



THE STRIKING SUCCESS OF GEEK GIRL BURLESQUE

Nerds Gone Wild

By Zach Freeman

THE SUCCESS OF GEEK GIRL BURLESQUE AT Gorilla Tango Theatre over the past year is impressive by any stretch of the imagination. In October of 2010, “Boobs and Goombas: A Super Mario Burlesque” launched as something of a curiosity—an improbable parodic tale in which Mario and Luigi become so sexually frustrated that everywhere they look they see “beautiful ladies.” Geeky jokes about Nintendo characters intertwined with seductive costuming and burlesque strip teases caught the media’s—and the public’s—attention. Most, even the nerdiest, seemed to take the show as something short-lived, something that geeky gamers would rave about and then move on from. But that’s not what happened.

Nerds, along with everyone else who made the trip to Gorilla Tango, loved the way Geek Girl Burlesque comically paired scantily clad women with nerdy fan-boy (and girl) obsessions, keeping most of the jokes broad enough to appeal to a mass audience, while occasionally diving into the deep end for the diehards. In hindsight, it’s a golden combination. And it wasn’t created arbitrarily.

Husband and wife team Dan Abbate and Kelly Williams had been running Gorilla Tango in Bucktown for about four years when they started to pick up on a pattern regarding which shows were most marketable: They found that parodies tended to do very well, as did burlesque. And they started wondering what would happen if they brought the two things together. Williams reached out to a friend she knew through improv, the nerdy/sexy MsPixy (who prefers that her real name not be used in articles or interviews), and after an initial meeting of the minds, Geek Girl Burlesque was born.

“Goombas,” their initial show, launched them into the spotlight a lot faster than they expected. Originally scheduled to run twice a week for a single month, the show became a monster hit, selling out the first two shows a week in advance and quickly gaining interest from various media outlets and strong word-of-mouth. After being repeatedly extended for almost a year, “Goombas” now boasts a rotating cast of sixteen actresses and its own geeky cult following. “When people start making fan art, you know you’ve caught on,” says MsPixy.

That could be the whole story—a surprise hit is born and blows away expectations—but the trio didn’t stop there. In the past year, including “Goombas,” Gorilla Tango has launched four shows under the Geek Girl Burlesque banner (two written/directed/choreographed by MsPixy herself). But what’s extraordinary is that three of those shows (“Goombas,” “A Nude Hope: A Star Wars Burlesque” and “Fellowship of the Boobs: An LOTR, WoW, D&D, RPG Burlesque”) are still running, and a fourth, the upcoming “Boobs of Khan: A Star Trek Burlesque” is scheduled to open this week. (“Gleeks and Freaks: A Glee Burlesque Musical” was extended twice before closing).

To Abbate, this is a surprising, but very welcome, development, even if it has caused Gorilla Tango to rethink its business model. Where previously Gorilla Tango sought to rent their space out to other production companies well in advance, the staying power of the Geek Girl Burlesque shows has forced them to make a decision: “When people start booking space months in advance, do we book those or hold those for Geek Girl Burlesque? We made the decision to reserve those spots for these cool shows.”

Abbate, Williams and MsPixy only have so much time, and in order to keep the shows coming, ideas are “commissioned” out to different groups. The upcoming “Boobs of Khan” was pitched to the sketch group The Nerdologues after Katie Johnston, a Gorilla Tango producer, saw them perform at Chicago Sketchfest 2011. As the troupe was working on the script, Gorilla Tango took a liking to the playful attitude of Caitlin Costello, the troupe’s sole female member, and asked her to direct the show. Asked what will surprise “Star Trek” geeks, Costello gushes, “We have managed to bring The Original Series ‘back to the ‘future’ to visit The Next Generation. Data meets Kirk!” It’s pretty clear Gorilla Tango knows how to spot a geeky female.

With the brand experiencing so much success, it’s only a matter of time before these shows outgrow their current space. Geek Girl Burlesque is looking to do a bigger, more spectacular—“with more glitter” chimes in MsPixy—version of “Goombas” at The Viaduct Theater here in Chicago (which boasts a maximum capacity of 250, versus Gorilla Tango’s eighty-eight) as well as setting up a residency at The Brick Theater in Brooklyn.

That’s what you might call a buxom future.

“Boobs of Khan: A Star Trek Burlesque” opens September 9 at Gorilla Tango Theatre, 1919 North Milwaukee

→ Sweeney Todd

Stephen Sondheim has garnered considerable attention recently about how miffed he was concerning changes being made in an upcoming Broadway adaptation of “Porgy and Bess.” Many have applauded his purist stance. Others are genuinely puzzled by it: not so much because of his defense of Gershwin’s original work as the fact that Sondheim himself allowed equality—if not more—radically destructive changes to the film version of the work usually considered his masterpiece, “Sweeney Todd.” We have seen “Sweeney” presented as an opera, a musical, as a chamber music piece, an oratorio, as a comedy and, with Tim Burton, as a grisly and humorless slasher film occasionally interrupted by truncated and poorly done singing. With so many performance options, director Rachel Rockwell wanted to pick and choose aspects of various approaches in her current Drury Lane Theatre production. In terms of visual and sonic style, Rockwell has come to terms with the fact that Burton’s film version has changed audience perceptions of what “Sweeney Todd” is now: the crashing pipe organ chords that open the work are not of the subtle, haunting variety of the original, but rather, seek to evoke elephantine epic Gothic horror à la Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Phantom of the Opera.” This production is so murky and full of cobweb-like trappings that it often has the feel of a Halloween haunted house rather than a musical theater piece. The violence, too, is graphic, gripping and anxiety-producing. And yet, unlike Burton’s film with its detached, cartoon-like emotionless characters, Rockwell never forgets that despite the explicit horror trappings, that when one attends the tale of Sweeney Todd, it is important to feel something for the character despite his gruesome actions. In this, Gregg Edelman gives us a Sweeney who is a broken man, to be sure, but who reminds us that it is his sense of powerlessness in a world of corrupt authority that casts him and his wife, daughter and career aside. One of the most brilliant aspects of this production is that it shows Sweeney from two sets of eyes firmly fixed on him: Liz McCartney’s Mrs. Lovett, who falls in love with him and comes to her dastardly idea of serving up Sweeney’s victims in her pie crusts, and Jonah Rawitz’s Toby, who falls for Mrs. Lovett and comes to see Sweeney as a threat to her. Mrs. Lovett has always been the show’s central character but here, we experience Sweeney come back to life with a new purpose of revenge via her encouragement, but with a scribe taking careful notes in young Toby. And borrowing an effective idea from Burton’s film, here Toby IS a boy, not an older teenager or young man as he is usually portrayed. This makes his key song “Not While I’m Around” a very different and more tender experience and gives the climax of the show a real wallop since we have come to care about these lost characters. And yet, the central element that for many of us is what has always made “Sweeney Todd” the special work that it is and yet was completely removed from the film version, i.e., its humor, is well preserved here. The work is a comedy for sure, albeit a dark comedy, and the manner in which this production is able to preserve that aspect while maintaining horror and heart puts it a cut above the rest. (Dennis Polkow) At Drury Lane Theatre, 100 Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace, (630) 530-0111, \$20-\$46. Through October 9.

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3

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Sondheim’s bloody masterpiece

4

CYRANO

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Swashbuckling, irreverent, romantic

5

HOPE THROUGH DANCE

(Woodstock Opera House and Ruth Page Center)

Finding hope in the suicide of a young dancer



PHOTO: S. TRUGLIO

THE OTHER DANCE FESTIVAL