

October 8, 2007

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE SENSUOUS WOMAN'

In Bump-and-Grind World, a Democracy of Pasties

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

Oh my God, I'm seeing stars. With sequins on them. And tassels too! Round and round they go.

Since I have not, to my knowledge, recently been knocked unconscious by a falling disco ball, I must be having a flashback to "The Sensuous Woman," the neo-burlesque revue at the Zipper Factory headlined by the comic [Margaret Cho](#). This singular entertainment — more singular than entertaining, in truth — employs enough pasties to supply a decade or two of "Gypsy" revivals.

In her opening monologue Ms. Cho protests the body-type fascism of American culture, decrying the public ridicule heaped on [Britney Spears](#) after her infamous performance at the [MTV](#) Video Music Awards, an outcry that included much snide commentary on her size. As Ms. Cho rightly observes, with disgust, Ms. Spears is hardly fat by any sane standard. (I'd add that her performance was desultory and disengaged but hardly the scandal of incompetence that it was made out to be. I feel for Britney, really I do.)

Ms. Cho goes on to say that "The Sensuous Woman" has been created to celebrate the many varieties of human beauty. And it does pay lip service — or perhaps hip service — to this notion by including among its odd cast about a half-dozen strippers in assorted shapes, sizes and genders, from a zaftig blonde wrapped in the stars and stripes (stage name: Miss Dirty Martini) to Selene Luna, a polished spitfire, less than four feet tall.

Unless you are a connoisseur of exotic exotic dancers, however, this variety show is more enjoyable for its celebration of outré gay humor. Ms. Cho has become a beloved figure in the gay world for her down-and-dirty comic style, and her resplendently nasty opening monologue will not disappoint fans. Much of the material consists of jokes about gay sex (the foibles of Senator Larry Craig get a good working over), lesbian sex and even straight sex, none of which can be repeated, or even vaguely described, in a newspaper. I blush as I type.

Ms. Cho then cedes the stage to comedy acts interspersed with those curio stripteases. The comics Diana Yanez and Kurt Hall portray lesbian and gay rappers (his nom de mike: Lisp).

The transgendered comic Ian Harvie, looking like a teenage boy from a wholesome 1950s television series, does a trim 10 minutes of moderately amusing stand-up.

The liveliest segment comes from Liam Sullivan, an actor and YouTube celebrity, in the guise of the peevish teenager Kelly, who gives the proceedings a boost with his deadpan performances of two Internet hits, "Shoes" (six million viewings and counting) and "Let Me Borrow That Top." In the same synthetic blond wig, blocky eyeglasses and Dr. Seuss-striped stockings that he sports in the videos, Mr. Sullivan delivers a spot-on impersonation of a jaded suburban girl with a fashion fixation and a limited vocabulary that is arguably even funnier live.

Directed by Randall Rapstine, the show has a modest gimcrack appeal. (The stage is cleared of post-strip debris by Ms. Yanez, in a dubious routine as Ms. Cho's Latina maid.) But with weekend tickets going for \$55, the flimsiness may strike some as a cheat. Dedicated fans of Ms. Cho's comic shtick should also note that she is onstage telling jokes for only about 15 minutes of the 90-minute running time.

But she makes like an old-fashioned lady of burlesque more than once, in the finale exposing pretty much all of her elaborately tattooed flesh. I do have to question her choice of accompaniment. The music of [Richard Wagner](#) has probably been put to many unusual, sometimes nefarious, uses. But even Gypsy Rose Lee at her most highfalutin would surely not have attempted a routine to the "Liebestod" from "Tristan und Isolde." Some music is definitely not meant for bumping and grinding.

THE SENSUOUS WOMAN

Directed by Randall Rapstine; choreography by Kitty McNamee; sets by Steven Capone; lighting by Josh Monroe; tech director, Production Consolidated/Gregg Bellon; stage manager, Jessie Boemper; production supervisor/electrician, Ian Grunes. Presented by Westbeth Entertainment, Arnold Engelman and Chris Petrelli, executive producers. At the Zipper Factory, 336 West 37th Street; (212) 352-3101. Through Nov. 3. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

WITH: [Margaret Cho](#), Princess Farhana, Kurt Hall, Ian Harvie, Ryan Heffington, Kelly, Selene Luna, Diana Yanez and Miss Dirty Martini.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)