

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 13 April 2010 06:00

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For many, LeClaire resident Danielle Colby-Cushman is best known as a co-star of the History Channel's hit reality series *American Pickers*, and the office manager for the city's collectibles shop Antique Archeology.

Yet for some, she's perhaps better-known as the director/founder of, and a featured artist in, the area's only practicing burlesque troupe, for which Colby-Cushman performs comedy routines, dances, and (yes) removes her apparel under the stage name Dannie Diesel.

And for those who have either not heard of this unique company of entertainers - performing at Davenport's Capitol Theatre on April 24 - or are unsure of what it is they do, Colby-Cushman offers an example, taken from troupe member Birdie Belleville's 2009 striptease debut.

"She'd never done a reveal in front of a live audience before," says Colby-Cushman during a recent interview, "and the routine that she came up with was based on an Amy Sedaris book where she makes herself up into a birthday cake. We were looking at this book at my friend's house, and there's a picture of Sedaris with granny panties on and pantyhose underneath, like, rolling around in sprinkles and whipped cream, and it's *hilarious*. And I was like, 'Ya gotta do this, because if you don't, I'm do  
in' it.'

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"So after some coaxing," she continues, "Birdie and I went out and we bought stuff to make pasties for her, and we got whipped cream and sprinkles and candy, and she did this routine where she's, like, eating while she's doing her reveal. And she *rocked the house*."

"For me, it's all about comedy. It's about funny. And if you don't have the comedy in there, you're just taking yourself *way* too seriously."

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the world of Burlesque Le' Moustache.



### **Taboo and Wrong and Bad**

Raised in what the Davenport native calls "a very loving but strict household" of Jehovah's Witnesses, the 34-year-old Colby-Cushman says that her interest in burlesque originated when she was "10 or 12 years old." But her fascination with the centuries-old art form didn't fully take hold until six years ago, when Colby-Cushman and her husband and children were living in Chicago, and she attended a performance starring comedienne Margaret Cho and legendary burlesque artist Satan's Angel.

"It was *amazing*," says Colby-Cushman of the show's ensemble of comics, singers, dancers, and striptease artists. "Growing up in a strict household, I think I went into that evening thinking that burlesque was taboo and wrong and bad. But what I realized after I left that event was how absolutely *liberating* it was, to be in a room with women on stage who were ranging from a size zero to a size of, easily, 28 - all different types of women, with all different strengths."

"I left thinking, 'Who *cares* if I have stretch marks? Who *cares* if I'm a size 14 or 12 or 10? It doesn't matter. What matters is that I like

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*myself.*

That's the feeling I left with, and it was life-changing, and at that point I knew I wanted to do it [burlesque]."

As a traveling makeup artist for Lancome and Estée Lauder, work commitments kept Colby-Cushman from following her dream while in Chicago. But she says that after family obligations called her and her family back to the Quad Cities area, "I knew I had to figure out a way to do the burlesque thing. It had to happen. I think it just got to the point where I was like, 'F--- it, I'm getting older, I've got to do the stuff that I want to do *now*, or my kids are gonna think they don't have opportunities to do what they want to do.'"

It probably comes as little surprise that many of her acquaintances thought Colby-Cushman's idea of forming a local burlesque troupe was a questionable one, to say the least. "Oh yeah, people thought I was insane," she admits. "But I think I'm pretty used to that, and I don't care what people think anymore. You know? You just do what you do, and some people are gonna ask questions, and some people won't."

Prior to the formation of Burlesque Le' Moustache as a professional performing troupe, says Colby-Cushman, "I started out just doing classes, teaching burlesque classes" for slightly less than six months. But after continued practice in the art of burlesque - with routines that encompass everything from knife-throwing to aerial acrobatics to vaudevillian comedy - the women "really wanted to *perform*."

Burlesque Le' Moustache productions, says the group's leader, don't involve any frontal nudity - at least, not *intentional* frontal nudity. "We wear panties. We wear pasties, so nipples never show. Unless there's an unfortunate mishap which, let's face it, could happen at some point in one's burlesque career. At which point you cover the breast with your hand and finish your routine, and laugh about it later."

