

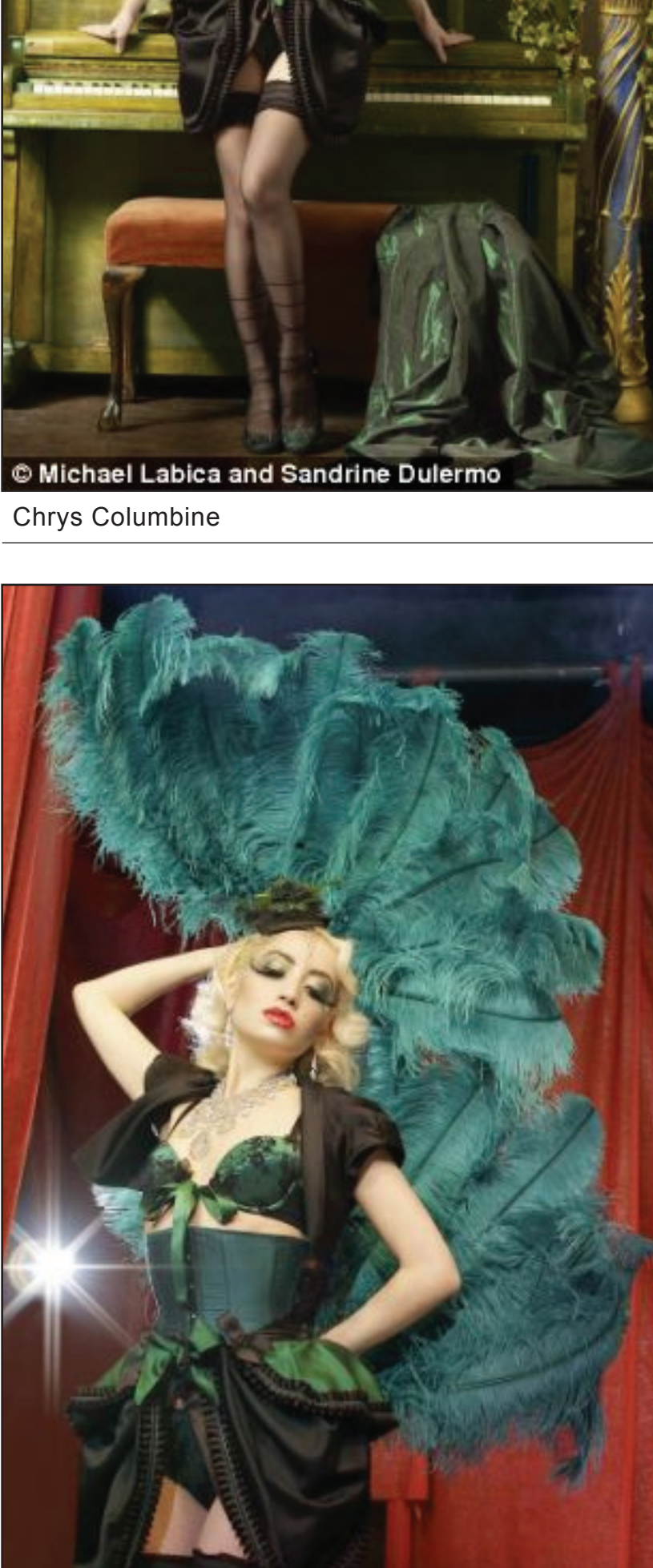
Get ready for high tease with the new queens of burlesque

A new generation of glamorous burlesque artistes is packing out theatres with an uplifting – and sometimes shocking – mix of circus, striptease, song and sparkle. YOU twirls some tassels with the showgirls

By JO UPCRAFT



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
Camille O'Sullivan



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Chrys Columbine

Chrys Columbine

Chrys, 27, from Camden, North London, performs her sultry combination of burlesque and classical piano on a regular basis in London and has travelled with shows to Paris, Portugal and Germany.

I've always been a show-off. I grew up doing ballet and modelling, and had a few small parts in television and theatre productions. My father is a classical guitarist and I started taking piano lessons at the age of 11.

After I graduated from university with a music degree, my joint passion for acting and playing the piano took me into the world of burlesque; I became friends with some girls who performed in London clubs and quickly became hooked.

I use my talent for the piano to turn my shows into a unique spin on a burlesque performance. My signature routine is called 'The Birth of Venus' and was inspired by Botticelli's painting.

