

COVER



vintage jazz soundtrack fills London's Palladium Theatre as a diverse, dressed-up audience – women with red lips and seamed stockings; same-sex couples in faux leather and frock coats – settles into their seats. The house lights dim. Velvet curtains part. Centre stage, under a single spotlight, is a glass box containing the lithe female figure the crowd has come to see: Dita Von Teese.

Then – shazam! – the box is empty. Von Teese has vanished into thin air.

It's a fittingly enchanting opening to *Nocturnelle*, a new full-length revue show – her fifth – inspired by the 19th-century golden age of grand stage illusion. Lavish and theatrical, the spectacle features an array of acts – pole-dancers, fan-dancers, a belly dancer and bubbly pin-up drag queen host BenDeLaCreme – performing alongside the high art “strip-scapes” Von Teese is known for.

There's confetti, sequins, rhinestones and ostrich feathers; aerial ballet and a carousel with bobbing pink ponies. There's the famed martini glass routine – a captivating display that many have imitated but none – not even Taylor Swift (with whom Von Teese collaborated on the *Bejeweled* video, splashing side-by-side in custom Swarovski corsets) – has mastered quite like Dita Von Teese.

“It's sophisticated striptease, plus a little trickery and a whole lot of glitz,” says the burlesque icon, 53, of *Nocturnelle*, which she's bringing to Australia in August, her first visit since her sold-out *Glamonatrix* tour in 2019.

“The crowds can get pretty rowdy. (Director) Tim Burton came a few times and said it's like a rock concert but in beautiful theatres, with people dressed in 1940s formal wear.”

Her smoky-eyed gaze is steady, her Midwestern twang soft. “Now Australian crowds get to see what we've been working on for a solid two years. I'm grateful we've sold out in some places and added new dates. This show is a big financial risk. I'm the producer. I don't have any sponsors. It's all my money.”

We're speaking weeks after that premiere, via Zoom: while I'm in London, Von Teese is in Prague's Forum Karlin theatre, fresh from the curtain call for *Nocturnelle* and sitting straight-backed in her dressing room. Even at lam her time, she's immaculate: ruby lips, raven hair and alabaster skin, complete with the beauty mark on her left cheek, tattooed at 18. She's wearing a fitted black sweater over a bullet bra and apologises for being underdressed, which, considering she spent the previous evening gliding around in outfits including a black antique gown by the fabled Art Deco designer Erte, paired with red-soled Louboutin heels and a dramatic diamond-studded headdress, seems understandable.

“I've always loved wearing make-up and interesting clothes,” she says. “I like the idea of glamour and what you can do with your exterior – how it changes the way we present ourselves in the world.”

She resists the idea she is playing a character. “I have never had an alter-ego,” says the woman born Heather Renee Sweet, the shy, blonde middle daughter of a machinist and a

manicurist from Rochester, a farming town in Michigan. “I'm who I always was.”

More than three decades after choosing Dita Von Teese as her stripper stage name – Dita first, a nod to silent film actress Dita Parlo, then plucking Von Teese (later misspelled as Von Teese) from the phonebook when she began posing for *Playboy* – what's remarkable isn't simply that she has endured. It is how meticulously she has engineered that longevity.

In a social media-fed world that prizes novelty, despises ageing and embraces extremes – from OnlyFans to Mormon wives – while discarding women with alarming speed, she has transformed herself from cult fetish model into a globally-recognised arbiter of glamour: equal parts performer, businesswoman and preservationist of a near-forgotten art form.

She has performed across the globe, in venues including the prestigious Folies Bergere in Paris and the Opera Garnier Monte Carlo, before Prince Albert II of Monaco. She has regular residencies in Las Vegas at the Venetian, a hotel on the Strip. Her stylistic va-va-voom has made her muse to some of fashion's greatest designers, including Jean-Paul Gaultier, Christian Louboutin and the late Vivienne Westwood, who designed the billowing violet taffeta wedding dress Von Teese wore when she married polarising gothic rocker Marilyn Manson in 2005; she filed for divorce the following year.

She is also a Hollywood fixture, appearing in music videos, television series and films. She lives in the Hollywood Hills with her longtime partner, set designer Adam Rajcevic, in a Tudor Revival house filled with artworks, Victorian-era taxidermy and collections of old books, vintage hats, powder puffs and one-of-a-kind memorabilia. Among her proudest acquisitions are a pair of stilettos once owned by Bettie Page, the 1950s pin-up who scandalised the era with her bondage photographs, and the corset that Natalie Wood wore while playing burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee in the 1962 film *Gypsy*.

“I saw *Gypsy* when I was a girl, watching old Hollywood movies on Sunday afternoons with my mother and sisters,” says Von Teese, who was a ballet-dancing 12-year-old when her family moved to Orange County, California, and 15 when she got a job in a local lingerie store, where the first packet of pantyhose she opened proved disappointingly plain, rolled inside a plastic egg.

“I wanted to be glamorous like Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth and Hedy Lamarr.” She became the store's lingerie buyer and began bringing in lacy fripperies of the sort she had seen in her father's *Playboy* magazines. She dyed her hair

Dita Von Teese on stage, below and opposite



black, dressed in charity-shop chic and got into rockabilly culture; she went swing dancing and began all-night partying with a crowd of friends – inclusive, intersectional and outrageous – who fed her creative urges. For a time, she studied costume design, and knows how to hand-stitch a rhinestone.