Yet Colby-Cushman adds that while participants were eager to bring burlesque to the public, that didn't necessarily mean they were eager to perform in the risqué manner that the art form frequently demands.

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"My little sister was pretty much the first person that I duped into doing this," she says with a laugh. "And she was like, 'Okay, I'll do this, but I am not gonna take off my bra or my corset. I'll stay very modest. I'll be the modest one in the group.' But then, as we started amassing girls, it turned out that each *one* wanted to be the modest one in the group." (See sidebar "Meet the 'Staches" for details on the members of Burlesque Le' Moustache, and what they'll be performing in the April 24 production of *Cabaret Le Freak*.)

"So finally, at one of our practices, I just looked at everybody and I'm like, 'Take your f---in' bras off. Everybody take your bras off. *Right* now. Let's just get used to this. Let's just laugh at each other now and get it out of the way, and then, you know, hopefully we won't have any issues going forward. Because we can't have everybody be the modest one, because then I'll be the only whore *out there*.'"

Colby-Cushman laughs. "And that was actually the most fun practice we ever had. We went through the routines, we just did the routines topless, and it was really *freeing*. You'd think that would be slightly uncomfortable, but it wasn't at all. We laughed and we had fun and we made fun of each other, and from that point on, I think all of us were fine. We just realized, 'Okay, you know what? We can *do* this. We're all beautiful women.' And you don't realize it until you're standing topless next to 10 *other* beautiful women."



### **No Boundaries, No Judgment**

Burlesque Le' Moustache's leader, though, stresses that there was far more nudity on display at that rehearsal than audiences will ever find in one of the troupe's live shows.

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"Honestly, if you'll sit down and watch an R-rated movie, you'll have no issue with what we do at all," says Colby-Cushman. "Because we don't show any more than would be shown in an R-rated movie. In fact, we probably show a hell of a lot *less*. I mean, yeah, there are definitely certain routines that are more salacious than others. But it balances out so beautifully, because you have your more naïve, innocent girls, and then you have your girls who are *not* ."

And regardless of how much skin is shown, says Colby-Cushman, the women are linked by a collective understanding of Burlesque Le' Moustache's mission. "It's all very tongue-in-cheek," says the troupe's leader, "and we want audiences to have a sense of ownership in it, from the women to the men. Ownership of their own sexuality - a sense of pride in it."

As performances include what she calls "limited, respectful audience participation," Colby-Cushman and her fellow ensemble members want audiences to feel that "when you walk in the door, there are no boundaries - we're all just sensual beings at that point, and that's all that matters. We're here to support one another, and create an area where there's no judgment.

"There's that rush when you know that what you're offering is *pure*, you know?" she adds. "I mean, this is truly who we are. We're not surgically augmented. We're real women who have very real bodies."

Judging by the audience reaction to Burlesque Le' Moustache's February 6 production at the Capitol Theatre - a performance, accompanied by the troupe's house band Hot Club of Davenport, that played to some 1,200 attendees - Colby-Cushman says that the ensemble obviously struck a nerve with its very first local performance.

"It was so overwhelming," she says. "I couldn't even *believe* how people embraced it," making particular mention of the climactic vignette which found the troupe's women involved in what Colby-Cushman refers to as "the water-dance routine."

"Basically the girls are doing their laundry on wash day," she says, "and we put up sheets, and then do, like, a shadow dance behind the sheets as we're disrobing. And then after we've disrobed, we come out front, and the girls in the front wash us off. So it has a very homoerotic

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undertone to it - which is nice because guys *always* like that - but it's also friendly, so it wasn't too much for the women, either.

"And that's how we ended the show. To a standing ovation. People just went insane. It was a *beautiful* thing."

Following the troupe's April 24 performance at the Capitol Theatre, Burlesque Le' Moustache will next play the Rock Island Brewing Company on May 28 and Chicago's Viaduct Theatre on May 29, and Colby-Cushman hopes that with added public exposure (no pun intended), the company will continue to grow, and hopefully in new directions. "We want to see if we can get some *boy-lesque* in there, too," she says. "But it'll take time to see where we can go with that, because I think - especially in this area - guys are just a little bit more, 'Uh ... *no-o-o-o* ...  
... :

"But I think that we're really gonna get somewhere with this," says Colby-Cushman. "I think in the end it's gonna pay off, and people are gonna see that we can do some really cool stuff here. And I hope that's the message that comes across. That if it's never been done before, that doesn't mean it's not *supposed* to happen. It just means that you've got to break down the barriers, and hope that people are receptive."

