

Swim at Home™

The beautiful solution to crowded pools, difficult schedules, and staying fit.

Swim against a smooth current adjustable to any speed or ability. Ideal for exercise, water aerobics, rehabilitation and fun. Just 8' x 15', an Endless Pool™ is simple to maintain, economical to run, easy to install inside or out.

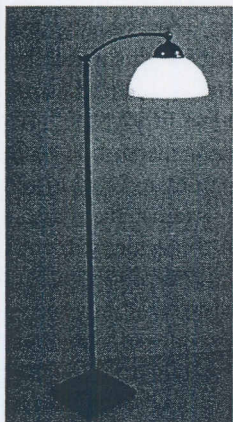
For Our Free Video Call:
(800) 233-0741, Ext. 1777



www.endlesspools.com/1777
200 E Dutton Mill Rd
Aston, PA 19014

PERFECT READING LAMP

LEDGER Floor Lamp



The Double Swivel Action places light correctly for a high or low chair, or desk or a table, or a computer.

Bronze with Slate Base
Opal White Shade
Height(Adj): 30"-54"
100 watt
Dimmer Switch

\$129.00
2 for \$229.00

shipping \$12.00 each

Mail or Phone Orders

NEW HAVEN LIGHTING 1-800-243-3123
P.O. BOX 6353 Hamden, CT 06517
WWW.NEWHAVENLIGHTING.COM

HUMMINGBIRD Pin or Earrings

www.rnstudios.com

STERLING \$29
14K GOLD \$125
14K GOLD \$161
w/ diamond eye

POST OR WIRE EARRINGS

STERLING \$45
14K GOLD \$225
14K GOLD \$297
w/ diamond eye

ROGER NICHOLS *studio*
137 NE Greenwood Ave. • Bend, OR 97701



S/H \$5.75
1-800-235-0471

Velvet Box

Healthy Solutions for Losing Weight



STRUCTURE HOUSE •

- ◆ PHYSICAL HEALTH
- ◆ EMOTIONAL RENEWAL
- ◆ BEAUTIFUL SURROUNDINGS
- ◆ PERSONAL SUPPORT

800.553.0052 ◆ <http://www.StructureHouse.com>



FINE WATCHES

www.pdugan.com

Patek Philippe 978.256.5966

15 Fletcher St., Chelmsford, MA 01824

NEW YORK JOURNAL

THE NAKED CITY

The New Burlesque versus the old smut.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Probably the bluntest but most densely coded sign in New York right now can be found on the front of the Show World theatre and pornography emporium, on Eighth Avenue, between Forty-second and Forty-third Streets. It is a handwritten sign, taped to the street façade, and reads simply, "NO LIVE GIRLS." In one sense, it is just a way of alerting passersby, or, for that matter, inquisitive policemen, that Show World, in accordance with Mayor Giuliani's New Rules, is no longer in the strip-show business. The New Rules, brought in by the Mayor three years ago, and aimed at giving the business to topless bars and strip clubs—at least, in the parts of town that the Mayor wanted to give over to business—dictate that only forty per cent of a bookstore or a cabaret can be devoted to X-rated material. Now the upstairs lounge of Show World, where live girls were once lively, has become a small Off-Off Broadway theatre, with short-story readings and tryouts of new plays and even a production of "Measure for Measure." The explicit point of the sign is that there are no live girls in the vicinity, but its handwritten, hand-taped nature also seems to imply both coercion and temporariness. The sign has the force not of a permanent injunction—"No Parking"—but of a momentary disappearance: "Gone Fishin'." The real meaning of the sign is that there once were live girls there, and there ought to be live girls there again, but, somehow, just now, there aren't.

What is thriving in New York in the absence of the old smut is something that is often called the New Burlesque. The New Burlesque is a strange, late-night movement in which live girls take their clothes off for not much money, in a spirit that seems to be a generational marker: extreme unself-consciousness about sex, joined to extreme self-consciousness about everything else. It is organized by a community of desperately sincere young people who

find in the old arts of inhibition and titillation a sexual authenticity that mere candor no longer affords. The New Burlesque combines elements of downtown art and uptown stripping—or, according to certain skeptics, the tawdriness of topless dancing with the tedium of performance art.

