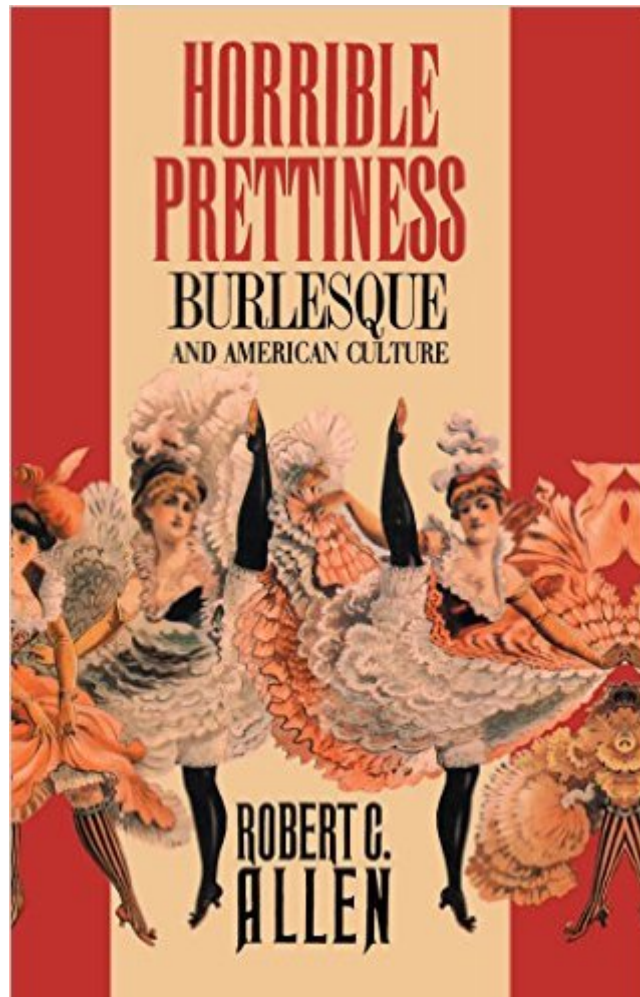


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Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque And American Culture (Cultural Studies Of The United States)



Synopsis

Robert Allen's compelling book examines burlesque not only as popular entertainment but also as a complex and transforming cultural phenomenon. When Lydia Thompson and her controversial female troupe of "British Blondes" brought modern burlesque to the United States in 1868, the result was electric. Their impertinent humor, streetwise manner, and provocative parodies of masculinity brought them enormous popular success--and the condemnation of critics, cultural commentators, and even women's rights campaigners. Burlesque was a cultural threat, Allen argues, because it inverted the "normal" world of middle-class social relations and transgressed norms of "proper" feminine behavior and appearance. Initially playing to respectable middle-class audiences, burlesque was quickly relegated to the shadow-world of working-class male leisure. In this process the burlesque performer "lost" her voice, as burlesque increasingly revolved around the display of her body. Locating burlesque within the context of both the social transformation of American theater and its patterns of gender representation, Allen concludes that burlesque represents a fascinating example of the potential transgressiveness of popular entertainment forms, as well as the strategies by which they have been contained and their threats defused.

Book Information

Series: Cultural Studies of the United States

Paperback: 382 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press; 1st New edition edition (May 27, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807843164

ISBN-13: 978-0807843161

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #285,758 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #149 in Â Books > Arts &

Photography > Performing Arts > Theater > History & Criticism #326 in Â Books > Humor &

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Customer Reviews

This enchanting work brings the burlesque back to life! When Lydia Thompson hit New York theaters in 1868, she and her troupe were an immediate success. But she also initiated a

vituperative debate over the appropriate limits for the female performer. Robert Allen vividly describes how Americans increasingly put aside their religious reservations and took to the theater by the mid-19th century. He first examines the physical and social arrangement of space within the theater auditorium. He then takes his reader on a journey through the male-impersonating, revealingly attired, slang-spouting, minstrel-dancing burlesque women to their descendants - the cooch dancers and modern day striptease. A unique book for entertainment buffs and feminist thinkers alike. To read actual burlesque plays see "The Best Burlesque Sketches".

I must confess, I didn't know all that much about burlesque before reading this book - only that there was more to it than strip shows. Reading the account of Lydia Thompson revolutionizing the US stage with her blondes from London was thrilling. It's a very well written and very well researched account of a theatre situation long forgotten. The description of the theaters, audiences and shows from 1869 onwards is fun to read, and I must say, it's one of the best books on the entertainment industry I've come across in a long while. What I loved especially is the fact that these early burlesque shows dealt with in the first half of the book are so very close to Offenbach's new genre "opera bouffe" in Paris and the early kinky operettas in Vienna. Sadly, that connection isn't discussed here, but if you're interested in operetta, you can work it out yourself, easily. There are great images.... and the story of the female Mazeppa being strapped to a horse, topless, it priceless. No wonder the show sold out for months and months. I wish commercial theater today were a bit more like that - daring, subversive, crazy, wild, and very very sexy.

Allen's 'Horrible Prettiness' is *the* historical study on theatrical burlesque and a great background history of nightclub burlesque (yes, there is a difference). It is an excellent scholarly book and has been very useful in my own studies. Yes, it is a bit of a heavy read (as another review pointed out) but the information and research Allen provides makes it well worth it.

What's the difference between burlesque and vaudeville? Why did Flo Ziegfeld use nearly androgynous women in his shows and say 'the vampire is not a welcome household pet'? (pg. 272) How did curiosity museums evolve into 'freak' shows? And what about those posters in which "men had become human-headed duckpins sent flying by an athletic burlesquer (female) using bowler balls marked youth song dance wit and beauty"? B.F. Keith's, Boston, attracted 40,000 patrons each week,,,grossing \$20,000. (pg. 190)Such is the detail of this book. I previewed it from the local library and so you see it was worth adding to my own library. I was particularly interested in show

business at that time and this book lets you into the world of the women who wore tights without being dry or preachy. From the front flap: Burlesque 'inverted the normal world of middle class social relations and transgressed norms of proper feminine behavior and appearance (Horrible Prettiness?). You can flip through and enjoy the bits of plays and songs quoted within chapters, Racy!

While the information is very informative, the book itself is very hard to read. There is more than one instance where instead of focusing on the subject at hand, it appears the author tried to cram as many multi-syllable words onto 1 page as he possibly could. Rather than being impressed by his vocabulary I found it distracting, and completely unnecessary.

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