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COMMENTARY

'Zumanity' Heralds a Burlesque Revival

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LAS VEGAS -- All over town, on billboards and in print ads, seemingly nude bodies poke through viscous liquid like aliens searching for escape. They herald the arrival — or escape -- of "Zumanity," the latest Cirque du Soleil extravaganza to be unveiled here. The show, the Montreal-based company's 15th since its inception in 1984, is playing at Cirque's third permanent venue in Las Vegas and is its first for adults only.

Moreover, this \$50-million escapade epitomizes the current revival in America — and in Las Vegas in particular — of the venerable burlesque tradition. As early as 1905, when the Oscar Wilde-inspired craze called Salomania found young women performing Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils with bare midriffs and papier-mâché heads of John the Baptist in vaudeville theaters across the country, burlesque charmed, shocked and lured U.S. audiences to the footlights. When striptease was added to the menu in the early 1930s, the form peaked in popularity as the glamour queens — Gypsy Rose Lee, Lili St. Cyr and Sally Rand — strutted their voluptuous bodies both on Broadway and in Las Vegas.

By the early 1950s, striptease had found its next great innovator — in Paris. There, in 1951, Alain Bernardin opened his famed Crazy Horse Saloon, where he perfected the "art of the nude" by taking away the feathers and showcasing the women in highly choreographed acts that removed the raunch from burlesque, muted its humor and raised striptease to an art form. In 1962, he visited Las Vegas and realized that, aside from beautiful women, he needed real dancers to manifest his fantasy. This vision came full circle in 2001, when the first — and only — sister show of the Crazy Horse, "La Femme," opened at the MGM Grand.

But the appearance of "Zumanity" at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino, where it officially opens Sept. 20, although it's been playing since mid-August, marks the apotheosis of the burlesque revival in Las Vegas. After the family-friendly 1990s, adult entertainment — where all the usual rules of good behavior, both sexual and financial, are suspended — is back here with a vengeance. With the addition of the Cirque du Soleil approach, there now is an air of polymorphous androgyny on the Strip that takes the tease out of stripping but puts the risk back in risqué.

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"Zumanity" is housed in a completely redesigned theater, and the space is spectacular. The audience of 1,259 surrounds an extended and curvaceous runway that penetrates to the center of the showroom — a very witty touch: a phallic platform softened by womb-like curves. At the back of the stage, a 45-foot-high brocaded red-velvet curtain hangs in asymmetrical and sumptuous gatherings. Very bordello. Very Weimar Berlin.

As the audience is being seated, a handsome black man sits center stage playing a grand piano while a Marlene Dietrich character, blowing smoke rings from a footlong cigarette holder, glides slowly out from the wings. Her arms and torso appear nude but for some embroidered black lace.

This is only the beginning of an evening of illusions. Tall, slim and blond, the woman wears her indolence with pride — along with a waist-cinching corset and a tight black, fishtail-hemmed skirt. Oozing her way to the front of the piano, she slowly turns, leaning over just a little. And there it is in all its stunning glory. Her skirt has no backside — but she sure does. The fabric has been excised in a circle, and in its place we see the alabaster symmetry of a perfect female derriere framed in lush black velvet. It is an epic image: dramatic, naughty and suggestive.

Indeed, the costumes for "Zumanity" — designed by the wildly theatrical couturier Thierry Mugler in his first collaboration with Cirque du Soleil — are, for the most part, dazzling architectural constructions. As the show proceeds, they easily compete with the choreography as performance art in their own right.

For the ensuing 90 minutes, there are numerous other backsides on parade, all of them lovely and well-toned. But the greater preponderance of male over female is one of the first hints of a prevailing homoeroticism. Somewhat troublingly too, many of the female performers play aggressive, even angry, women — perhaps in reaction to several overtly misogynistic numbers.

To be fair, there are plenty of bare female breasts and, happily, not a silicone one in sight. Yet as the cast of diabolical characters — "the Creatures of Mass Seduction" — is introduced by a drag queen emcee, one quickly realizes that if old-fashioned, politically correct heterosexual sex is your thing, "Zumanity" might not be your idea of a fun evening. If, however, you subscribe to the theory that sexually, we're all deviants ... well, this show could be your erotic nirvana.

The 15 or so actual acts in "Zumanity" constitute a Chinese menu's worth of sexual configurations: androgynous man/androgynous woman; black man/white man; disinterested man/angry woman; sadistic man/submissive woman; exhibitionistic man/sex-hungry women.

Completing this ark of drowning lovers are a few solipsistic characters who, in their independence, perhaps fare better than the warring couples: the frolicsome satyr; the male showgirls complete with pink ostrich feathers and enormous bejeweled codpieces; and the swaggering "Seducer" in shimmering latex and leather. The pièce de résistance

arrives in the shape of a tall, slim man decked in — among other, unmentionable accouterments — black stockings, stilettos, black corset and a live snake.

Amongst all this lust and ambivalence are a few numbers of transcendent beauty. Two charming, petite and topless contortionists, one Russian and one Mongolian, dance erotically and lovingly with each other both in and out of a large, water-filled martini glass — a lively update of a classic burlesque routine. Underwater, their graceful movements are magnified, and these martini girls transform into the exotic mermaids of one's dreams.

There also is a penetrating poignancy between the topless trapeze girl who hangs from the heavens on gauzy white chiffon "ropes" as her ardent suitor — a handsome, muscled male dwarf — gallantly circles the ground beneath her. Their duet actually soars, not only in an elegiac aerial dance but also in a demonstration of actual desire. They embody the enduring metaphor of the unobtainable female who is forever out of reach of an adoring, though often earthbound, male. Their love affair ends with her descending to Earth, caressing her beloved and leading him away, hand in hand, to a temple of tenderness that few others in "Zumanity's" world are allowed to enter.

"Zumanity," in short, presents a human zoo of outrageous couplings and a fair share of misery. If, however, you wish to see the human body and its poetic complexities take flight, there is, only a few casinos away at the Bellagio, the Cirque du Soleil masterpiece. "O" captures, in its underwater and aerial spectacle, all the magnificence, pathos, wit and magic inherent in human yearning. ("Mystere," the company's third and oldest Vegas show, is at Treasure Island.)

On the other hand, if the unadulterated female body is your old-fashioned idea of erotic — there is something for everyone in Sin City — you can cross the bridge from New York-New York to the glowing green MGM Grand and "La Femme." There you will find a vision of feminine beauty as seen through the eyes of a man who devoted his entire life to exploring, displaying and worshiping the female form.

"La Femme" presents an erotic anomaly and a truly radical image in this day and age: naked women with self-esteem. No man shares the stage with the goddesses of Bernardin's world, and "La Femme" exhibits an impenetrable fortress of female beauty, power and sweetness. A hundred years after her American debut, Salome has lost her last veil in Vegas and no longer performs in the court of biblical king, but she is alive and dancing in a noisy casino on the most famous Strip in the world.

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