“The young Marilyn Monroe was a pretty girl in a sea of pretty girls. Then she had her hair bleached, put on fake eye-lashes, and became extraordinary,” writes Von Teese in her best-selling 2015 book *Your Beauty Mark: The Ultimate Guide to Eccentric Glamour*. She has launched her own lingerie line, signature perfumes and even a French gin. “It's the idea that what you're not born with, you create.”

Von Teese also helped reinvigorate an entire industry. When she began her progressive take on classic striptease – now known as neo-burlesque – in the early 1990s, burlesque was not the polished, Instagram-friendly form it is today. It was largely forgotten outside fetish circles and strip clubs like the ones in Orange County, where – struck by the other dancers' lack of imagination – she performed fan dances in the style of Depression-era vedette (burlesque star) Sally Rand, famed for playing peekaboo behind ostrich feathers to the strains of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*.

“I worked it out on my own,” she says. “I didn't feel like I had modern models of sensuality to relate to. There was no internet. I had a book with still photos of burlesque stars and went from there.”

Her difference – her self-fashioned femininity – became her calling card. Wearing corsets that tight-laced her waist down to a teeny 16.5 inches (42cm), she flew her freak flag at major fetish events such as Torture Garden in London and posed for a “return of the fetish” Christmas cover for *Playboy* in 2002. She appeared nude but for \$US5m (\$7m) of diamonds at a benefit auction for the New York Academy of Art in 2005.

As her profile grew, she resisted drawing a line between burlesque and stripping – a refusal to moralise that, paired with a fierce commitment to the craft, has allowed her to remain both insider and outsider, inheritor and innovator.

“I'm glad what I stand for is niche,” she says. “And I loved the backlash over the recent comment (by actor Timothee Chalamet) that no one cares about ballet and opera, because it reminded people there's more out there than what's on TV or Netflix or the music on the radio.”

Perhaps the most striking shift in Von Teese's career has been in who's watching. While subject to the heterosexual male gaze at the start of her career – she's spoken of the





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– Dita Von Teese on her new show

“weird silence” of a room full of men – her audience has shifted almost entirely to women and the LGBTQ community. A crowd drawn not just to the spectacle but to what it represents: a reframing of eroticism. A celebration of female agency, diversity and inclusion – Nocturnelle’s acts include Congolese Australian showgirl Zelia Rose and the plus-size, pastie-twirling Dirty Martini – and indeed, of ageing with confidence.

She rejects the idea that getting older is something to be feared. “We have it instilled in us that we’re meant to be afraid. It’s kind of crazy not to celebrate your beauty and sensuality at all phases of life.”

Von Teese has long surrounded herself with older women she admires. A great friend of hers just passed away, she tells me, aged 105. At home in Hollywood, her close female circle includes former Catwoman Julie Newmar (92), famed “blonde bombshell” Mamie Van Doren (95) and French American actress Leslie Caron (94). It’s tempting to imagine them reclining on the tasselled vintage patio furniture she has by her pool (as seen in a popular Architectural Digest profile), sipping gin slings, sharing stories and quips and watching the hummingbirds fighting over the feeder.

“It’s important to be around people of various ages, and these women are iconic sex symbols. I love talking to them about their lives. I want to hear what they have to say.”

Part of the appeal, perhaps, is aesthetic consistency: Von Doren is still as (bottle) blonde as she always was. While others reinvent to stay current, Von Teese has kept the look she created years ago, finding power and reassurance in con-

tinuity. Not for her the radical style overhauls of, say, the makeup-free Pamela Anderson, another Playboy cover girl, whom she coached and lent pieces from her wardrobe for her role in 2024’s *The Last Showgirl*. Von Teese knows what works for her, and leans into it.

She’s never had a stylist except once, briefly, who she sacked for trying to put her in jeans. In early photo shoots she had to fend off requests to straighten her hair, change her lip colour and wear ballet flats. “It made me feel really vulnerable, and I don’t like that,” she says, wavering just a little. She had stipulated that our late-night Zoom would be the only opportunity to see her; a daytime interview was possible, but only with the camera switched off. If Heather Sweet was – is? – super-shy, as Von Teese has often said, she nevertheless has the sort of steely determination and punky DIY spirit that

comes with making her own way from her mid-teens, without showbiz connections or wealthy parents. Sure, she’s been challenged: “I’ve certainly been offered an ‘easy life’ by men” – she does quotation marks with her red talons – “but my response was ‘Yeah, that’s not happening, I’ll take the hard way’. I’ve always been a very independent person.”

Von Teese has built her world largely by herself, learning from old films and vintage photographs and constantly refining her act (“I thought, maybe, that this is my last international tour,” she says. “But then I thought, wait a minute – I have another show idea”).

Her precision is part of the magic. While creating *Nocturnelle*, she spent time learning classic illusions from magicians in Las Vegas and at Hollywood’s Magic Castle, the exclusive private clubhouse for magicians – she charmed her way inside – not far from her home.

Then she flipped the script. In traditional stage magic, it’s often women who are hidden in boxes or sawed in half by a charismatic showman. In *Nocturnelle*, it is Von Teese who controls the illusion. She is not the assistant but the architect of the fantasy itself.

“I’ve had a crazy life, and a life I never could have dreamed up for myself,” says Von Teese – who, after three decades spent redefining burlesque, understands that real staying power lies not in disappearing, but in knowing exactly how to keep people mesmerised. ♣

Teese’s Nocturnelle Australian tour starts in Adelaide on August 5 and ends in Brisbane on August 19.