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## After-dark inquiry: Nasty Canasta

Check out one of neoburlesque's best artists. *Interviewed by Bruce Tantum*



**Nasty Canasta**

Photograph: Malgorzata Saniewska

Nasty Canasta is one busy neoburlesque performer—she's taking the stage at [Wasablanca](#) on Friday, August 5, [Gotham Burlesque](#) on Saturday 6 and [Naked Girls Reading](#) on Tuesday 9. But she still had time to speak with *TONY* about brains, cheese and more.

**You're quite the active performer this week. Are you always so industrious?**

Yeah, it's looking like a busy but great extended weekend. All sorts of stuff, all at once—it's all or nothing, isn't it?

**How do you keep all your performances straight?**

It does get a little confusing, honestly. But what I do is make little lists. I have a giant wall calendar, where I write things in dry-erase in lots of different colors. Performing and producing is pretty much my full-time job, so at least I'm not having to do it after business hours or anything like that. I don't know how those people do it!

**You're billed as "the Girl with the 44DD Brain"—can't you just keep it all in your head?**

You'd think! But no way.

**How did you come up with that moniker?**

I think that was the third or fourth tag line I came up with; I can't even remember what the other ones were, unfortunately. All the classic performers would have these really incredible tag lines, like "the Dreamgirl" or whatever. That kind of thing just isn't me—I'm a little bit of a wiseass. But I love this one. I really like it when the audience perks up when they hear the host say "44 double d"—and then they hear "brain" and go, "oh...." It kind of encompasses everything I do. There's the tease and nudity aspect to it, and like I said, I'm a little too smart for my own good.

**I would imagine that a touch of wiseassery would serve you well in your line of work.**

It does. You need to have a bit of a sense of humor about things, or else you'll kind of go crazy.

**Besides being the brain lady, you've also been crowned Cheese Queen of Coney Island, right?**

Which is also another bit of wiseassery, to tell you the truth. That was a while ago, and there have been a few Follies Fromage since then, but there have been no new cheese queens. So I still have the crown, I guess.

**How did you get into this business?**

I've been performing for about seven and a half years, and full time for probably the past six. My story isn't so unusual, I don't think. I started out in theater—I went to school for theater,

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then came to New York for theater—but not being a singer or a dancer, I wasn't terribly successful. After more years than I care to remember, I started getting fed up with the whole downtown-theater thing anyway, and it happened that a friend of mine took me to a show. He had been doing some circus stuff, and said, "This buddy of mine who I took a circus class with is doing some weird thing at the Slipper Room. Wanna check it out?" I watched the show with my jaw open. A few months after that, Galapagos was looking for performers for their vaudeville night, and I was like, You know what? I want to try this. And it all began there.

#### **You're known as a neoburlesque artist, but were you ever doing classic burlesque?**

No, but I think my stuff actually has gotten more classic the longer I do this. When I started, for instance, I was really determined to use contemporary music—my first number was to a Nirvana song. I wanted to be real performance art—y and cutting edge, and I still gravitate towards that, but I enjoy doing the classic stuff as well. I've found an appreciation for it. When it's done well, it's as wonderful as anything else. It's an honest kind of performance. I've always been kind of timid about that. I have more confidence in my comedy and my ideas than the kind of theatricality you need for a straight strip. It took me a long time to get used to that. But there's a joy to it that's wonderful.

#### **How do you come up with ideas? It must be hard to think of new twists that haven't already been done.**

Yeah, with so many people doing it—not just in New York, but all over the world—it is a bit difficult. You have a responsibility to make sure nobody has done whatever you think up. There are times when you come up with what seems like a totally original idea, and then you get on the Internet and realize somebody else had that idea first. The ideas themselves come from every direction. Sometimes it's just like, Oh God, that song is brilliant. What can I do with that? Or it's looking at some classic burlesque thing and wondering what I could do with it. Like the girl-in-the-martini-glass thing—my version of that is a giant coffee cup. I love *Blade Runner*, so I do some sci-fi—referencing stuff.

#### **True to your theatrical background, you wrote a burlesque-style radio-murder-mystery play, *The Case of the Falling Starlet*, which was performed late last year. Do you have plans to do more of that in the future?**

I actually wrote the script for the Wasablanca show, so the answer would be yes! And I'd like to do something more with the naked-detective character from *The Case of the Falling Starlet*. I love the whole idea of radio plays, and I would love to have the character sort of travel through time and do a psychedelic '60s version or a Sherlock Holmes version.

#### **Would you consider burlesque itself to be a form of theater?**

It's a little different, really, even though a lot of burlesque performers come from theater. Of course, they come from a lot of other backgrounds as well. Many of them are like, "Yeah, I have no problem being naked—but God, don't make me talk onstage!" And I can totally get that.

#### **Speaking of talking onstage, you're involved in the Naked Girls Reading series. Who came up with that idea? It's simple yet brilliant.**

Yeah, it is. Naked Girls Reading was founded in Chicago by Michelle L'amour and her partner Franky Vivid. It really took off there, so they brought it to New York, and now it's all over the world. It's exactly what it sounds like—naked girls, reading. It's a literary salon with themed readings, and most of our readers are from the burlesque world. We do them at Madame X, which is a very plush, boudoiry place. People seem to like it—it's like, "Hey, they're naked—and it's a really interesting story!" It's kind of my favorite thing right now. It's kind of Victorian, right?

#### **Yes, and burlesque itself seems vaguely Victorian too.**

You could fight forever about when and how it actually started, but most accounts do kind of point towards it starting around the late 1800s. And people still seem to love it.

#### **What do you have planned for Gotham Burlesque?**

I'm definitely doing my electric-fan dance; that one is perfect for the summer, to be honest. I use a big box fan, which is great because we can also use it in the dressing room. I actually have a few fan dances, which are burlesque standards, but I kind of twist them a little bit. Like I have an ostrich-feather dance, which is pretty traditional—but I perform it to a loop of car alarms.

August 2, 2011

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