

# Mae Dix

## Strip-Tease Performer 1895-1958

On a particularly hot evening in 1917, Mae (sometimes spelled May) Dix promendaded before an enthusiastic, nearly all-male audience at the Minsky's National Winter Garden theatre. Dix was, recalls Morton Minsky in his tell-all memoir, *Minsky's Burlesque*, "a red haired beauty with a gorgeous figure and a great way of putting over a comedy song."

Amidst the revelery, Dix "accidentally" stripped off her show-girl's costume, a short black dress with detachable white collar and cuffs. "At the end of her song one hot summer night," Minsky adds, "she removed her collar as she walked offstage, trying to forestall the next laundry bill." Her "accident" changed commercial sexual entertainment.

The National Winter Garden theatre was located on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and Houston Street, an epicenter of Gotham's downtown entertainment scene. It was on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of a non-descript building accessed either by trudging up five long flights of stairs or taking the rickety freight elevator. And, in an era before air conditioning and no-smoking laws, the theatre was likely hot, smoky and sufficating with bodily aromas. Nevertheless, Dix's show was a hit.

Inspired by the loud applause and cat calls from the audience of mostly working-class, ethnic men, the starlet returned for an encore. Dix casually removed her costume's detachable wrist cuffs and, as Minsky recounts, "between the heat and the applause,

May lost her head, went back for a short chorus, and unbuttoned her bodice as she left the stage again." Her display broke a long-held legal and social convention that barred women from fully exposing themselves in entertainment venues while performing. Dix's performance announed a new aesthetic, the female nude as an erotic spectacle.



In its hey-day, burlesque was like no other popular form of commercial sexual entertainment. The first American performance of this new form of theatrical art occurred on the evening of September 28, 1868, when British star Lydia Thompson and her troupe, the British Blondes, took the stage of the George Wood's Museum Theatre, on Broadway and 31<sup>st</sup> Street. They performed the *Ixion*. The 800-seat house was sold out and the audience was delighted, according to a *New York Times* report, by a star "of the purest type, saucy, blue-eyed, golden-haired and of elegant figure." The performers wore provocative outfits, including flesh-colored tights and "skirts cut above the knee, their legs clad in pink tights." Most scandalous, they all dyed their hair blond. The production included the dancing of the cancan, only recently introduced in Paris, and "jigs, hornpipes, and parodies of minstrel show numbers." In no time, Thompson became a national sensation and, almost single-handedly, instituted a new, popular art form that competed with traditional legitimate theatre.

Dix's performance at Minsky's theatre introduced what became known as the striptease. However, as Rachel Shteir argues in her essential work, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, by the mid-'20s the strip-tease stage performance began to split into two alternative approaches to commercial sexual entertainment: the strip and the tease. The "strip" was quick, direct; the female performer took it all off so she could show her stuff. The "tease" was just that, a tease; the removal of each garment heightening erotic anticipation. Each approach had leading performers. Shteir claims that the first "stripper" was Anne Toebe (sometimes spelled Tobie) and the first "teaser" was Carrie Finnell. Over time, this difference would all but disappear as classic burlesque was superseded, modernized into the Las Vegas revue.

Dix was born Esther Mae Dix in Lake Ann, MI. Early in her career, she worked New York as a wardrobe mistress for the stage shows "Pajama Game" and "Fanny" and, in 1913, she acted in early movies with the Biograph Motion Picture Company. In '16 and '17, she performed as a soubrette in plays at the Union Square Theatre on Irving Place.

After her work with the Minskys, she was featured on the burlesque circuit - including Baltimore, Buffalo and other cities -- with Barney Gerard's "Follies of the Day." Rachel Shteir, writing in *Striptease*, describes Dix as having "red hair and hefty frame [that] appealed to audiences, as did her 'devilish, dynamic dancing.'"

In 1925, she performed a particularly proactive act, "Try to Get In," in which she appeared before a chorus line and stripped to only a banana between her legs which, suggestively, fell off as she existed the stage. Performing in Chicago at the State and Lake Theatre

in '26, she used a popular gimmick and pulled papier-mâché cherries from between her legs and threw them to a waiting mostly male audience. Dix encouraged men in the audience to help her with her strip, letting them rip off parts of a newspaper she was reading until there was little left to cover her.

She often appeared wearing a head-to-foot union suit adorned only with colorful handkerchief around her waist. She often impersonated the popular speakeasy hostess, Texas Guinan, who welcomed her guests with her famous tag line, "Hello, Sucker." Also in the '20s, she performed throughout the mid-west in her band, "Mae Dix and her Chicago Harmonaders."

In '32, she performed uptown in Harlem's New Gotham Theatre at 167 East 125<sup>th</sup> Street, offering a new show, "Let's Take a Trip," in which she stripped from fully clothed until only three parts of her body -- guess which? -- remained covered with signs reading "Stop," "Go" and "Detour." In the '50s, *Billboard* lists her (or someone with her name) as working in the theatrical costume business and as a wardrobe mistress for the road company of "Pajama Game."

In the years following Dix's performance, the striptease began to move in two directions. One involved how the female performer removed her costume; the strip or the tease. The other involved the venue -- and the paying customer -- where the performance took place, whether the downtown working class or the uptown sophisticate. The striptease's (male) appeal helped precipitate a major antivice campaign directed at repressing city nightlife from the late-20s until World War II. It culminated when Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia shut down all Big Apple's burlesque houses in 1942.

The poet Hart Crane once visited the National Winter Garden theatre, but it is not known whether he spied either Ms. Dix or Ms. Dawson do her striptease. Nevertheless, he did leave this memorable verse recollecting his visit:

Outspoken buttocks in pink beads  
Invite the necessary cloudy clinch  
Of bandy eyes. ... No extra mufflings here:  
The world's one flagrant, sweating cinch.

And while legs waken salads in the brain  
You pick your blonde out neatly through  
the smoke.  
Always you wait for someone else though,  
always—  
(Then rush the nearest exit through the  
smoke).<sup>1</sup>

When Dix performed her striptease in 1917, she pushed a half-century old theatrical aesthetic to its breaking point.

**For more information:**

Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

Morton Minsky, *Minsky's Burlesque: A Fast and Funny Look at America's Bawdiest Era* (Gettysburg, PA: Arbor House 1986).

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<sup>1</sup> Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, ed., Langdon Hammer (New York: Penguin, 2006.) The poem is taken from Crane's *The Bridge* (1930).