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Gilded Lili: Lili St. Cyr and the Striptease Mystique

By Kelly Dinardo



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Burlesque. A uniquely American form of entertainment...and one of the most celebrated forms in burlesque was that of the inimitable Lili St. Cyr. Her body of work as a striptease artist—featuring her innovative on-stage bubble baths and reverse stripteases—was on a level with such dazzling performers as Gypsy Rose Lee, Blaze Starr, Tempest Storm, and Ann Corio. And wherever the glamorous Queen of Burlesque appeared, controversy followed. *Gilded Lili* is the first biography of this pioneering artist, sure to be a smash as burlesque enjoys its own resurgence. Her tempestuous love affairs and troubled life make Lili St. Cyr's story a microcosm of American sexuality in the twentieth century, mirroring social changes in sexual politics and the commercialization of sexuality. A compelling biography and an intriguing take on feminist history, *Gilded Lili* is golden indeed.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Contemporary "stripper chic" and the "neo-burlesque movement" have spurred new interest in Lili St. Cyr, one of America's best-known postwar striptease artists, and this swift, engaging biography from freelance writer DiNardo is sure to satisfy, offering not only a portrait of the pioneering sex symbol but also a carefully researched history of the burlesque industry from the mid-1800s to its 20th century heyday. Most enthralling, however, is the delicious dossier of St. Cyr's lovers; although her official husband-count is six, her love affairs--with both men and women--may number into the hundreds. Ironically, she battled loneliness all her days, sinking into despair and heroin addiction toward the end of her life. The story of the burlesque queen with the physique of a goddess makes for great reading, and gossip hounds will delight in rumors that "Gilded Lili" taught Marilyn Monroe many of her best-known sexpot affectations. (Even more intriguing, sources claim that St. Cyr had a clandestine love affair with the blonde bombshell.) DiNardo shows admirable skepticism while reporting the salacious morsels long associated with St. Cyr, sorting the stage siren's real life from the legend that grew around her. Despite the rigors of fame, Lili proves strikingly self-aware--"Years of adulation...spoiled me," she admitted--making her as tragic and sympathetic a figure as any of the famously troubled stars who followed.

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Review

Contemporary "stripper chic" and the "neo-burlesque movement" have spurred new interest in Lili St. Cyr, one of America's best-known postwar striptease artists, and this swift, engaging biography from freelance writer DiNardo is sure to satisfy, offering not only a portrait of the pioneering sex symbol but also a carefully researched history of the burlesque industry from the mid-1800s to its 20th century heyday. Most enthralling, however, is the delicious dossier of St. Cyr's lovers; although her official husband-count is six, her love affairs--with both men and women--may number into the hundreds. Ironically, she battled loneliness all her days, sinking into despair and heroin addiction toward the end of her life. The story of the burlesque queen with the physique of a goddess makes for great reading, and gossip hounds will delight in rumors that "Gilded Lili" taught Marilyn Monroe many of her best-known sexpot affectations. (Even more intriguing, sources claim that St. Cyr had a clandestine love affair with the blonde bombshell.) DiNardo shows admirable skepticism while reporting the salacious morsels long associated with St. Cyr, sorting the stage siren's real life from the legend that grew around her. Despite the rigors of fame, Lili proves strikingly self-aware--"Years of adulation...spoiled me," she admitted--making her as tragic and sympathetic a figure as any of the famously troubled stars who followed. (Oct.) -- *Publishers Weekly*, November 19, 2007

Recent women's-studies interest in striptease has resuscitated the stars of the form during its mid-twentieth-century heyday, from Bettie Page to Gypsy Rose Lee. One of the biggest star strippers, tall, thin Lili St. Cyr, didn't just dance out of her clothing. She created imaginative variations (e.g., the reverse strip) and settings (bubble baths, Cleopatra and Salome portrayals, etc.) and spiced them with elements of ballet. She realized early that the greatest differences between headliners and chorus dancers were salary and the fact that the stars were usually naked, the chorines usually not. After that, her career path was clear. Although she performed nude for at least part of most appearances, much of her act seems tame today. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, her routines were sufficiently risqué to cause legal trouble, and an audience member once sued her for lewdness (one wonders what he thought he was buying a ticket to see). Apparently the first book about St. Cyr since her autobiography, *Ma Vie De Stripteaseuse* (1982), this is an excellent show-biz study.--Mike Tribby -- *Booklist*, October 15, 2007

The most popular burlesque star throughout the Forties and Fifties, Lili St. Cyr influenced Marilyn Monroe, performed with Dean Martin, and danced well into her 50s. Author Kelly DiNardo recounts the fascinating life of "the queen of striptease" in the well-researched and superbly written *Gilded Lili: Lili St. Cyr and the Striptease Mystique*. -- *Austin Chronicle*, November 15, 20007

About the Author

Kelly DiNardo has written for the *Washington Post*, *Glamour*, *YM*, *TV Guide*, *USA Today*, and many other publications. She lives in Washington, D.C.

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