

All tease, no sleaze

Marianka Swain was charmed by *An Evening of Burlesque* at London's Indigo₂ on October 26

Anyone who wandered into the venue expecting a scantily clad Dita Von Teese lookalike writhing and moaning in a martini glass would have been somewhat baffled by *An Evening of Burlesque*. The show seeks to subvert expectations of burlesque as either arty, supposedly highbrow but essentially titillating striptease or, according to Christina Aguilera's amiably trashy film, the stage version of an earnestly provocative MTV video.

Instead, keeping cheap thrills to a minimum, *An Evening of Burlesque* goes back to the roots of this decidedly quirky form of entertainment. The term "burlesque" derives from the Italian word "burlesco", meaning a joke or mockery, and the show embodies that gently parodic ethos with a programme of rip-roaring variety: tongue-in-cheek songs, dances, magic tricks, hula-hooping and even comedic knife-throwing, with some audience-baiting thrown in for good measure.

"It's the perfect feel-good show for this moment in time," explains producer Michael Taylor. "Just as the Olympics did a great job of taking everyone's mind off their money worries, this lets you forget your troubles for two-and-a-half hours. It's all tease, no sleaze!"

Indeed, the tone of show is somewhere between Cirque du Soleil and *Cabaret* – equal parts impressive talent and sly sauciness. Powerhouse diva Amber Topaz defied her diminutive stature to dominate proceedings as she switched effortlessly from intimate bluesy crooning to show-stopping belters, channelling both Jessica Rabbit and Liza Minnelli and throwing in some ingenious prop work, while convincingly tipsy Kalki Hula Girl blended physical comedy and astonishing skill during her hoop display.

Bettsie Bon Bon (pictured right) gave us a modern twist on the classic MGM starlet and the *Evening of Burlesque Babes* performed some witty numbers packed with purrs and shimmies, while acrobatic A J James threatened to steal the show with his cheeky-chappy irreverence and edge-of-your-seat balancing act.

Neither dancing nor singing were necessarily West End standard, nor was the production free from the occasional glitch,

but everything was delivered with engaging panache and there were some genuinely delightful surprises in a packed evening, ranging from eccentric gags to a particularly ingenious use of audience participation. As much as we can appreciate shows that stun us, move us, challenge us or totally seduce us, there's something to be said for one that offers such a pleasingly witty blend of teases, twists and – perhaps most important in these gloomy, straitened times – laughs. ●

