

The PEOPLE issue

Kelly Williams and Dan Abbate, the burlesque producers

'There's so many funny female performers. Now find the funny female performers who are willing to take off their clothes.'



LISA PREDKO

Williams, 37, is marketing and PR coordinator for Gorilla Tango Theatre; her husband, Abbate, 31, is the company's founder and CEO.

**Dan Abbate:** Gorilla Tango was something I conceived with my sister. We had been working together on an Internet project in the late 90s. We had an anonymous e-mail site called gorillatango.com, like Hotmail or Yahoo. We just started randomly pairing words together and eventually came to the pairing of Gorilla Tango. We sold off that Internet stuff to another company around 1999, and that was the end of Gorilla Tango for us. Then we went to Albuquerque and I'm thinking of names for this new improv theater. I don't remember who said it, but we were like, "Hey, Gorilla Tango served us well." The company that had bought us went under, so we thought maybe the domain would be available again.

**Kelly Williams:** I'm originally from Minnesota but I grew up in Santa Fe. I saw an audition notice for improvisers for Gorilla Tango Comedy Theatre and then I was like, "OK, I'll go ahead and just try it."

**DA:** We opened Gorilla Tango in 2003, and what we learned in Albuquerque was that although improv and sketch was appreciated by a group of people, it wasn't appreciated by a large group of people. We had a good supply of performers, we did a lot of good shows, and we had a regular audience. In terms of volume, it just wasn't what we wanted. If I wanted to live in Albuquerque and do improv for the rest of my life very comfortably, I could've done that based on the way Gorilla Tango was set up down there. There was just the matter of wanting to grow and wanting to do more things and continually move forward.

**KW:** One thing that we did discover about Albuquerque is that it's a large city in the sense that its population is about 700,000, but it feels more like a number of small suburbs living together. People in Chicago venture out to other areas to go see stuff. Chicago is one of the best cities for small theaters. Your other options are New York and LA, but even those two places have their challenges. Chicago is very friendly to small theaters, as opposed to LA, where they're looking to do film, or New York, where they're looking to do television. We set out to create a show that we think the audience will really respond to. We noticed that they really like parody. And burlesque [was] big, so we said, "Let's look at burlesque." Ms. Pixie, who is the artistic director of Gorilla Tango burlesque and also created *Boobs and Goombas* as well as *Fellowship of the Boobs*—we approached her because I knew her from the Chicago improv community. We started brainstorming ideas. We knew we wanted it to be a parody. We knew we wanted it to be a geeky, nerdy sort of thing, so we were coming up with *Thunder Cats*, *GI Joe*, *Super Mario Bros*. We were expecting it to be a one-month run. It took off like crazy. We sold out the entire first eight months.

**DA:** I think it's two things: The juxtaposition of the burlesque and the parody initially gets people through the door. And the thing that keeps it going is that the show is actually good. The girls that are performing are extremely talented performers. They're hilarious. It's the curiosity factor coupled with an actually really good show.

**KW:** These are female-powered. The major creatives are females, all the performers are female. What we do is commission people to write scripts and then they'll do a treatment and we'll tell them, "Yes, go in this direction; no, don't go in that direction." The stuff I've done when I've written and directed has been generally female focused. That's not necessarily a political thing. It's just what interests me.

**DA:** A lot of times burlesque shows are set up in that old variety show type thing, where the girls come out and do a sexy dance and then some guys come out and tell jokes, and the guys are funny and the girls are sexy. From day one, we were saying "no guys"—the girls are going to do both the funny and the sexy.

**KW:** There's so many funny female performers. Now find the funny female performers who are willing to take off their clothes. Surprisingly, there a lot of them. —As told to Tony Adler

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