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The marquee poster for the Crazy Horse, the elegant Parisian strip show. One of the dancers, far right, clothed in little but light.



40 of ...SS!

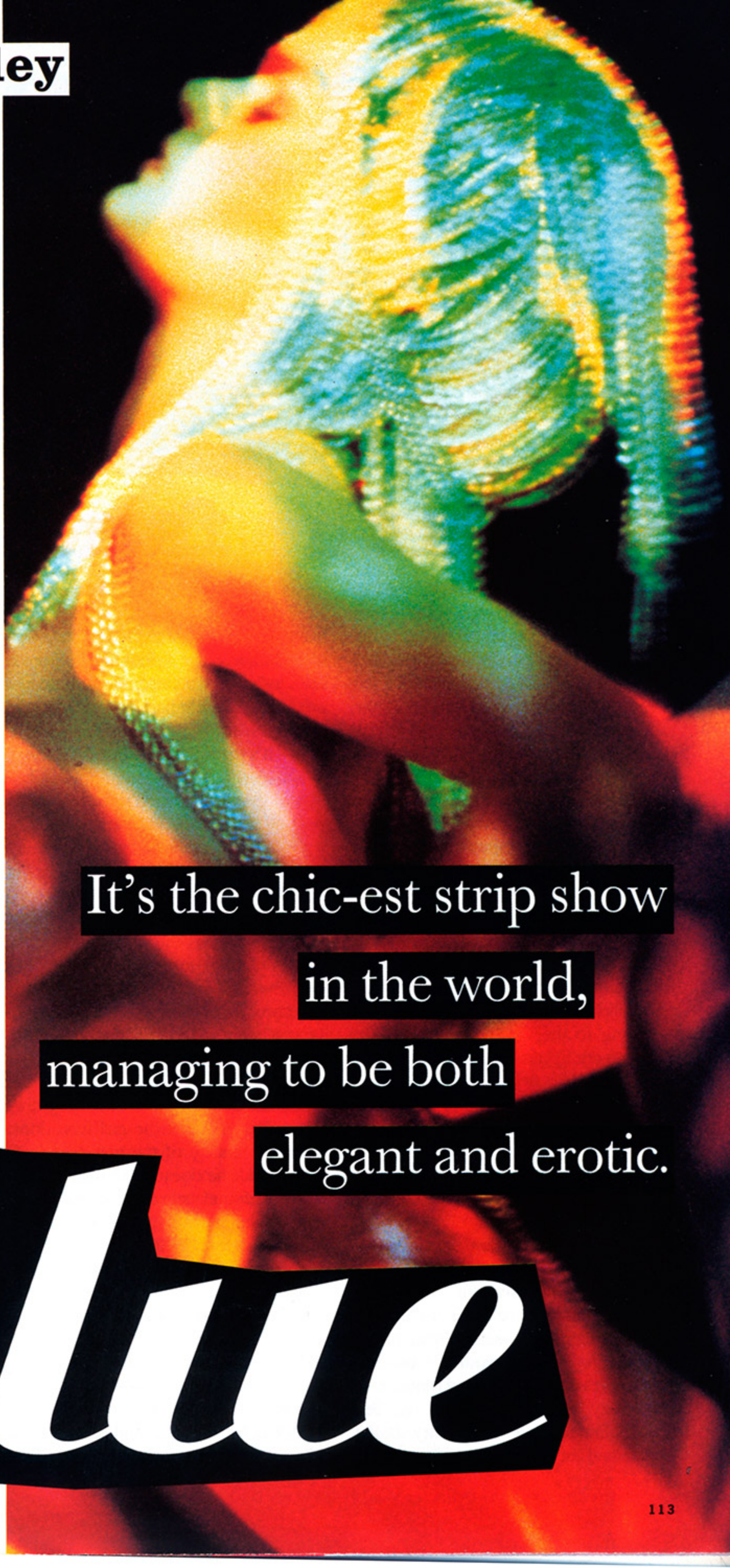
By Toni Bentley

Is a woman naked if her skin is covered head to toe in body makeup (#004 by Christian Dior), her head is crowned with a glittering silver wig, her eyes are framed by thick black lashes, her lips are stained deep red, her pubic hair is trimmed and painted into a perfect black triangle, and her whole body shines under soft pink beams while small crosses of light cast their shadows over her?