In some measure, the New Burlesque is a way of ushering the old erotic theatre out of the straw and stick houses of pornography and into the little brick house of downtown art, which, huff and puff as he will, the Mayor cannot blow down. (This is because the drafty holes in the downtown brick house are stuffed with the Arts & Leisure section of the *Times*.) Its sites include the Va Va Voom Room, on Lafayette Street; the Blue Angel Exotic Cabaret, on West Twenty-fourth Street; and the Slipper Room, on Orchard Street. A typical Saturday night at the Va Va Voom Room—"Your den of iniquity for vaudeville and burlesque"—begins with a terrific Basie-style swing band of sax, piano, and drums. Then there is a series of acts. There may be a comic, say, or a Cab Calloway impersonator; there may be a pseudo-French chanteuse singing Piaf songs; and then there will be burlesque strippers, impersonating burlesque strippers. Miss Bunny Love may come out holding a cake, dressed as a nineteen-fifties housewife, in crinoline and pearls, and then, in *extase* at the sheer Betty Crockerness of it all, take off her dress and underskirt, and spray her body and breasts with whipped cream and icing. It is a joke about the absurdity of fifties motherhood; it is a joke about the absurdity of "subverting" that absurdity by spraying whipped cream on your body, à la Karen Finley; and it is a way of actually doing it at the same time.

A typical Saturday-night lineup at the Blue Angel, similarly, might include Miss Bonnie Dun, a stately, slow-moving fan-dancer of the Sally Rand school, followed by an "edgy" performance artist

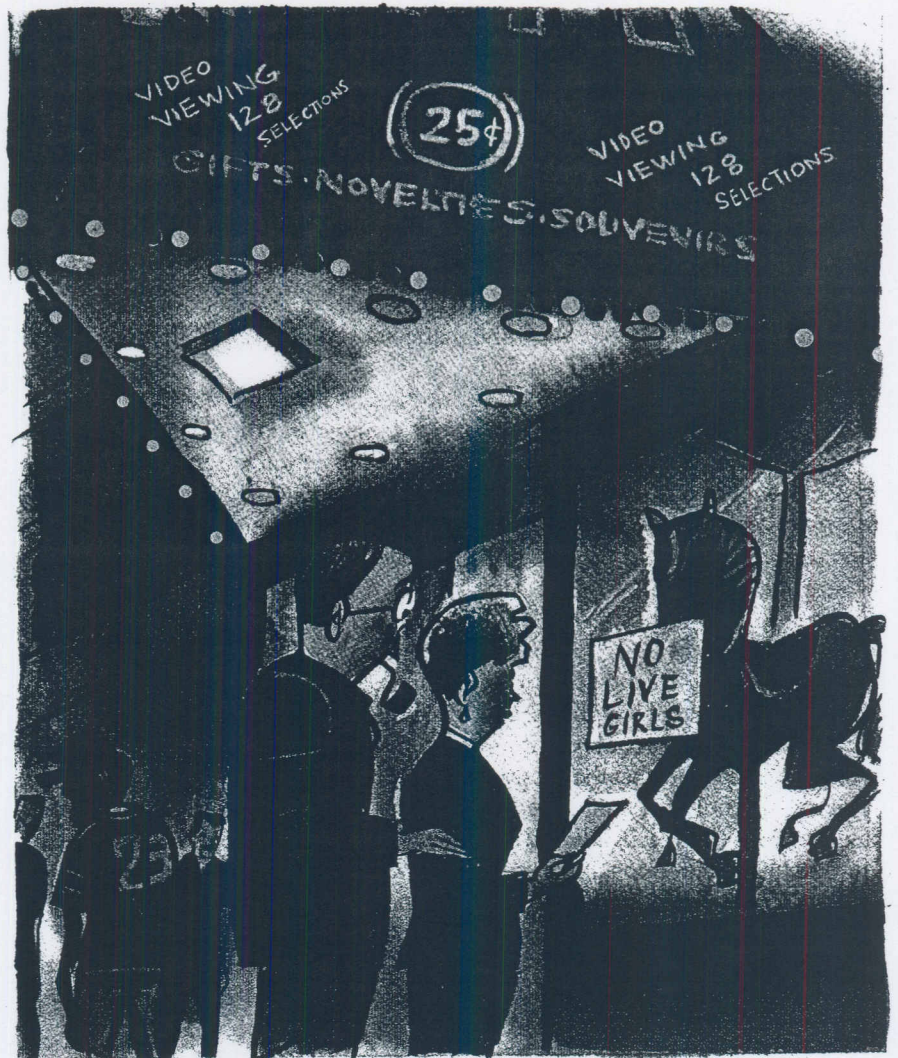


who pretends to mutilate herself; a second dancer, who begins dressed as a nun, though she does not end that way; and a nicely augmented girl who progresses from raincoat to black thong, of the kind one might expect to see in a windowless one-story building with violet neon lettering in an industrial suburb of Atlanta. There is always, in the New Burlesque, what the professors would call a metaphor of the exotic: the Blue Angel is run by Ute, who has a German accent, and the Va Va Voom Room by Miss Astrid, who pretends to have one. The performance takes place behind a hedge of camp, irony, pastiche, historical reference, and star-shaped pasties.

