

Burlesque yoga draws out inner sass

Teacher Little Woo says her classes blend the sexy with the spiritual

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"No one is expected to take off anything in these sessions," Little Woo says by way of introduction to her burlesque yoga, "but people can find it a very liberating experience. Even the bikini-impaired might strip down to their panties and bra."

Thankfully, it will take a long while to peel off the extra layers I have loaded on especially for this practice of her upcoming class. For I am not your pastie kind of girl, although I confess the lithe teacher has already coaxed me into a see-through tutu and titillating red feather boa.

We're in a private studio on East Cordova, and, while the accompanying sound is undoubtedly music to strip by (The Stripper by David Rose, Charlie Parker's Funky Blues), this is not bump 'n' grind erotica.

Little Woo is fusing the vibrant Vancouver burlesque scene -- a revival of the vaudeville art of tease that owes much of its crossover from fetish to mainstream to the likes of Dita Von Teese -- with the dominant world of yoga in the city.

Just think more fishnets than Lululemon.

"People get drawn to burlesque," says Woo, whose background includes teaching music at the Royal Conservatory Music in Toronto. "They see performers on stage and they wish they could emulate them. I'm here to give them confidence, to draw out their inner sass."

But, she stresses, "It's all quite lighthearted, and in a safe and playful environment."

Resplendent in a corset, stockings and heels (she's dubbed the 'shaman of



CREDIT: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun
Burlesque yoga teacher Little Woo runs classes in Vancouver.

burlesque' by fellow performers), Woo runs through her routine, flowing effortlessly from one posture to the next. It's yoga, but not as you might know it.

When in a classic yogic position such as Tadasana or mountain pose, standing tall with your hands by your sides, for example, she will add a little bend in the knee for kinky affect. She does the same with a sun salutation (surya namaskar) -- a similar pose but with the arms raised -- and replaces the yoga straps used to help people reach certain poses with feather boas. (Who knew they generated so much heat? Most handy when you're scantily clad.)

"I just like to add a little feminine, minx-like energy to the pose," she says, punctuating the sentence with a girly giggle. "It doesn't mean I'm not using my muscles. Instead of a series of yoga postures -- or asanas -- I offer a series of burlesque-inspired movements."

As for her powerful Utkatasana, or chair pose, with bent knees and arms stretched out as if in a deep squat, she will scoop the hands upwards as if begging demurely. "Like a gentle goddess from the Hawaiian islands," adds Woo, who moved to Vancouver via a national screenwriting award from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television after a degree in film/TV production at Concordia University. "Through burlesque yoga, I guide students to explore these various archetypal energies... be it a seductive femme fatale, a cheeky cabaret vixen, or a warrior princess."

Even the warm-up has a twist. "I like more sensuous stretching," she explains, while turning a plain forward bend into an elaborate swan dive.

As her description ("sexy low-brow art meets sacred spirituality in a playful dance") suggests, the class is also linked to her work as a spiritual counsellor: "Burlesque is a symbol of something that could be considered taboo or wrong or risqué or scandalous, but by combining it with yoga -- which means union with the divine -- I'm trying to make the whole connection with our bodies a spiritual practice."

Along with Woo's brio, her class certainly makes burlesque feel more accessible, and she emphasizes that all ages and all abilities attend the monthly classes that she started at the end of last year. "People say that they feel really natural in these moves -- but it's something they never really get to do in their real lives," says Woo, who also teaches bellydancing.

While my "inner sass" probably needs just a little longer than a practice run to shine through, I know that my regular yoga practice will never feel the same again.

Little Woo holds an ABCs of Burlesque workshop (for men and women) on Saturday, June 24, and a Burlesque Yoga Classic Set workshop (for women) on Saturday, July 15. See www.burlesqueyoga.com for location details.

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