I rise out of two giant satin clam shells the size of a children's paddling pool, holding two huge clam-shell fans. I then do a delicate fan dance followed by a striptease – it's all very tasteful, gentle and elegant and I never go completely naked. I complete the routine by playing my own classical version of a Leonard Cohen song on a grand piano.

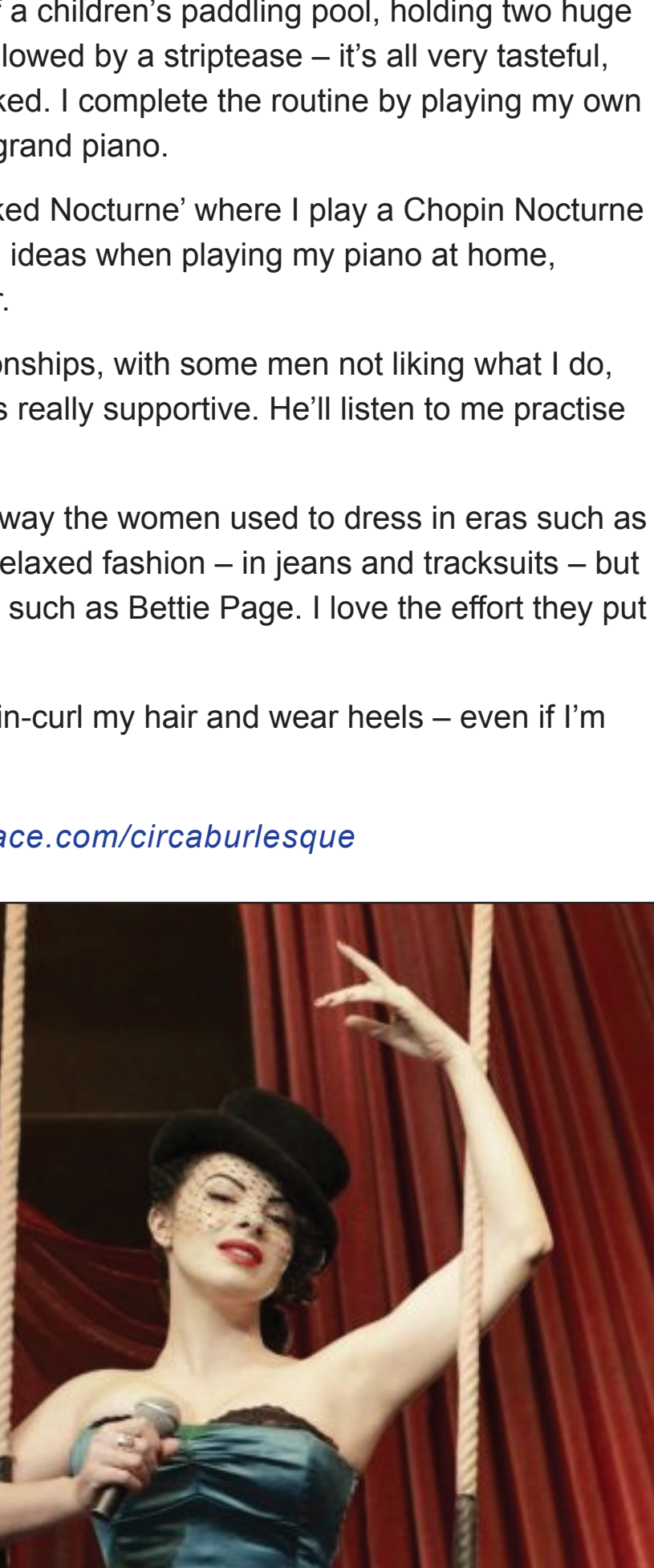
I'm currently working on a new act titled 'The Naked Nocturne' where I play a Chopin Nocturne and strip at the same time. I'll often come up with ideas when playing my piano at home, dressed in stockings, a pencil skirt and fascinator.

In the past my job has caused problems in relationships, with some men not liking what I do, but thankfully my current boyfriend loves it, and is really supportive. He'll listen to me practise and give his opinion.

Much of the appeal of the burlesque world is the way the women used to dress in eras such as the 1950s. Women today dress in a much more relaxed fashion – in jeans and tracksuits – but I've always been drawn to older, glamorous stars such as Bettie Page. I love the effort they put into looking good.

