera, how to mimic old-style poses and how to make that sexy pout, we meet our equally sexy photographer, Darling Propaganda.

"For years, the joke was that when I saw a pretty girl, I didn't know if I wanted to do her or be her," says Propaganda. "Apparently, what I want is to photograph her!"

Propaganda, too, has been obsessed with pinups and beauty queens since she was a little girl. "My hippie mom wouldn't allow me to have Barbies because they were bourgeois. All her withholding did was create in me an intense fetish for stiletto shoes and playing dress up."

Propaganda's own studio (darlingpropaganda.com) is rife with props and costumes—vintage, new, wacky—which inspire the women who come to her.

"Generally, even if they have little or no idea what they want when they come in, I can find something that makes their eyes light up, and that emotion is what makes a great image."

Bombshell Betty concurs: "It is always exciting to me when a woman comes to the shoot thinking that she is just not photogenic or that she just can't look good in pictures, and after the shoot she is finally really pleased with pictures of herself ... It is also rewarding to see the shy, self-conscious women come out of their shell and really get into feeling sexy. The transformations I am privileged to watch are amazing."

Of course, we were different nuts. Who knew how long it would take to crack our shells? Apparently, one hour and fifteen minutes. The classes made us all a little self-conscious, and standing in front of the mirror making bedroom eyes at my reflection was a bit awkward, but came in handy when I had to "make love" to the camera. Bombshell's signature props were fantastic to work with. I had all sorts of wild ideas about wearing one fluffy, blue petticoat and nothing else.

Then came the photo shoot itself. Sara Jane was first, a glammed up '20s flapper doll, vamping like Marion Davies. Then Katie, dressed in pink, sort of a rockabilly desperate housewife. When it's my turn, I freeze. Betty is directing me, Darling Propaganda is saying things that normally I love to hear from a woman (i.e., "Oh, that's hot!") and all I can remember is that Betty told us to mouth the vowels if we got stuck smiling or pouting. So I begin what would become my day's mantra: a sexy, Betty Boopish version of A-E-I-O-U, with a lot of emphasis on the "ooo."

It works. I'm as relaxed as the other girls, tearing off one outfit for the next and urging





The peeps (left to right): Sara Jane, Diane and Katie



Bombshell Betty (in red) has her hands full



Striking a pose—holding in laughter

Propaganda to make my posterior look as big as possible (Hey, so I admit it, I'm an ass girl). Betty helps, giving me hints that are simple but make all the difference ("How about your hand on your hips?" "Rrrrr!" and "Don't cover your face!" are tops among them), while our lenswoman shoots and urges, "Oh, that's great."

It takes about two hours but by then I'm convinced that I'm the new Anna Nicole Smith (well, without the drugs, death and Howard K. Stern). I'm already envisioning launching my own burlesque troupe and starring in my own pinup calendars—filled with nothing but sexy, fat, queer girls.

Of course, I'm hardly unique. After all, hundreds of women

*"The transformations I am privileged to watch are amazing."
— Bombshell Betty*

have been flocking to Bombshell Betty's Pinup Workshop for months now. "One of the things I love the most about my classes is the great diversity in the women who attend," says Betty. "Women of every age, from 18 to over 60, have enjoyed the class. I have had ex-members of the Fat Bottom Burlesque Revue as well as people of all shapes, sizes, ages and ethnicities ... there is no typical student. I have had openly lesbian, straight, bisexual and transsexual-transgender people attend my classes, and everyone seems to feel welcome and accepting of everyone else in the class."

Betty's taught her fair share of lawyers, housewives, tattooed punk girls, beauty school dropouts and Ph.D. holders. Isis Starr, the "Living Legend of Burlesque," attended Bombshell Betty's Pinup Workshops at the age of 60 or so. "I have also had people fly in from out of town or even around the world for the workshops, so we have people of various cultures participating as well. What is important to me is that everyone feels accepted and honored for who they are. Everyone is trying something new in this class, and that brings them together."

For my fellow Curvettes, that's more than just a "Can I get a Kumbaya?" spiel. "Betty and Darling were really reassuring and just made me feel hot," admits Sara Jane. She's still raving about the class—from the props and makeup to the real tricks to being photographed, she can take the experience into her everyday life. And she's thinking of going back with a group of friends. Katie, too, is all raves about playing dress up: "I didn't think I could look that girlie in a photo. It's a rarity. I can't wait to show them off."

And for me, well, I liked reaching outside of who I thought I was, and, as Betty says, creating a sort of alter ego. Or maybe I was creating a whole new way of looking at myself, big hips and all. If you see me on stage soon, twirling pasties and eating fire, well, you'll know what I mean. ■

Queer, Safe and Solo

Disgruntled by "the lack of real people out there having orgasms in porn," mechanical engineer Boots Boccaleone and systems administrator G.A. Sincoc decided to make their own. Their brainchild, Red Handed Porn, a name inspired by the exhibitionism of being caught red-handed, launched in January 2007, encompassing everything under the sun, with an unintentional focus on queer women and transfolk. The crew at Red Handed Porn does all its own filming because, besides fake orgasms, Boccaleone says, "high quality is also something missing in [mainstream] porn." Calling itself the "home of hot, real, amateur masturbation porn," Red Handed Porn offers various packages covering as many bandwidths as budgets; and since the site depends on real people in authentic settings having genuine orgasms, voyeurs aren't the only ones getting their rocks off. Qualified exhibitionists may have the opportunity to rub one out on camera and have their autoerotic fantasy documented in an episode on the easy-to-browse site, which offers talent testimonials, outtakes and viewer-rated episode selections. The



flexible membership includes six episodes a month. Red Handed Porn also sponsored the San Francisco-based Masturbate-a-thon in an effort to help promote masturbation as an important way to stop spreading disease and help sexuality, says Boccaleone. "If you really know your own body, you're that much more capable of sharing it with someone else," she says. (redhanded-porn.com) — Colleen McCaffrey