Watching the show at the Crazy Horse Saloon, a nightclub deep under Paris's fashionable avenue George V, there is reason to wonder. It begins with the realization that the creamy-skinned figures on the stage are real, living, breathing women. Or are they?

The champagne is poured, the orchestra kicks up a lively jazz beat, the red room goes black, and the shimmering pink curtains part to reveal a row of 12 young women in tall black busbies, like female guards from Buckingham Palace—in someone's dreams. Metal-studded collars support a single leather strap that extends between their naked breasts down to their waists, where a slim white sporran hangs in traditional Scottish fashion. Black garters, stockings, and boots, and white gloves complete the stunning uniform. Each bosom, stomach, and thigh is perfect and glows like translucent velvet. The women salute and march in place, knees lifted high, and then suddenly pivot to reveal 12 perfectly round and smooth behinds. These, too, glow.

Forty-one years after its opening, the Crazy Horse remains the chic-est strip show in the world. This is the most taste-



It's the chic-est strip show

in the world,

managing to be both

elegant and erotic.

Bluu



The dancers in red stockings and black boots.

A dancer, right, in a colored wig and little else.



Dancers, right, balance on the edges of revolving neon hoops.



Three twirling dancers, right, clothed in light from glowing stars.



She is the fantasy of the

ful display of what is usually regarded as the sleaziest of entertainments. There is none of the pornographic notion that three particular female body locations are naughty, dirty, or taboo—but then, it is French. The Crazy Horse claims the rare, paradoxical position of being the epitome of both elegance and eroticism, two qualities that other practitioners of this difficult art have yet to master. The clumsy efforts at American nightclubs, where the talent is often minimal, the music deafening, and the silicone breasts ubiquitous (the Crazy Horse would never allow these predictable, gravity-defying entities on its stage), simply do not have the erotic sophistication of the French original and are usually downright frightening.

Going to the Crazy Horse is more like attending an opening night on Broadway. The tickets are undeniably expensive—approximately 100 American dollars. The men are dressed in suits, the women in silk and Chanel No 5. There is a low, excited buzz of anticipation in the air. But, most significantly, no one is there for any purpose other than entertainment; this is not a procurement site, and women are physically and emotionally safe.

Approximately one-third of the audience is women, and their apparent appreciation for the women onstage underscores the attraction and romance of the Crazy Horse. As Darci Kistler, the celebrated New York City Ballet dancer and an occasional visitor to the

Crazy Horse, says, “I think every woman has a desire to be seen that way. Women like to be seen—not exploited, but seen. It’s rather like looking into a kaleidoscope—so close, so intimate, yet a fantasy. There’s part of you that can identify. It’s powerful, and it’s untouchable—it’s the joy of being nude.”



Curiously, the women perform as if clothed, adhering to the strict choreography without giving any apparent thought to being overtly sexy. These are girls dancing—who happen to be naked. Their bodies are mesmerizing: slim yet curved, long yet round, athletic yet soft. The faces are fresh, serious, and exotic. A Crazy Horse dancer is not the girl next door; she’s the fantasy of the girl next door gone wild. She does not imitate or suggest the sexual act, and no male ever shares the stage with her. The Crazy Horse is a veritable fortress of femininity—ironic and sophisticated.

But it is also deeply erotic—an eroticism shaped by someone who clearly worships at the altar of the female nude. It is the fantasy of Alain Bernardin—founder, owner, and, in his own way, artist.

