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Tease with everything in Shanghai

No titillation, politics or religion but Josephine McDermott finds a couple reviving burlesque in "China's Paris"

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Norman Gosney and partner Amelia Kallman run Chinatown, a burlesque club based in a former Buddhist temple.

"More feathers, more feathers!" was the plea when the burlesque troupe of British impresario, Norman Gosney, was invited to perform in Borneo. At the opening of a hotel in the Muslim, Malaysian state of Sarawak, the rules from the cultural department were, "No skin, legs, thighs, midribs, breasts, shoulders or bottoms, no body contours, and no implied stripping or nudity". Gosney's wife and business partner, Amelia Kallman, said: "Although we graciously accepted the invitation, there were several points when we looked at each other wide-eyed wondering if there had been a mix-up, as we specialise in cabaret, vaudeville and burlesque entertainment." The showgirls, covered up with stockings, shoulder pieces, sparkling tube tops and "tons and tons of feathers", were eventually deemed appropriate enough to perform, under the auspices of the chief minister of Sarawak.

It is all in a day's work for the couple who moved to Shanghai in 2007 and run Chinatown – a club housed in a former Japanese Buddhist temple built in 1931. It combines burlesque, Moulin Rouge and classic Vegas-style performances in a plush setting that harks back to the city's 1920s heyday. But there's been nothing like it since the dance halls and cabaret venues of that era were closed when the Communists came to power in 1949.

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Today, Shanghai's Cultural Bureau requires video recordings of Chinatown rehearsals, with Chinese translations of Broadway numbers and variety skits, to check the club is complying with the rules.

Gosney summarises the rules: "No t--- and a---, and we have to be careful around titillation." "We don't touch anything political," he adds. "I've had to cut back on some of my sexier acts but it forces us to be cleverer," says 26-year-old Kallman, from Virginia. The club, like all entertainment venues in the city, has attracted extra attention from the authorities now Shanghai is hosting the World Expo, the world fair that dates back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London.

"Frank Sinatra's now been approved," says Kallman. Each lyric of every Frank Sinatra number they perform recently had to be written out and translated into Chinese for official approval. But the jury is still out on a sketch where Kallman dresses as a nun. It's the religious garb that bothers the cultural bureau. In the guidelines you are not

allowed to ridicule religion. "It's a 15 to 20 year-old culture here. It's paranoid and insecure and it makes up for it with bluster," says Gosney. The couple assiduously jumps through the bureaucratic hoops and in the four months the club has been open it has received the blessing of the authorities and had rave reviews. Before it opened, tacky, PVC-wearing pole dancers generally hijacked the term burlesque. "Originally burlesque was comprised of a physical act, a singer and a burlesquer. You have to have stories. Girls just taking their clothes off doesn't cut it," says Gosney.

The couple met in New York in 2004, "on Norman's roof", the penthouse of the Chelsea Hotel. He says he started talking about moving to China as early as 2005. He could sense an economic crash was imminent and didn't want to be among the Americans when they "lost their toys".

"Shanghai has a reputation as the Paris of the Orient and we thought it would make a great backdrop," says Kallman, who performs as showgirl Miss Amelia and boasts the world's largest collection of nipple tassels or "pasties", displayed on the first floor of the club. "We specialise in escapism. When you walk in to Chinatown, you walk into a movie," she says. People are often surprised to learn the couple did not visit for a recce before packing up their bowler hats, suspender belts and corsets and moving to Shanghai. "We just knew," says Gosney. But it took a while to find Chinatown's three-floor venue. "I cycled around for three months and had a list of about 50 or 60 venues. As soon as I found it, I struck everything else off the list. I hadn't been as excited about a venue since Limelight," says Gosney, referring to the club in a former Episcopal church in New York which he designed. It opened in 1983.

Speaking to the 62-year-old nightclub veteran it seems as if he's been at the beginning of every pop culture epoch since the 1960s. From living in a commune in Somerset in the 1960s and hanging out with David Bowie at the second Glastonbury in 1971, to raging against the establishment with Malcolm McLaren 10 years before anyone knew what punk was, and posturing with Warhol at the Chelsea Hotel in New York in the early 1980s; he was there. So his decision to move to Shanghai, is an endorsement of the city more than 5,000 British expats have made their home.

Gosney grew up in Redland, Bristol, where his parents ran a pub. His uncle ran a working men's club in Sheffield. He credits working men's clubs as the origins of variety and vaudeville where the likes of Morecambe and Wise began. He says: "The things I saw at the club had a great influence on me."

He learnt his early craft with the Crystal Theatre in Bristol alongside Keith and Kevin Allen, the cast of *The Young Ones* and 20th Century Coyote. He also trained at the summer schools of Bristol Old Vic Theatre whose acting graduates include Peter O'Toole. But he says he hates the "churchiness" of British theatre and is more comfortable in a club where he's fighting to be heard over booze being thrown.

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He spent much of the late 1960s and 1970s travelling the world; always returning to the UK. On stopovers, he was involved in his first club, the UFO, whose house band was Pink Floyd, and also producing the layouts of album covers for Led Zeppelin's first six releases.

In 1979, before China pursued its "opening up" policy, he was one of few foreigners to visit Guangzhou in South China, formerly Canton. But he finally stopped returning to the UK in 1979. He arrived back from travels in Sri Lanka, to find the country beset with strikes, unemployment and inflation. It was, he says, "terrible". He went straight to the US and was heading for California when he met a friend in New York who said he was looking for an art director. Within two years, their names were behind some of New York's biggest nightclubs including Palladium, Area, Limelight and Mars. "I was one of the people that ran The Cabaret at Danceteria which spawned Madonna, the Beastie Boys and Run DMC," he says. "In the mid-80s I scored the penthouse in the Chelsea Hotel. It was an amazing gathering place for 20 years, with the likes of Peter O'Toole, Blondie, Andy Warhol and William Burroughs." But despite his success, his interest in super-clubs eventually wore thin. "In the late 1980s and early 90s I designed a lot of clubs – Gold in Tokyo, P1 in Munich and Hell in South Beach – all \$10 million clubs. My [then] wife and I bought an island off Belize. A hurricane and a marriage later, it was 1996 and I was over building big discos."

In the intervening years before moving to Shanghai, Gosney opened the first modern burlesque club in New York, a speakeasy on 23rd Street called Dutch Weisman's. "It was completely illegal. It was the first rebirth of burlesque and vaudeville. We did full glamour, not the seedy stuff. We were an amazing underground success. But then the press wrote about us, giving clues about where we were and we got busted."

In 2000, he opened The Slipper Room. "It's still very much ground zero for burlesque. There aren't many clubs in New York that have been open for 10 years." In 2002, he opened Show on 41st Street. A succession of burlesque venues across New York followed where he provided the entertainment.

And so now when the curtain goes up on their shows each week, instead of Manhattan film directors and burlesque aficionados, the audience is made up of Hong Kong accountants, Shanghai's nouveau riche and expats who thank their lucky stars that the pair rolled into town and filled an entertainment void. "We get rich, cosmopolitan Chinese who've been to America and Hong Kong Chinese taking the private booths and spending lots of money. On the ground floor we get office workers. We did a whole show for a group of accountants the other day and they loved it," says Gosney. And he says both the performers and the audience are learning to adapt. "We are learning how to deal with Chinese audiences. Fifty per cent that come in are a great audience. The other half isn't. Most under 35s have no manners and don't know how to behave," he says.

"We appeal to a younger generation who have a feeling they've missed out, but also an older generation who have a sensibility for it," says Kallman, stepping in deftly.



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