Nonetheless, the essence of the act involves women wearing clothes and then not wearing clothes. The New Burlesque is a joke about stripping in which the punch line is stripping, like a joke about a doctor which ends with a prescription. The joke is on the male gaze, and still the male gaze. As a consequence, this means that the New Burlesque can coexist quite happily with the old smut. At the Blue Angel, for instance, Ute, who challenges the audience to consider their own spectatorship, is joined by a co-host named Dominick, a Howard Stern-style comic who rages at the Mayor for making it tough for "a guy to find a place where he can drink a beer and look at some titties." The doubleness creates an odd netherworld of meaning. The girls in the Va Va Voom Room are pretending to be live girls, and the audience is pretending to be a burlesque audience. But the performers do all the things that live girls do—taking off their clothes to music while writhing in pasties and thong—and the audience does all the things that burlesque audiences once did, hooting and applauding as the dancers dance, so that in the end it isn't clear how the pretense is different from the actual thing. One has to read the entire book from beginning to end to be reminded that there are inverted commas embossed on both covers.

MARCELLUS HALL

A typical figure of the New Burlesque is the comedian Trav S. D. ("Trav S. D.—trav-es-ty," he explains. "You see?") Travis, as burlesque comics have so often been, is both a funding officer at the New-York Historical Society, where he spends his days beseeching foundations



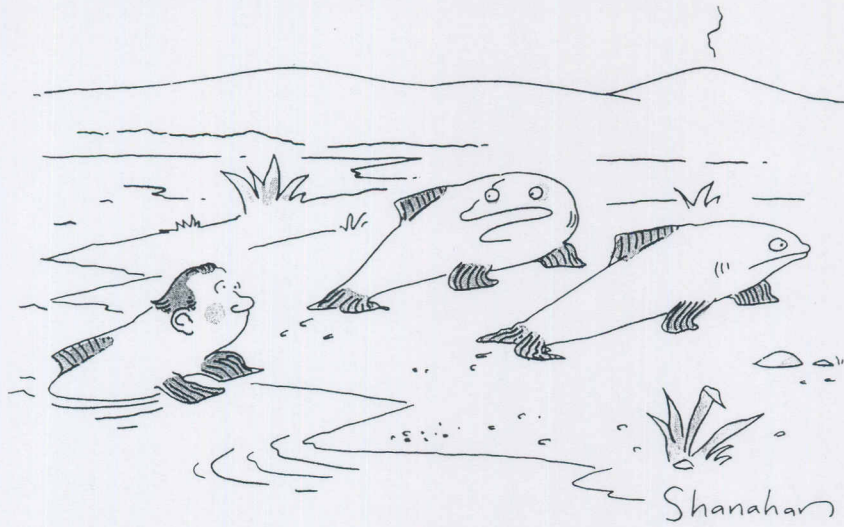
In the New Burlesque, sex is sheltered behind camp, irony, pastiche, and pasties.

for grants to dust off the Tiffany lamps, and a hardworking, upwardly mobile top banana. He is also a playwright, a poet, an actor, the director of the Mountebanks theatre company, and an occasional contributor to the libertarian magazine *Reason*. He is thirty-five, is married to a woman named Susie, and is the devoted father of Cashel and Charlie. He has on tap both the narrow-eyed, "What the hey!" leer of a professional burlesque comic and the wide-eyed sincere look of someone who, as a teen-ager, was voted the funniest man in Rhode Island. Wherever he goes in New York, on fundraising or whoopee-cushion business, he wears a Stubby Kaye porkpie hat, to indicate his true vocation.

Travis is a scholar of burlesque. His own act, which he will soon perform at a burlesque theatre on Coney Island, is an erudite evocation of the sonorous, ornate monologues of W. C. Fields or

Fred Allen. "Ladies and gentlemen, that which you are about to see may disturb you," he begins one routine. "I have here photographic representations of the most heinous collection of freakish human aberrations ever to step on God's footstool: my old girlfriends. Those of you with a weak heart may want to step out onto Surf Avenue for a smoke." The "girlfriends," whom he shows in ancient slides of Barnum's freaks, include A'a' and Pahoehoe, the famous bearded Hawaiian sisters. "Boy, could those girls hula. And they didn't even need a grass skirt."