Just as they used to, I'll draw on my eyebrows, pin-curl my hair and wear heels – even if I'm just popping to the shops.

[Visit myspace.com/chryscolumbine](#), or [myspace.com/circaburlesque](#)



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo



Camille O'Sullivan

Singer Camille, 34, grew up in Dublin with an Irish father and French mother. She has been performing around the world in her shows 'La Fille Du Cirque' and 'Dark Angel' since 2004. When not on the road she lives in Dublin.

In 2000 I was working as an architect when a car accident left me with a broken pelvis, hip and hand. It made me question where I was going with my life.

I already sang occasionally in small bars in Dublin, and dreamed of making a full-time career of it. The crash made me think, 'Yes, you are scared but you only have one life. Go for it.'

My shows are an emotional roller coaster. I take songs from the likes of Jacques Brel, Nick Cave and David Bowie and adapt them into my own English and French versions.

Seeing me perform is a very intense experience – the songs evoke all the emotions from euphoria to despair. I often feel sorry for the audience because I put them through so much, so I'll go and climb over them to make them laugh and make sure they're OK.

My first year was hard – no one understood why I didn't sing happy, uplifting Doris Day songs. Britain and Ireland have only recently started to enjoy this type of 1920s German and French traditional cabaret. I think we were scared of what it was about, but now we're more open.

My show is also about style. My mother is French and growing up I was in awe of her glamour – I remember an old Edwardian dress she used to wear, and a Christian Dior mini. I enjoy the idea of expressing your personality through a look and embracing your femininity on stage.

I start a show looking sophisticated in a 1930s dress and pill-box hat but, by the end, I look like I've been dropped off the back of a bus. I purposely make myself look ugly, pulling down my hair, smearing my face with make-up; it's interesting how you can do that but still look sexual.

For the past four years I have toured with the Famous Spiegeltent – a 1920s travelling theatre tent – and I've performed with it in New York, Sydney, London and Edinburgh.

My life is nomadic and I love it, but you get lonely because you're never in one place long enough to form friendships. I joke that I have a man in every port, which I do, but sadly they're all in my band.

[For further information, visit camilleosullivan.com](#)



Roxy Velvet

Roxy, 28, from Hackney, East London, has been performing her trapeze act in a giant birdcage for two years. She has her own monthly show 'Love on the Rox' at Volupté in East London. Her performances have also taken her to Milan, Rome and Norway.

After seven years at Cheltenham Ladies' College I was expected to go to Oxford to read geography. But I had other plans.

A degree in fine art and years of drama lessons led me towards performing.

I blend many styles together: 1920s French and American burlesque and 40s German carnival mixed with traditional circus.

The 'China Girl' routine provide me with ideas. My 'China Girl' routine – a striptease on points – was inspired by a little porcelain cat in my bedroom.

I also take a lot of ideas from old-fashioned films and base my stage persona on Marilyn Monroe.

I make my own costumes. For a Japanese-themed show I made a kimono and sewed hundreds of fabric butterflies on to it, which took a month.

I'm most famous for my birdcage, which is a freestanding aerial rig, ten feet high by eight feet wide, with a hoop inside for my trapeze work. I perform many shows in it, including 'The Magic Birdcage' in which I do acrobatics and end up in a 30s-style feathered boudie outfit, and 'Snow Queen', in which I swing and strip until I finish hanging upside down.

There have been no major accidents and heights don't scare me. Perhaps they should, as my father died in a hang-gliding accident when I was 15, but instead I think I get my love of high altitudes and no-fear attitude from him.