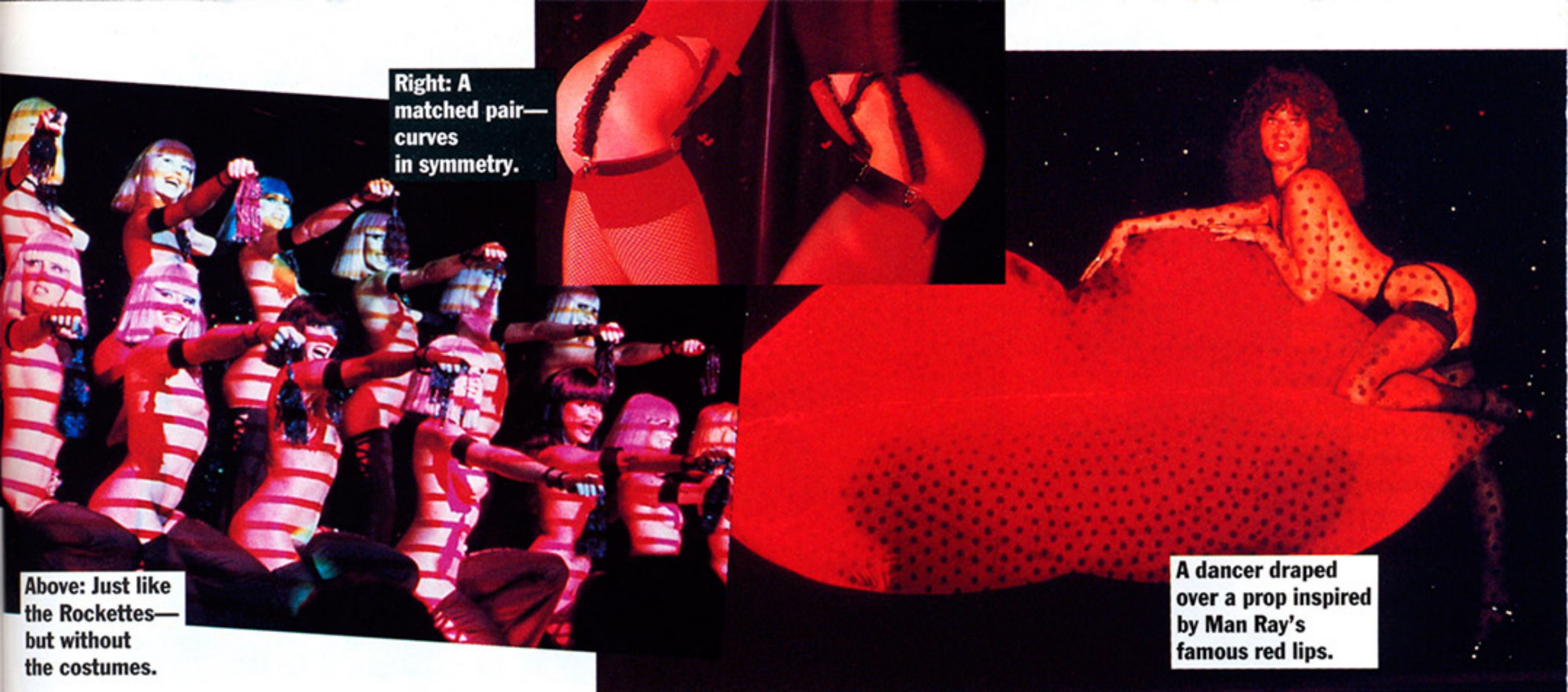
When he was 12 and attending a priest-run boarding school in Versailles,

Bernardin had a vision: “I saw a young girl walking toward me on the street in a plain, tight blue shirt. Her nipples were pointing. I was so excited, so impressed.” The image became his icon and inspiration for the Crazy Horse.

The nightclub first opened for two weeks in May 1951 and then promptly closed for three months. “The show was very, very bad,” Bernardin admits. He knew that he wanted a woman to strip, but, he says, “I didn’t know how to do it. How can you stage something you’ve never seen in your life? Where do you find the girl who will do that? What kind of music?”

He wanted something totally different from established revues like the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère, where topless girls were featured as decoration in the swirling spectacle of animal acts, singing, mime, wrestling, sword swallowing, and costume parades. Bernardin wanted the girls to be the show itself, to breathe, dance, strip, entertain; there should be no distractions. In skipping feathers and fountains, Bernardin went straight to the source: the mystery of a naked woman.