On a recent Thursday evening, Travis had put on a straw boater and a blazer, adding a note of Ring Lardner wisecracks to his normal appearance, and gone out to pursue both of his vocations. He was wearing the straw hat because the New-York Historical Society was having at its headquarters a Prohibition Ball to raise funds. Travis looked right at home: "It's



"Trust me—you're more than ready."

good, really, because I bought the boater for this ball, but I can also use it in my work." He made sure that the guests, particularly potential funders, were happy and had drinks in their hands, and settled down to talk. He took a table, appropriately enough, within a few feet of one of the society's many underappreciated treasures: John Vanderlyn's "Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos," the early-nineteenth-century female nude with strategic drapery. An "Ariadne Asleep" created one of the first great scandals in the city about how much could be shown and with how little drapery.

"I suppose the New Burlesque grew out of the New Vaudeville," Travis said, scrunching his brow. "But the New Vaudeville was basically warm, fuzzy baby boomers, and this is something else. The New Burlesque, at least the local version, sprang out of grunge culture. It was very much allied to tattoo and piercing. And then, somehow, people started exploring burlesque in that same spirit. My own involvement came through my time with the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, which pioneered explicit sexual circus performance. They had their famous flaming-fellatio act, although, weirdly, it's the man who eats the torch that the woman is wearing, a strap-on dildo that's on fire.

"In some ways, it was an intermarriage of postmodern feminism and grunge culture," Travis went on to say. "A lot of it is done in a Camille Paglia spirit—women's sexuality as empower-

ing, not demeaning, that kind of surprising stagecraft and desire to take apart traditional forms of sexual role playing. I found it incredibly moving at the Blue Angel the other night, when the young burlesque artist came out dressed as a nun, and then took her cassock off, and flung her ta-tas around."

Travis rubbed sleep from his eyes. "I am tired," he said. "Cashel, our oldest, is up early, and he's a kicker in bed." He laughed ruefully. "But I'm looking forward to tonight's show, particularly, because the World Famous Bob is a favorite of mine. It's surreal. I feel that I'm seesawing between two lives. But it offers very different kinds of happiness."

While the New Burlesque shines, the old smut falters. At ten-thirty on another recent week night, Al Goldstein, the sixty-five-year-old publisher and editor of *Screw*—a mangy lion in a New York City winter, pasty-white rather than golden, but a lion nonetheless—is changing his pants and is about to go onstage. He is upstairs, at the "cabaret" at the old Studio 54, sitting with an entourage in a small clump of deep sofas a few feet from the raised stage, waiting to put on his one-man show. Slowly, carefully, he unwraps the tinfoil from a vast salami and experimentally places the salami inside his pants. Then he takes it back out. The sticker on the salami reads "Katz's Delicatessen." Tonight, he is opening for Ron Jeremy, a star of pornographic

films, whose act is based in part on his capacity for auto-fellatio. The Katz's salami is there as a way of kidding Ron.

"He's really sweet," a pretty blond woman was saying of Goldstein. "His face in repose is so sad."

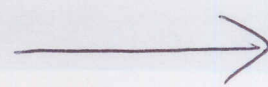
"I've been to the Supreme Court before, but I never got cert," Goldstein was saying to a friend at the same time. He has an old-fashioned New York accented husky and complaining.

Fifteen minutes before, outside on the street, working a cheerful line of people waiting to see him perform, Goldstein had been teasing the blond woman and her husband, a lawyer who works with him from time to time, about oral sex how much and how often. Goldstein always teases people about oral sex on first meeting, as a form of avuncular haziness you should have such an uncle. "You look like a nun," he had begun, and went on from there. But the woman seemed unperturbed, even flattered, by the public attention. "There's something sweet about him," she insisted.

These are difficult times for Al Goldstein. He recently described himself as "sad, overweight, diabetic, financially ruined sixty-five-year-old Jew with a dwindling list of friends and a nearly dried-up sex drive." He is involved in a dispute with a former assistant, who claims that he harassed her with threatening messages. A few weeks ago, Goldstein came back from his house in Florida to surrender to the police, and spent a day in jail. He maintains that the messages were innocuous and were protected by the First Amendment. It is his twentieth arrest; the previous nineteen were on obscenity charges. Long ago, he won a famous case allowing him to impute a sex life to Pillsbury Doughboy.