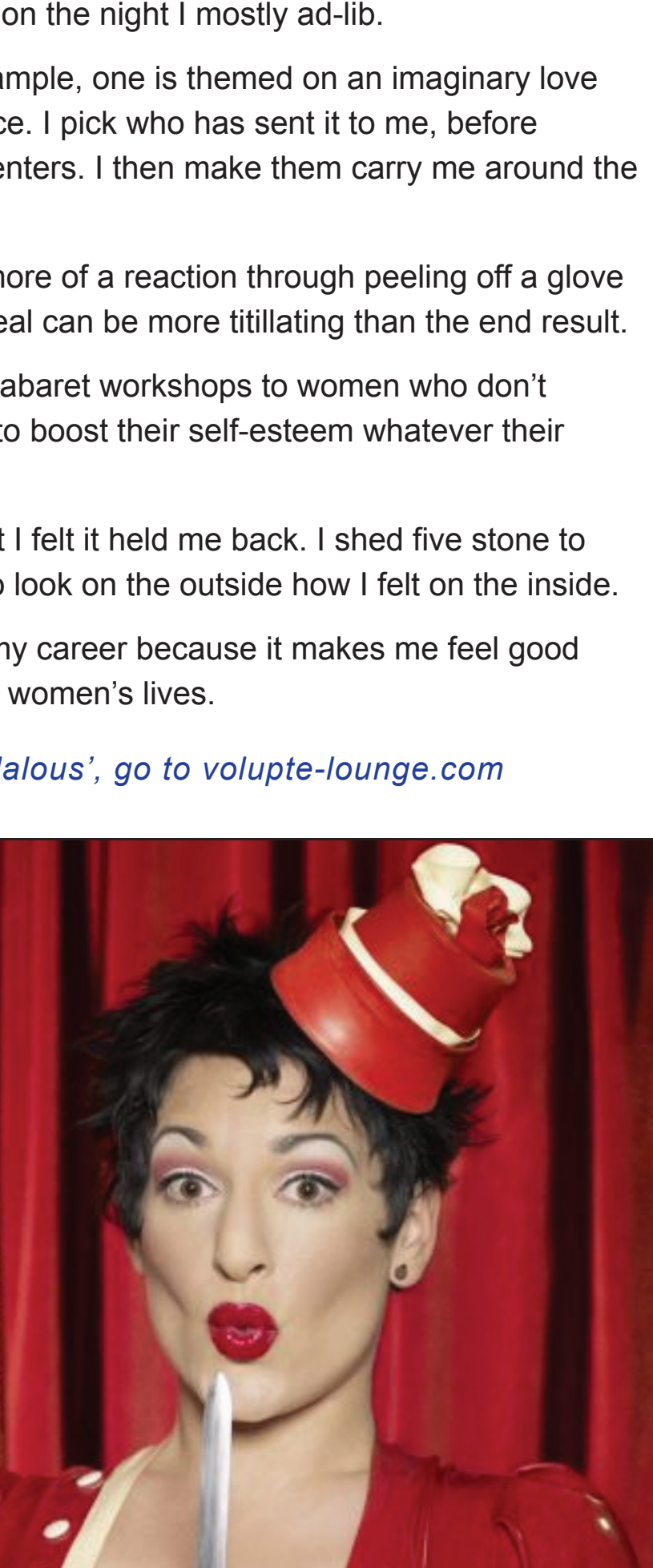
I studied the trapeze at Circus Space in full London and train every other day at the Hangar in East London – a warehouse north of circus equipment. I have fabulous arm muscles!

I perform my own show night monthly as well as other acts five times a week at clubs in London. I also do corporate events and celebrity parties: I did comedian Al Murray's birthday and also starred in the video for the Hoosiers single 'Cops and Robbers'.

There is nothing I'd rather do, except be a weather girl.

A weather girl on a trapeze perhaps...

[For further information, roxyvelvet.com](#)



