

By Bob Goepfert
The Record

ALBANY — Some styles of entertainment are more resilient than you would imagine. It is believed that burlesque and vaudeville passed away because of movies and television.

Indeed, because of the adult nature of so much modern entertainment, many thought burlesque could never make a comeback because it is too quaint for modern tastes.

Don't suggest that to Jim Romano. For the past year, once a month, he and a group of his friends convert Valentine's (a small Albany club) into the Bing Bamboo Room to offer a night of old-fashioned burlesque at 8 and 10 p.m.

It's only offered on the last Monday of the month, but it's becoming one of the more "inside" entertainments in the area.

All the elements of the burlesque genre are included in the one-hour show — a wise-cracking master of ceremonies, singers, magicians, dancers and comics. The homage to original burlesque is so faithful, they even offer tableaux to serve as fills during costume changes.

The tableaux, as well as the rest of the comedy, are more than a touch corny. But no one ever said burlesque was sophisticated.

For example, last month "Washington Crossing the Delaware" offered Romano in a cape and wig, looking like Washington. He's stood next to a street sign saying Delaware Avenue. Then car horns started to honk, and it was hard not to groan before laughing.

And, to answer the question you've been dying to ask, yes, there are strippers. Or, as the women prefer to be called — striptease artists. "Whatever you write, don't call me an exotic dancer," pleads Scarlet.

Scarlet admits having worked at some of the Gentlemen Clubs in the area, but quit because she did not like the atmosphere at those places. "This is fun. I feel sexy and, really, I think of this as kind of an art. It's stripping, but the emphasis is on the tease," she says.

Her remarks are echoed by another stripper — oops, striptease artist — who uses the name Miss Lilly. Lilly, AKA Marie, says, "I like the theatricality of the show. It's not just girls taking off their clothes.

This is more about providing an entertaining night out. It's about having fun."

Romano says the girls love working at Valentine's because of the atmosphere they create. "We try to make it classy, and the audience treats them like princesses. They respect their performance." He emphasizes that the ladies never mingle with the audience.

It almost sounds like people reading *Playboy* for the jokes. Nonetheless, everyone I interviewed at a dress rehearsal was insistent that the evening of entertainment is designed to show respect for a lost art form and to enlighten people who have the wrong impression about burlesque.

"Burlesque is a misunderstood form of entertainment that should be revived and respected. It's something that exists only in books and movies now, and it deserves better," says Romano.

"We are trying to capture the innocence of the form, and all the people involved do it for love and to try to keep alive something that is valuable entertainment."

They certainly aren't in for the money. Admission to Valentine's is only \$5 a person, and the club has a capacity of about 100. Romano says the two Monday shows are extremely popular, but even if they drew capacity audiences, receipts would not provide a large financial reward to the 10-12 performers and technical staff.

As for the crowd, Romano says his audience cannot be labeled. "They are young and old, single and coupled, male, female, straight and gay."

He says the only thing they have in common is that they are all well-behaved. Romano encourages this behavior by creating an environment that suggests a night out — with attractive linen covering and candles on the tables.

Romano cannot offer an explanation as to why it works. "Maybe it because we are not polished comics that our efforts seem so genuine. Sometimes when you try too hard to be funny, you can't get a laugh. We take a relaxed approach and get a lot of laughs."

Romano estimates he has a pool of about 35 people with various skills, who think of themselves as a family united

Burlesque is alive and, well, in Albany

in a cause. Catt, a redhead who recently moved to the area from Texas calls herself a torch-singer and says she tries to appear at every show. "I love working with all these people. They are talented and fun. They've become my friends," she says.

To keep the night fresh, Romano develops a monthly theme for his shows. He's had Circus Night, a USO Night and "A Salute to Henry Mancini," in which dancers worked to contemporary covers of his songs. There were Pink Panther comic bits and even Inspector Cloussau dropped in.

He presenting theory is, "Get on, do your stuff and go on to the next act. That way it's fast and it's fun." He says because of "television-influenced attention spans," he tries to limit each act to three minutes on stage.

Keeping the flow of the show smooth is the responsibility of Mark Rennel, the master of ceremonies, known as Guy Smiley. Romano says, "If I didn't have Mark, I couldn't do the show. He keeps the audience entertained, the mood light and the show moving."

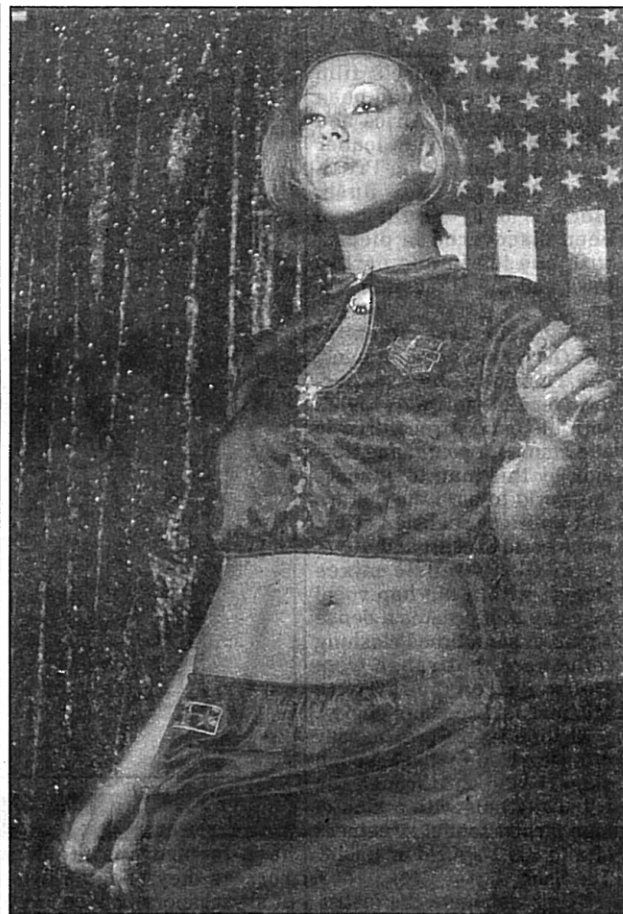
Rennel is a local actor and improvisational comic who says he's delighted to be in the company. "I love playing this smarmy kind of Las Vegas nightclub character. The most fun is when they heckle me. Then I know they are really into it."

Romano says there is talk about expanding the event to twice monthly, but that is for the future. He offers the burlesque show ten times a year (they go dark in January and August), but their audience base is expanding in unexpected ways.

In October they will provide the entertainment for a black-tie fund raiser for Center Art Galleries to be held at the refurbished Washington Avenue Armory in Albany. Romano is excited about the opportunity, as he thinks this type of event will enhance the legitimacy of the entertainment.

However, if you're like me and prefer the "underground entertainment" atmosphere, burlesque is alive and well at Valentine's for two shows on Mondays.

Burlesque, at Valentine's, 17 New Scotland Ave., Albany. Last Monday of every month (no show August). Performances 8 and 10 p.m. Admission \$5. 432-6572



Scarlet dances at Valentine's

Photo by Tom Killips