"I'm going to take this case all the way up," Goldstein said. "Maybe my son will be out of Harvard Law by then. He'll be able to defend me. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Goldstein's son goes to Harvard Law School, and Goldstein is so proud of this that he talks about it all the time.

On the stage, a fortyish woman with dark hair and pale skin has tied a blindfold to a chair, placed a red ball gag in her mouth, and is beating him on the chest with a plaited whip. The crowd, mostly made up of what looks like frat boys at their dates, watches wholesomely. After a while, the woman stops and unties the



man, gently removing the ball from his mouth. He stands up, and they both lean forward and exchange short, quick, head-nodding laughter, like two politicians meeting between the rostrums after a debate. Goldstein is the next act up.

Sooner or later, anyone out on an extreme edge is called either "surprisingly liberal" (said of Islamic clerics and Texas congressmen) or "essentially conservative" (said of pornographers and avant-garde artists). This is because a Burroughs or a Bukowski must be more conservative than you think, and those congressmen more liberal, to live in the world at all. Al Goldstein, in this scheme, is essentially conservative, even old-fashioned. He is the last apostle of the creed—which in the sixties and seventies tied Lenny Bruce, Kenneth Tynan, and Hugh Hefner into an improbable knot—that what is necessary to human liberation is the defeat of "inhibitions," and that this can be achieved if the basic acts of human beings as reproducing vertebrates are talked about very, very freely, and the basic apparatus shown very, very clearly.

"I'm a dinosaur!" Goldstein admits later. "The world has changed. The battle's been won! No live girls, because who wants them? How can you be excited seeing anything? Oh, I should be in Madame Tussaud's. I'm a living wax figurine. I'm a *dinosaur!* I'm waiting for Spielberg to make a movie about me. 'Pornographer's Park!' My voyeurism now isn't topless clubs. It's Court TV and C-SPAN, it's 'Booknotes' with Brian Lamb! My highest ambition now is to be a Supreme Court precedent. It's my legacy to my son, who's in Harvard Law. Otherwise, I have no purpose. You know T. S. Eliot? *I am the hollow man, I am the stuffed man now.*

"Giuliani hasn't won. It's *boredom* that's won, that's all! The New Burlesque? It's nostalgia, is all it is. I understand it. Listen, I still masturbate to Betty Page—I'm looking for the inside of her thigh. But it's nostalgia. People are bored with the excess. Plato's Retreat—what a nightmare that was. I might get married again just to not have sex anymore. The thought of going to a topless club—I would rather fucking die. But I'm happy with my hollow life. I said to my son, 'Next time I'm in court, you'll be at the defense table!' He said, 'No, Dad—I'll be at the prosecution table.' Then he gives me that wry look."

At Studio 54, Goldstein receives nervous, polite laughter for his standup, a sort of deliberately cruddy Seinfeld ("I wonder, Would you wash your balls if you didn't have a date that night?"), and nervous, polite applause when he leaves the stage. Ron Jeremy's act is the draw, and most of the crowd is there to see him.

"Did they laugh?" Goldstein asks his friends when he sits down, and then lights a cigar about the same size as the salami.

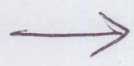
Eleven-thirty at the Blue La La show at the Slipper Room, around the corner from where our immigrant fathers sold and sweated. The Slipper Room is owned by a young couple named Camille and James, who renovated it and installed a perfect bijou stage, and they have struggled hard to keep it both gay and straight, as a young couple with a jazz bar in the thirties might have struggled to keep their little place integrated. He has Ken Burns bangs and a warm smile; she is blond and went to Franklin & Marshall, a liberal-arts school in Pennsylvania. They are the kind of charming, sincere young couple who in another city would have opened the one independent bookstore with a Beat section, or the one coffee bar not actually a Starbucks. In New York now, they have the Slipper Room, and

they put on their own New Burlesque revue on Saturday nights: "The show that looks like your dad's old *Playboys*, plays like your bachelor uncle's vinyl, and grooves like a cool, neat gimlet." James emcees, and Camille dances topless.