In America, where nudity is often considered shameful, Bernardin never would have succeeded. “Sexual exhibitionism, which most people find sleazy, has a sacred tradition,” says Camille Paglia, author of *Sexual Personae* and, most recently, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. “A naked dancing woman is one of the great mythological symbols.



Right: A matched pair—curves in symmetry.

Above: Just like the Rockettes—but without the costumes.

A dancer draped over a prop inspired by Man Ray's famous red lips.

girl next door gone wild.

There's something serious going on [when a naked woman dances]; there is an undertone. The mystery and allure of the dancing woman are that she conceals the inner thing we can never see. So even though she's totally nude, we still cannot see the womb from which we all came. She is always beckoning us, drawing us—saying, 'Come hither, come hither'—but she'll always escape."

There is another, more conscious fascination with the nude display: It is the public presentation of the forbidden. This not only breaks the rules (in itself an erotic event for a society that sees nudity, even in children, as having a moral component) but is done at the Crazy Horse in such a highly stylized and ritualized manner as to take on the qualities of art.

The unmistakable trademark of the Crazy Horse girls—the *cambré du corps* (curve of the body)—illustrates the point. In direct contrast to ballet, where the hips are forward, the back is straight, and the legs are turned out, this deep arching of the back exaggerates women's natural curves and, as Bernardin says, gives them "nice smooth rears." (Look at the hip profile of any model photographed in tight clothes or lingerie; she's swaybacked.) To complete this youthful image, chests are pushed forward and out, shoulders back, magnifying the arcs of the body seen from any angle.

This extreme physical stance is not simply the product of these young

women's nudity or proportions; it is a much-rehearsed, much-practiced, and perfected silhouette. The girls don't rehearse naked (except, of course, in dress rehearsals); precision, style, and rhythm are what make a dancing body look good, naked or clothed. There is no need to rehearse natural attributes.

Choreographer George Balanchine was a longtime fan of the Crazy Horse. "It's wonderful the way in which they dress the body, in which they cover it with lights," he said. "I find that interesting." He advised his own stage managers to take a good long look at Bernardin's various stage effects—especially the lighting—and invited dancers from the Crazy Horse to watch his own company when it performed at the nearby Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

The interest of a classical artist like Balanchine in the craft of Bernardin's strip goes to the heart of the anomaly of the Crazy Horse. Both Balanchine and Bernardin perfected, in their own way, an image of woman—desirable but unobtainable, tantalizing yet unknowable, and almost ruthlessly independent. For both, what was finally important was what is not seen, but what is merely suggested. "The imagination is more important than what the audience actually sees," says Bernardin. "You see only one thing, but you imagine a lot of things. Eroticism is like a mountain—you can't see it all at once."

It is here, balancing on the line between good taste and vulgarity, that

Bernardin's real genius lies. Has he ever gone too far? He is almost indignant at the suggestion. "Never. Why would I?"

Some think otherwise. There was the act with the nun. While Bernardin has dressed his girls in crosses for years ("I didn't wait for Madonna"), this nun wore a wimple—and very little else.

There is one kind of teasing, however, that Bernardin has banned. Although contact between performer and audience is a common affair in the world of cabaret, it is strictly forbidden at the Crazy Horse. "It spoils everything. It is giving what you don't want to have. If a girl comes up and kisses you and leaves red lipstick, she makes a fool of you, as if sex is something to play with. No, it is something very serious, like death, like religion."

"God is in the details," quotes Bernardin after Mies van der Rohe, and there was one crucial detail that bothered him for years. His determined search for a solution culminated in the small black triangle that rivets—and mystifies—today's spectators.

Even in the intimate setting of the club—where you could reach across the footlights and touch a girl—it appears that the women are wearing a neatly tailored black patch, a *cache sexe* (literally "hide the sex"), seemingly glued on in some curious fashion. This was, in fact, the case for the first 20 years of the Crazy Horse's existence.