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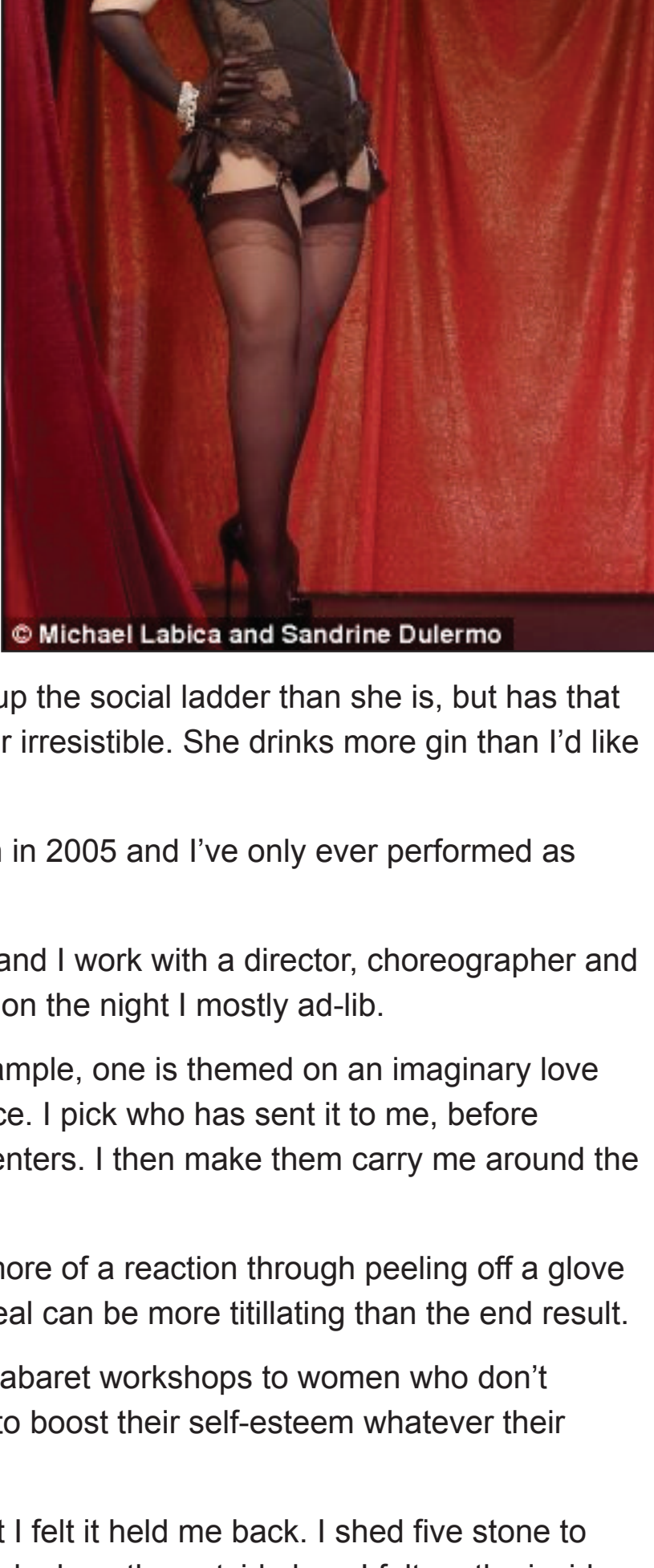
Ivy Paige

Lucinda Ryan, 28, from Kent, has been performing her song, stand-up and striptease act as Ivy Paige for three years. Her club night 'Scandalous', takes place once a month in London at Volupté in the City. She regularly performs around the country and in Europe.

I created the character of Ivy Paige three years ago. I didn't want her to be a sultry 1920s showgirl because that has already been done, so I opted for making her someone from the 1800s. Think Nancy from *Oliver!*

I've always been drawn to that era: the opulence and the way that the women looked beautiful but had an air of mystery.

Also, I look great in a corset: I have ten of them that are made to measure by lingerie specialist La Magia and cost around £500 each.



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo

Ivy is funny and lovable; she thinks she's higher up the social ladder than she is, but has that cockney, double-entendre humour that makes her irresistible. She drinks more gin than I'd like her to...

My first show as Ivy was in a tiny venue in Devon in 2005 and I've only ever performed as her since.

My act is a mix of song, striptease and stand-up and I work with a director, choreographer and co-writer; we rehearse together once a week but on the night I mostly ad-lib.

My routines are all based on storytelling – for example, one is themed on an imaginary love letter that I receive from a member of the audience. I pick who has sent it to me, before serenading them with 'Close to You' by the Carpenters. I then make them carry me around the stage. It's very light-hearted.

