



Norma Lee. Photographer unknown.



Alejandra del Moral. Photographer unknown.

Horacio Muñoz Alarcón*

Showgirls or Strippers?

The origins of the cabaret in late nineteenth-century France is linked to the birth of showgirls; they were one of many kinds of artists who performed in entertainment halls, spurring from then on the rise in nightlife the world over.

Strictly speaking, a showgirl—or *vedette*, as they are known in French—is an actress, dancer, and singer. Some became famous in different eras not only because of their physical attractions and charisma, but also because of their lavish shows. The spectacles included dazzling costumes and novel choreographies, in which these artists were usually accompanied by a dance troupe and a band.

In Mexico, specifically in the capital, at the beginning of the last century, the pioneers in this art form (Esperan-

za Iris, María Conesa, and Celia Montalván) performed in venues like the Colón and Arbu Theaters.

During World War II, theaters like the Tívoli, the Lírico, the Politeama, and the Margo began to offer revues or variety shows. The Margo would become the famous Blanquita Theater a few years later. Among other artists, exotic dancers like Yolanda “Tongolele” Montes, Su Muy Key, and Eda Lorna headlined at these theaters. A very different category of cabarets or nightclubs like El Azteca, El Burro, El Gusano, El Carrusel, El Olímpico, Waikiki, El Tío Sam, and the Club de los Artistas, where many showgirls performed, also made an appearance. Nevertheless, showgirls like Ana Luisa Peluffo, who did one of the first nude scenes on screen, and later Sonia Furió or Ana Bertha Lepe, created their own shows.

The year 1968 left a tragic mark on our history with the explosion of the student rebellions that ended in fe-

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rocious government repression, whose bloodiest expression was the Tlatelolco massacre just before Mexico's Olympic Games. After these turbulent events, the country's nightlife took off again, a kind of unleashing of energy that brought with it a considerable number of cabarets and revue theaters. The golden age of showgirls was beginning.

These performing artists produced very elaborate, flamboyant shows in the most luxurious, exclusive cabarets like the Capri, the Terazza Casino, and the Villa Florencia. By contrast, in the lower-class cabarets, shows that included on-stage nudes and live sex acts were the rule.

Something similar happened in the sphere of theater. Here, audacious, innovative works like the very erotic ad-

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Sonia Furió. Photographer unknown.



Eda Lorna. Photographer unknown.



Irma Serrano. Photographer unknown.

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aptation of the novel *Nana*, starring Irma Serrano, rubbed elbows with light, racy comedies that boasted a great deal of dialogue with sexual innuendo, such as *¿Cuánto por el anillo?* (How Much for the Ring?). Former showgirl Alejandra del Moral confirms this: for her the fundamental difference between them and a stripper is that the former studied music to play an instrument as part of their shows; they took dance lessons to create their own choreographies; and they designed their own costumes.¹ A burlesque queen, stripper, or “bumper-and-grinder,” on the other hand, who might well be the predecessor of a 1990s table dancer, took off her clothes, and might even feature live sex on stage as part of her act, such as the case of Norma Lee.

Beyond these contrasts, many of them spent their artistic careers performing in revue theaters and cabarets, or modeling for dozens of photographers who launched them as actresses in photo-comics. They also graced the pages of newspapers and magazines dedicated to the entertainment industry, such as *Cine Mundial* (World Cinema), *Órbita*, *¡Ay!* (Whoa!), *Chulas y divertidas* (Gorgeous and Fun), *Cinelandia*, *Bellezas* (Beauties), *Estrellas* (Stars), *Venus*, and *Jaja* (Haha). Only the most popular among male audiences (Olga Breeskin, Lyn May, Princesa Lea, Wanda Seux, Rosy Mendoza, Princesa Yamal, Amira Cruzat, Grace Renat) became very famous by appearing semi-nude in publications like *Su otro yo* (Her Other Self), a Mexican equivalent of *Playboy*. Others appeared on live nighttime television programs like *Midnight Variety*, becoming media figures.

Those preferred by filmmakers, like Sasha Montenegro, Rebeca Silva, or Angélica Chaín, became stars thanks to the so-called *fichera* films, about women taxi-dancers. These did colossal business up until the early 1980s, with very low-budget, low-quality films, but right up the alley of the taste of a broad sector of the public.²

The nighttime scene in Mexico’s capital gradually deteriorated in the late 1980s because of the severe economic crises, the September 1985 earthquake, and the



Wanda Seux. Photographer unknown.



Angélica Chaín. Photographer: Jesús Magaña.

emergence of nightclubs with table dancers. The latter had started up in the 1960s and boasted erotic dances, usually by women, performed on tables, runways, or bars in bars or “gentlemen’s clubs.” Their services can include sexual exchanges and prostitution.

This sparked the decline of the cabarets, and, with them, the extinction of the showgirls. In recent years, artists like Maribel Guardia, Lorena Herrera, or Ninel Conde have tried to perform these acts in very different venues from nightclubs, but without achieving the success of the great figures of the past.

In 2016, María José Cuevas’s documentary *Beauties of the Night* offered resounding recognition to the iconic show-

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Rebeca Silva. Photographer: Jesús Magaña.



Grace Renat. Photographer: Jesús Magaña.

girls of the 1970s, recreating the history of Olga Breeskin, Lyn May, Rossy Mendoza, and Wanda Seux, who the director interviewed for the film. Previously, visual artist and cultural promotor Grace Quintanilla had given voice to several showgirls in *Adventuress*, a tv documentary about women in cabaret.³ Works like these spark nostalgia as they vindicate their subjects, whose glamour and artistic talent indelibly marked Mexico City’s nightlife. **NM**

Notes

¹ Iván Restrepo et al., *Vivir la noche. Historias de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Conaculta/Tintable, 2014), pp. 74-93.

² The *fichera*, or taxi-dancer, films are specific to Mexico. They took their cue from Italian erotic comedy and rumba films, also specific to Mexico. The first film of this kind, directed by Manuel M. Delgado in 1975, was called *Beauties of the Night (Las ficheras)*. The term in Spanish refers to the *fichas*, or tickets, that the women dancers collected as a fee for dancing with a partner in dance halls.

³ This three-part documentary series is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BDzVA6SkFA&list=PL4q6mqIj4iypuTAtkHSjz5EcPROG3NpNh>.