

By Amanda Black  
Photos: Grant Duffield/Spectra/Chris Egger/Feature

# Stripped

## Beyond The Bikini Line

**T**HERE are not enough pages in this magazine to tell Perle Van Schalkwyk's incredible story. She seems to have continually re-invented herself over the years, not only becoming an actress but also the owner of one of South Africa's premier exotic dance clubs, the Lollipop Lounge. She's the kind of woman who knows who she is and takes what she wants. Even though she works in an industry that is still seen by many as taboo, she has turned it into a profession centred around passion and entrepreneurship. The idea is that every woman who works there is a businesswoman in her own right and there doesn't need to be some tearjerking story hiding behind the false eyelashes.

As we arrive for what would turn out to be a very interesting photoshoot, tensions run high. Not knowing what to expect, we were ushered through a metal turnstile by a platinum blonde with a serious nail job and introduced to the woman who started it all - Perle Van Schalkwyk, better known as Gigi.

We followed the waft of blonde hair and camisole-clad Gigi to a room adjacent to one where a lot of action is going on, complete with stage, pole, bar and all the burlesque-style trimmings of a proper boudoir.

"I don't believe in having big bouncers at the door, when you have them there, the men are more prone to try and be brave," she says sitting down in a sea of silky cushions. When Gigi matriculated from Paarl Gimnasium, she did a Bachelor in Drama at the University of Stellenbosch, but no one, including her, would have said that one day she be heading up a strip club with 40 girls dancing on her stages. She has been in a string of theatre productions and films including *Poena Is Koning*.

"I did the first full frontal nude scene in the production *Equus*, the first time nudity had ever been seen in Stellenbosch. The fact that I have classical training as a ballerina, in jazz-art, mime and piano has helped me loads in conceptualising the different shows that we host, keeping it almost theatrical. For instance, the 'Lollipop Branding Iron', (only paint), has become somewhat of an institution here during the bachelor parties." After university Gigi worked in educational drama for PACT Productions but on a salary of R180 a week and constantly travelling the country - things were tough. "After PACT, I worked with an anti-drug group lead by Steve Hamilton, a reformed drug addict, doing a play focusing on drug prevention at schools. We toured Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg helping young children and teenagers to deal with a growing drug problem in our country."

After a few other productions, she decided to concentrate purely on dancing and was a member of a formation team doing dance shows at the old Caesars Palace in Braamfontein. "I enjoyed dancing in a team but I felt there was something more out there for me, and so I started doing erotic dance shows at clubs and venues across

Johannesburg and its surrounding areas." One night, while busting out her routine at a show, the iconic playwright Deon Opperman was in the audience. He was spellbound and offered her the title role in *W.H.O.R.E.*, a one-woman show about a stripper with a Master's degree. She's been named Penthouse Pet and has also won the title of Striptease Queen, but it was her greatest triumph to headline another of Deon Opperman's critically acclaimed plays, *Nipplecaps And G-strings*, which toured festivals and theatres countrywide. "That role has meant a lot for me personally. In essence it's an actress telling a story of someone she knows very well... and all my girls have seen it because it is a universal story for women working in the industry." During the show's successful run, Gigi and her partner Mike opened The Lollipop Lounge, which employs proudly South African women. There's a squad of beautiful and highly flexible dancers in her stable and none of them are saving for their grandmother's knee surgery. "People always seem to think that exotic dancers have had some kind of tragedy in their formative years that sent them in the direction of the pole, but it just isn't true.

"I have an education, I grew up in loving home, I, as all the other girls that work for me, chose to do this because it's a passion and a great deal of choreography and time goes into putting on a 20-minute show! It is a very good living and affords you complete and utter financial independence."

According to Gigi many men come just to talk to the girls and she believes that some conversational groundwork has to be done before a private dance takes place. "More than 70 percent of the men coming through the doors are married and we find wedding rings in the bathrooms all the time. I think it's because women don't take care of their men anymore and fantasy in marriage seems to be dwindling.

"Women have their hair and nails done, facials and shopping. They are so busy with the kids and work that they forget to treat their men once in a while. This is by all means a spa for men. People are quick to say that we make sex symbols of ourselves but in actual fact, we make sex symbols out of the men that come through the doors and that is why they come back time after time." In an effort to re-connect women with their sexuality, they have hosted couple's shows where women learn how to do a lap dance to entice their partners and re-ignite the spark. "There are of course pros and cons to this industry and the women here often do not get the respect they deserve. They are artists, in peak fit condition, not dumb blondes with no prospects." A group of smiling, skimpy clad women giggle on the nearby couches, some of them get up to dance for a client at his table, some disappear behind curtains for private dances. They are all modest, friendly, intelligent and above all, women with plans for the future. "Not all girls plan to dance for the next 10 years, some of them want to open their own businesses, be it exotic clubs of their own, settling university debts or just to buy a house in suburbs - at it happens in no time at all." Like the famous American stripper Teresa Beaty so plainly put it: "The way I see it, God gave me the body, so I intend to use it. It's a big ego trip. You look around a bar, you pick out a girl and you say, that's the one: I'm going to take all of her money tonight."

*Team people recently ventured into the interesting world of exotic dancing. We met some girls, watched some shows and even had a go on the 'ol stripper pole!*

Perle Van Schalkwyk, better known as Gigi.