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Rick Coates

Mike Curths of the InsideOut Gallery likes to celebrate Valentine's Day by paying homage to the erotic side of the holiday. Last year he held an Erotic Art show by hosting dozens of the best erotica artists in the country. The event was such a success that he has decided to expand things this year.

"In addition to all the great art, we now have the capability of showing films, so we will have some eros films and a performance by Warp 51, this sextotic/sci-fi band," said Curths. "What I am really excited about is that we have arranged for the Super Happy Funtime Burlesque troupe to come to Northern Michigan to perform. So this is definitely going to be a day like none other seen in Northern Michigan."

Super Happy Funtime Burlesque originated in Grand Rapids in 2004 and has taken their community by storm. While his friends were soaking up the offerings of current pop culture, Super Happy co-founder Corey Ruffin was busy with his father's record collection that consisted of 10,000 recordings from the burlesque and vaudeville era.

"I immersed myself in it all. I was drawn into it and I did a lot of research," said Ruffin. "As a starving artist in this at times culturally-deprived Midwest, I found myself among other starving artists in Grand Rapids. We have poets, pantomimes, musicians and others whose independent acts were having a tough time finding a place to perform. So I knew that I couldn't put a pantomime in my band, so the discussion started on how we all could perform together by doing our own thing."

SMALL START

Instead, Ruffin created Super Happy Funtime Burlesque and the troupe started out small, performing just a few times before he met up with the show's current producer, Rich Haralson.

"Rich wanted a variety show for a party at his home," said Ruffin. "He owned the vacant lots next to his house and put up a walled fence, and it created the perfect environment for this short attention-span show that we had created. He saw the potential of this that night and started thinking that this could be done on a commercial level. Rich saw that this was very professional and that what we needed was a marketer, and he has been with us since." Ruffin, who is the bandleader and show's host (his stage name is Mr. Happy Pants), has watched Super Happy Funtime Burlesque grow from its humble beginnings at the 160-seat Sazarec Lounge, to now enjoying sell-out shows monthly at the 400-seat Wealthy Theater.

"Our first show drew 80 people and by the next show, we were sold out. And when we heard that a lot of people were coming and being turned away, we knew we needed to look for a larger space," said Ruffin. "We have a loyal following in Grand Rapids and now are at the 400-seat Wealthy Theater, and sell that out. But the bottom line is they are not going to come out and see us every weekend, so we are trying to take the show on the road. Traverse City will be our first out-of-town gig."

Because the troupe now has 30 members that include performers, musicians and tech staff, they can't afford to travel too far from Grand Rapids.

"We can't afford to spend the night, so we are looking for shows within a couple of hundred miles so we can drive back the same night," said Ruffin. "In order to keep ticket prices reasonable, and the fact that we spend our money on costumes and props, we just can't afford hotel rooms for 30 people."

BEGINNINGS

Burlesque started in the early 1800s as a result of tensions between the upper and lower classes. The clashes were a result of social rules established by the ruling elite and held over the working-class society, resulting in "burlesque" theatrical entertainment, which consisted of comic skits -- often stripteases that offered a parodic look at current societal issues.

Burlesque shows enjoyed success in Europe and America from the 1870s through the Great Depression era. Shows were described as risqué, bawdy and raucous.

Famous performers from the burlesque era included Abbot & Costello, Red Skelton, Mae West and W.C. Fields. Born out of burlesque was vaudeville. Some historians cite the art of vaudeville beginning in New Orleans with the medicine shows that traveled from town to town. From the 1880s through the 1930s vaudeville was the most popular form of entertainment in North America. Essentially, vaudeville was made up of a series of unrelated short acts that ranged from musicians to comedians to magicians to animal trainers and just about every other form of entertainment from that era.

UPDATED MATERIAL

"One thing I want to emphasize is that we are not some sort of burlesque or vaudeville revival show. We are not doing historical sketches from that period. Certainly we are in the 'spirit' of those art forms but with a modern perspective," said Ruffin. "Basically, we are a variety show with each act having about five minutes to do their thing. Essentially, 'American Idol,' late night talk shows and 'Saturday Night Live' are all burlesque and vaudeville in