*Burlesque Le' Moustache performs its latest presentation, Cabaraet Le Freak, at the Capitol Theatre on Saturday, April 24; tickets are \$20 to \$22 and can be reserved by calling (563)326-8820 or visiting [TheCapDavenport.com](http://TheCapDavenport.com). For more information on the troupe, visit [BurlesqueLeMoustache.com](http://BurlesqueLeMoustache.com).*

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## Meet the 'Staches

During our interview, Danielle Colby-Cushman - also known by her stage name Dannie Diesel - had the highest of praise for her fellow troupe members in Burlesque Le' Moustache, nicknamed "the 'Staches." And while she chose not to reveal the women's actual names - "To protect the innocent," she said with a laugh. "Some of their daddies don't *know* yet." - she did share tidbits on their characters and the circus-themed routines you'll see them perform in April 24's Capitol Theatre presentation of *Cabaret Le Freak*

**Carbomb Bettie:** Burlesque Le' Moustache's choreographer and, in real life, Colby-Cushman's younger sister, who performs "fan dancing, and also does an aerial-acrobatics kind of thing. She's not a *professional* aerial acrobat, but she does her own spin on it, which is kind of cool."

**Birdie Belleville:** In addition to her role as the troupe's assistant director, "most of what she does is really consumption- and food-fetish-type stuff. And she does a wonderful drunken strongwoman. A *bearded* drunken strongwoman."

**Miss Cheeky Rood:** "She does a balloon pop and also does a knife-throwing bit. She's the bitch of the troupe. She doesn't smile. You know, she's like the

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escaped-carny-that-could-cut-your-throat-at-any-second kind of girl.

*On-*  
stage. Off-stage, she's a kitten. A really sweet girl."

**LaPetite Boom:** *Cabaraet Le Freak's Snake Lady*, "she is the quintessential size-two hot college girl. She's just like *smokin'* hot, and one of the funniest people I've ever met in my life. For our St. Patrick's Day show, she played this girl named Patty Stains, and the routine was so ridiculously hilarious and not focused on being sexy that it just made her *incr edibly* sexy."

**Lily L'Amour:** "She reveals a little more than a classical burlesque artist would reveal, but her movements and her music choices stay very close to classical burlesque. She's going to do ... . How can I explain this ... ? A bed of nails, I guess, is the easiest way."

**Lucy Luxe:** "Lucy Luxe is the cheesecake of the group. For sure. On stage, she comes off as the cute, bitchy girl - in that punk-rock, I'm-super-cute-so- *f---you* kind of way - but off-stage, she's just a pleasure. She's our half-fish/half-woman siren. Also known as a *mermaid*, but in the circus world, it's 'half-fish/half-woman.'"

**Belle Cherie:** "Belle Cherie is just straight-up cute. She's just cute cute cute cute cute - all day, all night. She has this very sweet kind of awkward sexiness about her, and she's just really cool. She's gonna do what's called a 'visible woman' routine. I'm not gonna explain, because that should be a surprise for people."

**Pixie Pistol:** "She's one of those really-has-no-idea-how-sexy-she-is kinds of girls. *Super* cute. She'll be doing a dominatrix routine. A straight-up dominatrix routine."

**Alex Strangler:** The rare 'Stache currently performing under her own name, "Alex is our card girl for the show. And she owns [Moline-based tattoo parlor] Alex in Wonderland. She's quite the bombshell."



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**Dannie Diesel:** Colby-Cushman herself says, "I tend to stay very close to classic burlesque - that's just what resonates with me - but I tend to be a little more daring in what I do, to be a little shocking without being completely in-your-face about it. Which can get me in trouble sometimes. My [ *Cabaret Le Freak*] routine is I'm a devil woman. It's so long and involved that I really should have simplified it a lot more. But now I'm in love with it, so I'm not changing it."