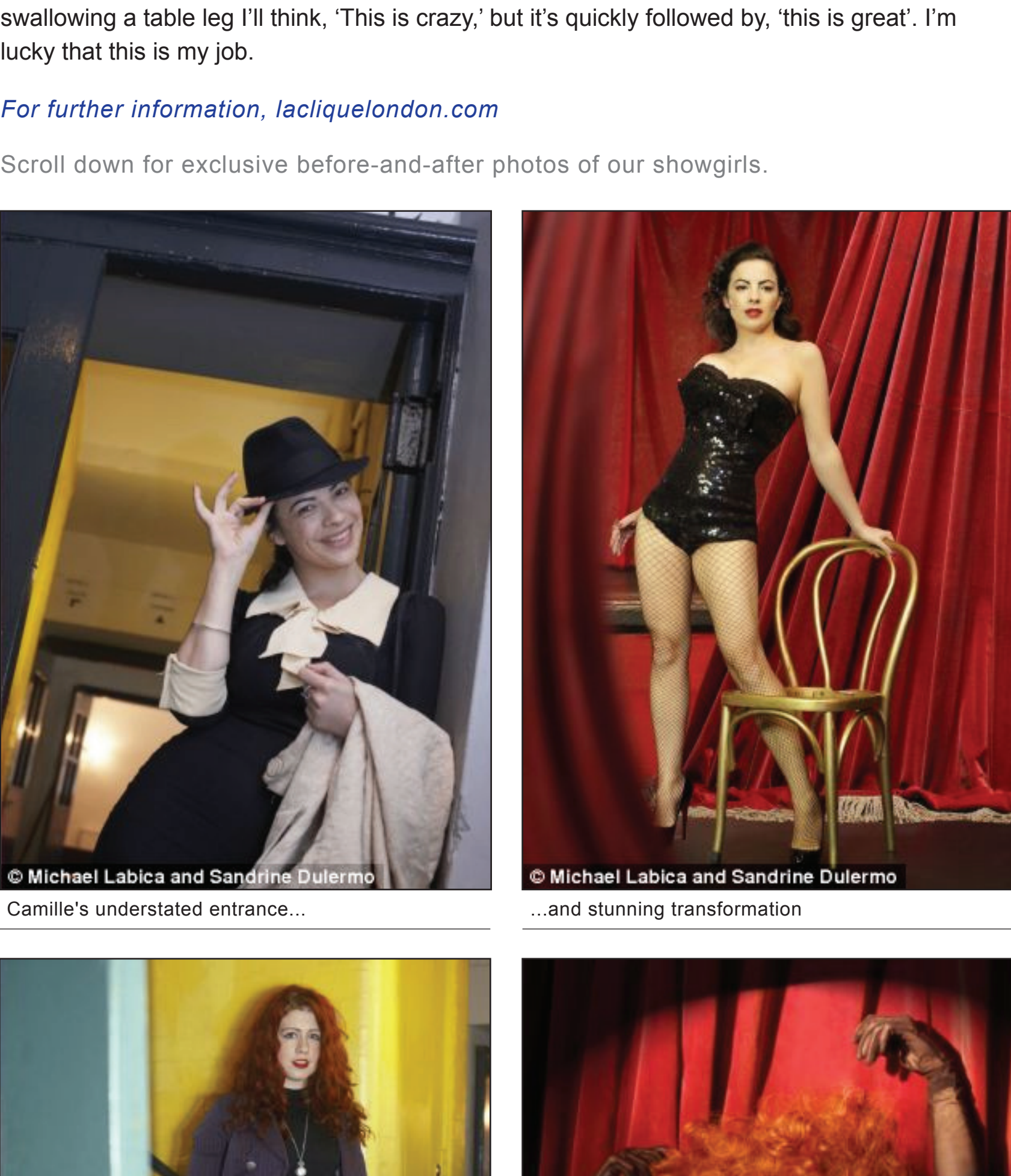
I do take my clothes off at the end but I receive more of a reaction through peeling off a glove than from being completely naked. Often the reveal can be more titillating than the end result.

When I'm not performing I teach burlesque and cabaret workshops to women who don't necessarily want to be performers but who want to boost their self-esteem whatever their shape and size.

Four years ago I was a size 20. I still felt sexy but I felt it held me back. I shed five stone to reach the size 12 I am today because I wanted to look on the outside how I felt on the inside.

In a way, teaching is the most rewarding part of my career because it makes me feel good knowing I'm making a positive difference to other women's lives.

[ivypaige.co.uk](#); for more details about 'Scandalous', go to [volupte-lounge.com](#)



Miss Behave

Amy Saunders, aka Miss Behave, 31, has been travelling around the world for the past five years with her mix of comedy, cabaret and freak show. She lives between London and Berlin and is one of only five professional female sword swallowers in the world.

I was 19 when a friend gave me a copy of the 1950s autobiography *Memoirs of a Sword Swallower* by Daniel P Mannix, and I decided that this was the life for me. I bought a two-foot stainless-steel sword from a shop in Barcelona and taught myself.

There I was in my living room while EastEnders was on, trying to get it down my throat. It took me three years to achieve it. You have to conquer the gag-reflex and teach your body to open the protective sphincter at the top of your throat.

