



# We just wanna have fun

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A GROUP OF 40-PLUS LADIES IS CONFRONTED BY A MALE DANCER OF THE EXOTIC VARIETY? ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

I don't know what came over us. One minute we were a group of midlife women sitting in a Las Vegas theatre mildly anticipating the soon-to-start Chippendales strip show; the next we were on our feet, a writhing pack of she-wolves with eyes riveted to the men onstage, who, as they peeled off layers of clothing, seemed to peel off layers of our inhibitions. By the time the boys had tossed their undershirts into the crowd, we had tossed away years of catching-the-bouquet etiquette and were fighting to claim a sweaty souvenir.

I keep mine in my underwear drawer.

And no, it does not rest alongside a collection of sex toys. I am a woman in her mid-forties, sexually

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satisfied, thank you very much, and so, I assume, are the women who were with me that night. So how is it that a soft-porn burlesque show reduced me and my companions to a noisy gaggle of screaming schoolgirls? Especially when the actual schoolgirls in the audience were decidedly not screaming.

Indeed, the younger women in the crowd that night — the college kids and bachelorette party pals — displayed, if not poise, self-control. Enthusiastic applause, yes, and the occasional *woo hoo*, but in the melee that was the under-shirt fight, I didn't scratch the eyes out of anyone under 30.

Was this break from our usual decorum a fluke, or do mature women at such events always behave differently than their younger counterparts? And if so, why?

During a pre-show interview, one of the dancers performing that night shed some light. David Abrams warned me that, typically, the 40- to 50-year-olds behave the most wildly. "They're by far the most outgoing age group," Abrams told me. "It's as if these women are past the stage of worrying about what people think. They get what they want from the show; they're there to have fun."

Abrams makes for a credible eyewitness: The 37-year-old dancer, born in Kingston, Ont., has spent the past five years touring the world, and he performs in front of more than 100,000 women per year.

He swears he likes dancing for middle-aged audiences the best. "Because they're more outgoing, they make my job more enjoyable. They've paid a lot to see the show, so you want to fulfill their fantasy."

The Chippendales show, if nothing else, is about fulfilling fantasies. From the moment the lights come up, a parade of hunks bumps and grinds, but not with the empty-eyed expression of



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runway models or the lecherous look of perverts. Instead, the men flirt and tease, making eye contact as much as possible. A cast of characters — from military men to cowboys, executive types to blue-collar workers — provides something for everyone. What they don't provide, however, is full frontal nudity. Some lovely bums, yes, but just before the torsos turn, the lights go out.

Perhaps that's why younger women don't get so worked up. Maybe those born two decades or so after the sexual revolution are tougher to titillate. Unlike women my age, who grew up in a world where a poster of a shirtless pop star could send you over the moon, girls in their twenties have had so much more exposure to porn.

Candida Royalle, the founder of Femme Productions, a company that creates adult movies that appeal to women and couples, asserts that while younger women aren't necessarily fans

of hard-core pornography, they're certainly more used to it. "They are a lot less easily shocked given the plethora of free sexual content on the Internet and the highly sexualized culture they've come of age in," says Royalle.

Royalle's films reflect her view of what most women want in erotica: subtlety and sensuality with natural actors, classy costumes and settings, and none of the hard-core, graphic shots and formulaic sex found in traditional porn. "Women want to see it but they want to see it done well with taste, dignity, respect and compassion."

The 58-year-old New Yorker, who got her start in the industry as a porn star back in the '70s, finds it easy to believe that women our age would cut loose at a male strip show. "As we get older we get much more confident, we don't feel we have to behave, and we know ourselves sexually," she says. "Plus, it's a safe environment. You're around your girlfriends, so you feel you can let go."

Joan Marsman, 49, a Toronto-based registered member of the Board of Examiners in Sex Therapy and Counselling in Ontario, echoes these sentiments. She adds that women in their forties often experience less stress than younger women if only because most are past the baby stage.

"They have their bodies back, they have more money and more energy."

True enough. No one in my group that night had to worry about nursing a baby or even nursing only one glass of wine all night. We had the means and opportunity to make a night of it, drinks beforehand, dinner après the show. Surely such freedom is an aphrodisiac regardless of how old you are.

But what about the link between lack of sexual desire and menopause?

"What we've found is that low sexual desire can be an issue at any age, that ►



there are sexual problems across the life cycle,” says Marsman. She explains that many things can kill desire, from illness to medication to conflict in a relationship to stress. “There is a myth that sex is for the young. It’s not true. This [midlife] is the age women come into their own.”

Regardless of age, Marsman says that because North American society is not touchy-feely or sensual, an evening at Chippendales might be the perfect antidote to a flagging libido.

“It’s fun and flirty. There are men who dance and seduce. There’s music to get your heart going and drinks.... I don’t see it as harmful. As a sex therapist, I’m looking for ways for people to access their sexuality. This type of thing might help someone get in touch. It might be a surprising experience for them and good to get out with friends.”

Onyx Baldwin, 36, the founder of Mahogany Fields M.E.Ntertainment, a company that provides Toronto-area women with everything from buff butlers and hunky waiters to male dancers and event chaperones, has built his business on the “girls just want to have fun” notion. In recent years, he’s dedicated considerable resources to tapping into the 40-plus market.

“They want to be entertained,” he says. “That’s the bottom line. They don’t want to walk in and see some guy take his clothes off. They want music and ambience. They want an experience.”

And they want anticipation without delivery. “Mature ladies prefer a flash of something,” says Baldwin with a laugh.

Susan Smythe\*, 46, a stay-at-home mom who lives in Toronto, will attest to that. She got an eyeful at a Montreal male strip show a few years back and says it was “disgusting.”

“Who wants to see a guy’s penis?” she asks incredulously. Smythe says she wants a place to go with a group of girl-

friends for a fun night out. She describes the ideal environment as classy with handsome waiters, and a talent-filled show. “It’s not about looking for a guy. When you’re younger, you’re always clinging to the hope that some guy will toss you a bone. But when you’re older, you don’t worry about that stuff.”

Lori Perkins, a 47-year-old proof-reader who lives in Montreal and is involved in a serious relationship, was pleasantly surprised by the Las Vegas Chippendales performance. “I thought it was going to be so cheesy,” she says, “but it was really sexy.”

Of the difference in reactions among the women in the audience, Perkins believes pride plays a role. “I think the younger women don’t want to admit that they’re having a good time. I don’t think they can let themselves let go,” she says. “I think the older the woman is, the less she cares. I mean, you may be a little embarrassed afterwards, but you’re having the time of your life. One of the best parts of the show is seeing the other women in the room lose themselves and go crazy!”

While we may go crazy in the theatre, Abrams points out that midlife women are much more well behaved after the show. In the area known as the Flirt Lounge, where audience members are invited to get autographs and have their pictures taken with the dancers, we’re generally polite and complimentary but we don’t cross boundaries.

“That’s where the younger girls can get out of hand,” says Abrams. “They’re young and often beautiful, and they think if they say things or do things they have a shot at one of us going home with them, which is not going to happen. Older women, however, give you a harmless hug and say ‘great job.’ I prefer to interact with women of that calibre — and so do most of the guys.” **M**

*\*Name changed by request*