"It was so frustrating," says Bernardin emphatically. (continued on page 138)

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Paris Blue

(continued from page 115) "You can never know how important a woman's sex is to a man." He pauses. "It is paradise." Since, according to Bernardin, "everything is allowed until it's not allowed," one night in the early 1970s—with the approval of the local police chief and his wife—the *cache sexe* became history at the Crazy Horse.

But what to do instead? Bernardin is a connoisseur of his territory. He draws a triangle on a piece of paper while explaining, "Everyone must have black, ten centimeters [four inches] by ten by ten. Like a painting, like a Modigliani, everyone the same. You cannot have a girl with eye makeup and lipstick and not have makeup there. She looks unfinished."

Black Leichner pancake makeup precisely painted on with paintbrush and toothbrush completes the "costume." The larger triangle formed by a woman's eyes, mouth, and sex is, to Bernardin, her "face." While this applies to the nude dancer, the image is an interestingly integrated metaphor of a woman's identity: It does not ignore or undermine (whether out of misogyny, fear, or prudery) the deep, often unfathomable power of her sexuality.

All this exposure, and yet the 22 women of the Crazy Horse live like nuns, their convent being the plush red-velvet underworld of the Crazy Horse backstage. It is only onstage, at performance time, that any nudity is allowed. The women are almost entirely isolated. They are forbidden to be seen by the audience anywhere except onstage and are never found in any of the theater's public spaces. They are even discreetly chauffeured home each night by assigned drivers, and their contracts are canceled immediately if they are found speaking to a customer anywhere.

Even in the offices and meeting areas backstage, nudity is forbidden, as is any contact, even a *bonjour*, with any of the male personnel. Between the dressing room and the stage, the girls are separated from the stagehands and musicians by a narrow tunnel of tall slats of blue wood. The final few feet leading onto the stage are divided by a thick white line, which the sexes are not allowed to cross. Elaborate measures like these make it easy to believe that the Crazy Horse employs both virgins and married women, and that they have lit-

tle trouble remaining so if they wish.

What kind of girl works at the Crazy Horse? Though there is surely some healthy narcissism involved, vanity alone could never sustain a girl through such long hours and arduous workdays. With 16 shows a week and daily rehearsals and costume fittings, the dancers are often in the theater for more than 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week (the Crazy Horse is open 365 days a year). Any notion that these women lead a wild private life is quickly dispelled. They are working women. An outsider's preoccupation with their nudity is more than matched by their own disinterest in the fact.

"My parents didn't have a problem morally with what I did because I didn't have a problem with it," explains Teasy McDonald, who danced at the Crazy Horse until recently. (Bernardin rechristens each dancer with a fanciful stage name for entertainment as well as protective reasons.) McDonald, 24, was the only American dancing at the Crazy Horse, and she liked it that way. Originally from Frisco, Colorado, she took ballet and jazz classes as a child and later attended New York University, majoring in dance.

A trip to Paris was a graduation present from her parents, and she was so taken with Europe she decided to stay. After doing several Moulin Rouge-type cabaret shows in South Korea, Germany, and southern France—"feathers, sequins, glittery bikinis, and fishnet hose"—McDonald decided to settle in Paris and auditioned at the Crazy Horse.

"Actually, I had never seen the show when I decided to audition, but its reputation was very good. I had done topless in Germany and decided it was no big deal. The girls were just as nice whether they went topless or not." Two days before her audition, she saw the show, and then her question was no longer "Would I do this?" but "Could I be in this show?"

The curtain parts on the fifteenth number of the 24,659th performance of the Crazy Horse. The 12 dancers are in full costume: a silver beaded cloche. The music is slow and sweetly sad. Though highly choreographed, the women hardly move but rather take one sculptural pose after another on the stage's moving floor. As they are carried smoothly and invisibly to the center of the stage, each dancer, in turn, steps quiet-

ly, proudly through an archway of blue neon—the only prop onstage—and is transformed into a translucent being. The lighting is soft and subdued, and there are no smiles on the mournful faces. This piece is titled “Adagio d’Oltre Tombe”—“Adagio From Beyond the Grave.”