Tonight's Blue La La show ("A Peek Into the French Art of Seduction . . .") begins with a recording of Blossom Dearie's version of Cole Porter's "Give Him the Oo-La-La." Then the World Famous Bob, a hefty, pneumatic blonde with a Betty Boop voice, comes out dressed in a French maid's outfit, and she and a pneumatic partner, Julie Atlas Muz, do a pastiche of a French stag film of the twenties—a maid and her mistress simpering and undressing. Then comes a singer who sounds like someone who once knew someone who once talked to someone who owned a record by Frank Sinatra, Jr. Then Meryl (Lady) Finger, in a black-and-red lace Spanish gown, belts out a thirties-style double-entendre song ("Everybody's Girl"); Blue Canary does a harmonica and tap-dancing act; Dr. Ducky Doolittle does a "lecture" along the lines of what used to be called a "party record." ("I'm a great fan of hers," Travis says, professionally, of Dr. Ducky. "She has another promising character, too: Knockers the Clown!") Finally, Julie



"I totally agree with you about capitalism, neo-colonialism, and globalization, but you really come down too hard on shopping."



Atlas Muz comes back out and does a curtain-humping Newark burlesque—a strip number to “savage” recorded music.

Some of it is parody, some pastiche, and some provocation. The members of the audience are mostly in their twenties, and seem to switch modes on a dime with the performers. At any moment, what defines a generation is knowing what's straight and what's twisted in its art without its having to be explained. A child of the sixties knows, let's say, that “When I'm Sixty-four” might be taken as sincere, while “Within You, Without You” could be treated as a semi-joke song. Similarly in sexual manners: a child of the sixties also knows, say, that whereas bralessness was erotic only to *Playboy*, one could still thrill to Joni Mitchell's long straight hair. It is extremely hard for a generational outsider to the New Burlesque to figure out which parts are twisted, and which merely curved.

The World Famous Bob, for instance, is both. She has made the passage from performance art to burlesque dancing in a few, untroubled steps. “I had a performance-art piece that I did all over the world,” she says, after the show. “It was called ‘The World Famous Bob's Topless Aerobics in 6-Inch Heels While Eating Cheeseburgers to AC/DC.’ Which sort of describes it right there. I came here and I worked in gay bars, and then I crossed over into burlesque. For me, the difference between stripping and burlesque is that burlesque is an art form. It's like the difference between coin currency and paper money, you know? Burlesque is more abstract. It's an illusion of a character. You're inventing you.”

The distance between what the World Famous Bob does and mere topless dancing is obvious to Travis. Although his world has intersected the world of Al Goldstein—he, too, has shared a stage with Ron Jeremy—he sees the old and the new eroticism as entirely distinct. The New Burlesque “is more intelligent,” he maintains. “Like all art, it is about tension. Generally, the strip ends at the moment of nakedness—if it occurs at all—as opposed to being entirely about gratuitously waving breasts around like livestock at the county fair. In the old smut, instead of wearing costumes the girls wear a G-string. They have no enthusiasm. They just flop around, like waitresses, and clearly hate their jobs. One

gets the impression that they are sex slaves, presided over by cruel taskmasters, and they probably are. This is because it's only about money. In the New Burlesque, the money is sort of incidental; the performers are into making art.”

Where have all the live girls gone? Some have gone to Long Island City, across the river; more have been beamed up to the World Wide Web. In New York, we tend to give credit to the Mayor and the *Times* for what is in fact made by the layering of time. All cultures need symbolic images of naked women and excuses for looking at them. The excuses are the culture. (The really good excuses hang in museums, the lame ones used to hang around Times Square.) The success of *Maxim* or *Stuff* is, after all, also a triumph of another kind of New Burlesque. A naïf would assume that the readers of these magazines were desperate, panting for nude women, live girls, the whole enchilada, and would not easily imagine that *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, which do show it all, existed right beside them on the newsstand, and had once even been more “distinguished” and acceptable. The only desire greater than that of looking at women's bodies, it appears, is the desire not to be seen looking at women's bodies in the same magazines your father did.

A certain sleazy reticence, Monica flipping up her jacket to show her thong, is as much a part of the sexual code of our time as a certain fascinated candor was of a time gone by. It would seem that What Men Want now is not the friskiness of life but the poses of girlishness, no matter how obviously phony they may be. They want the artifice, more than the girls—the filigree and formality of paper money more than the clink of hard coin. Well, Vanderlyn's Ariadne wasn't a live girl, either. Men are always in search of *tableaux vivants*, living pictures—or, rather, pictured lives, girls made to pose. What makes the blood jump are things the mind already knows, and those things, it seems, must now be bound with enough pastiche, self-consciousness, and fake German accents to achieve their little end. As so often, the prohibition and the provocation turn out to share the same assumptions. In the New Burlesque, as in Mayor Giuliani's New York, there are different kinds of happiness, but no live girls. ♦



THE
NEW YORK
onlin



NOW