I travelled around Europe with the Kamikaze Freak Show – a touring circus of the weird and wild – where I learned fire-breathing and how to lie on a bed of nails while concrete blocks were smashed on my stomach.

I once cut myself internally while performing in a production of Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride* at London's Sadler's Wells. I only found out 24 hours later that I had lost a lot of blood; I was kept in hospital for a week. It did make me think – but not enough to stop.

I started performing as Miss Behave in 2001 and describe her as 'a live cartoon with a late-night attitude'. She's irreverent, sexy and funny – think Betty Boop in latex.

My show has all the elements of the traditional fairground-style freak show but leaves the audience more amazed than repulsed. There's also dancing and very visual, light-hearted comedy influenced by people such as Morecambe and Wise and Tommy Cooper.

If I haven't swallowed anything for a few weeks, I have to practise to make sure my airways are open. Yoga and t'ai chi counterbalance the stress I put my body through. Often when I'm swallowing a table leg I'll think, 'This is crazy,' but it's quickly followed by, 'this is great.' I'm lucky that this is my job.

[For further information, lacliquelondon.com](#)

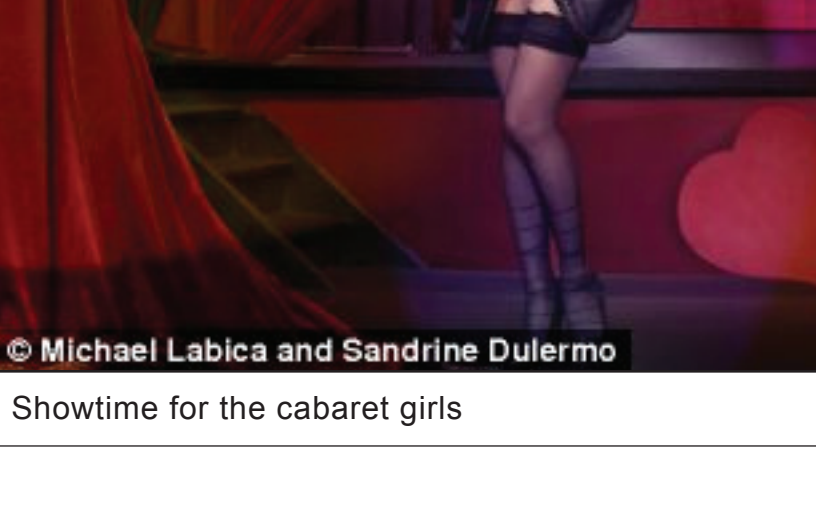
Scroll down for exclusive before-and-after photos of our showgirls.



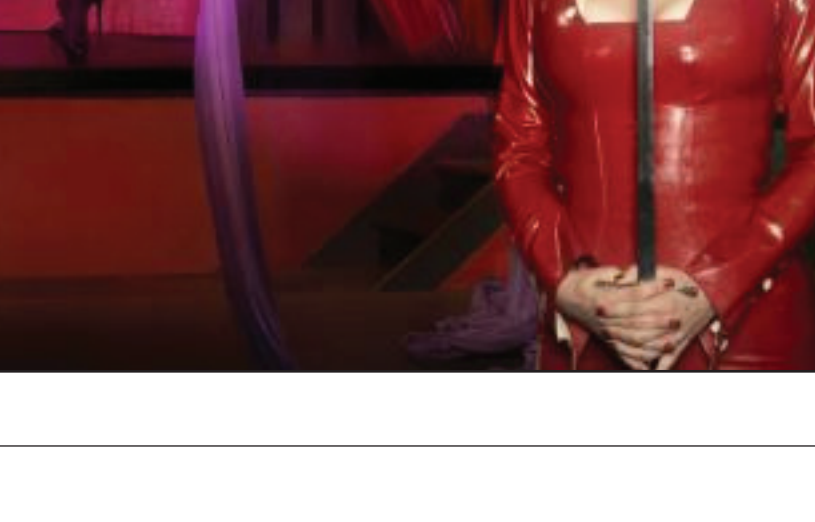
© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
Camille's understated entrance...



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
...and stunning transformation



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
Ivy en route to the dressing room...



© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
...and in full corseted glory

© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
Goodbye Amy...

© Michael Labica and Sandrine Dulermo
...hello Miss Behave

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Showtime for the cabaret girls