“All my life I wanted to do this,” confesses Bernardin. Of more than 250 numbers performed during the last 40 years, this one is his favorite. Bare women barely moving, sculpted by light, paying homage at an unseen tomb. The piece suggests an afterlife full of life. It is a poignant, personal image. These are Alain Bernardin’s angels. ●

Social Whirl New York

(continued from page 135) about half an hour.” The makeup was all natural, and the products were Bobbi Brown’s. “I used the smoky, subtle navy eye shadow because it gives the eyes sparkle and is great for evening,” says Romano. “Kelly Klein has naturally beautiful skin, so I used the Bobbi Brown Golden Orange face powder to give it a glow. The lipstick was a really natural color, Bobbi Brown 3. I did her makeup a little stronger than usual to help carry her through the entire evening.”

4 P.M. Burton Machen, yet another Frederic Fekkai team member (they are doing all the hair for the evening?) is at the Central Park West manse of Mrs. John McEnroe. “Burton always comes over whenever I have to go somewhere fabulous,” says Tatum. Her blond hair is blow-dried and rolled with a medium-size natural-boar-bristle hairbrush, then brushed away from the face and iced with a basic dry spray called Phytolaque.

6:30 P.M. Tatum O’Neal is in her bathroom doing her own makeup. “I didn’t wear too much,” she says later, “just my M.A.C. foundation, my Shu Uemura 4B powder, and my Elizabeth Arden eyeliner.” She creates her own lip color—a burnt-rose red—by using her Janet Sartin, M.A.C., and Elizabeth Arden lip pencils.

8 P.M. Tatum puts her ensemble on. “Donatella [Versace, the designer’s sister] thought I’d look good in a catsuit, but I felt uncomfortable so I changed my outfit.” Tatum decides on the black bondage top with a long black skirt slit in four places and pull-on gladiator

satin boots. “The bondage top was hard to put on—my husband had to help me.”

9:45 P.M. Ivana Trump shows up with the papaya-and-garlic-pill Beverly Hills socialite, Nikki Haskell. Ivana’s peach-and-cream fringe-skirted outfit by Perry Ellis looks more hoedown than rock and roll. “Most of my Versace is in London,” she says. Maury Hopson has done her tresses. “I hadn’t seen Maury all summer, so he came over to do my hair. And since I don’t let anyone else cut my hair but Maury, it was a little long. So he trimmed it a little, and that was it.” “I arrived this morning on the red-eye from L.A.,” says Nikki Haskell. “I went to my New York apartment, opened my closet, and the first thing that looked outrageous, I put on.” She did look outrageous in a bull’s-eye-print short-skirted suit by Moschino.

10 P.M. All eyes are on Beverly Johnson, who is onstage, looking every bit the gladiator. Her hair, as with the other models present, was done by Oribe—it’s woven with thick, long swatches that rival the mane of any thoroughbred.

10:45 P.M. Subdued supermodels are gliding down the parquet to “Bohemian Rhapsody.” CNN style arbiter Elsa Klensch looks on approvingly from her front-row table. “The ambience here is fantastic,” she says, “and what a way to start the season, with Gianni Versace and rock and roll.” And why are you wearing red tonight? she is asked. “Because I was on camera earlier, and I tend to wear red when I go on camera.”

10:50 P.M. Aaah.... There is Queen Isabella Saltzman. Lucy of the Frederic Fekkai salon has given her “a very soft French twist.”

11:15 P.M. Kelly Klein is in very good spirits, as is the rest of her table, including her husband, Calvin, and the artist Ross Bleckner. “The best part of this event is the music, the fashion, the guys, the girls.” She is holding up very well in black leather mini shorts and a fitted blazer, both by Calvin Klein.

12 P.M. The writer Bob Colacello has his head buried in the bosom of the supermodel Naomi Campbell. His other dance partner, the supermodel Christy Turlington, is attending to one of the bondage clasps on her catsuit, which suddenly popped open in the middle of Deborah Cooper’s “Pride: A Deeper Love.” Diane Von Furstenberg and her daughter Tatiana are in the same orbit, looking more like sisters than mother



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