

Pumps: Where Old And New Brooklyn Meet And People Get Drunk, Naked And Happy

Pumps isn't working with a whole lot of space, but the mirrors on every wall give you the sense of hidden corners, side rooms and secret doors. Dirt bikes decorate the walls as mementos from the owner's childhood. The stage is a simple set-up behind the bar with three poles in a line, each continuously mounted by some of the most skilled dancers in New York City. A neon red sign above reads, "If you ain't got no money, then get your broke ass out."

In a lonely building on Grand Street, Pumps rests amongst nameless industrial fortresses and abandoned rail yards a few hundred feet from the muddy waters of Whale Creek. As far as New York strip clubs go, it has a reputation for being one of the last old school, unpretentious joints in the city- a blue collar paradise and cheap alternative to the expensive "Gentlemen's Clubs" that can be found in Manhattan. It opened in 1997, when Mayor Giuliani had already begun enforcing the cabaret laws that shut down many of the strip clubs, peep shows and porn shops that peppered Manhattan from top to bottom like a giant titty-tenderloin.

Pumps was allowed to open because its location at the fringes of North Brooklyn didn't violate the 1995 "60-40" zoning law, which dictated that no venue that made more than forty percent of its profits off of sexual content (i.e. toys, porn or tits in the flesh) would be allowed to operate within five-hundred feet of a school, place of worship or another such establishment. Members of the community initially protested it being allowed even there, according to Andy, the fast-talking, down-to-Earth, Brooklyn-raised owner and founder of the club.

Fortunately for Andy, the location ended up having an unexpected advantage when the tidal wave of young transplants flooded nearby Williamsburg, Greenpoint and Bushwick.

Over the past eighteen years, as gentrification leaked over the East River and spread like wildfire along the path of the L train, Pumps has flourished with the new business. The club has even become a small hotbed of transgressive artists in recent years, reflecting shifts in the north Brooklyn neighborhoods that have become known for boundary-pushing events like *NYC Pornfest*, *The Smallest Penis in Brooklyn Contest*, *Bushwig*, and *Tooth Box: A Vagina Dentata Competition*.

"This whole spot fell together perfectly. It's the perfect storm. You are not going to get a neighborhood that is as cool as Williamsburg or Greenpoint or this whole surrounding area. This is like a soup of cool area," Andy told me last November in his manager's

office in the basement of Pumps, which is equipped with an aluminum bat and a row of CCTV sets that he instinctively scans every few moments.

Andy grew up in the surrounding area in the '80s, a time he remembers as being filled with “gunshots and craziness.” He describes the early days of his club as “off the hook bad. Every night was a brawl. Every night was terrible. This whole place, there was nothing here. The only reason to come here [Bushwick, East Williamsburg] was to come *here*.” He raised his arms, gesturing the expanse beyond the basement’s cinderblock walls, “This whole area was dark. No lights, no nothing.”

Now there is a BP gas station with a Dunkin Donuts across the street, flooding the exterior of Pumps with a purifying white light. One block over is 1027 Grand Street, a massive brick building that hosts Striphanger as well as a number of other artists’ studios. Next to 1027 Grand is the International Studio And Curatorial Program. A few blocks away, Kings Tavern offers “over 90 whiskeys, seasonal cocktails and a frequently rotating list of craft beer on draft.”

As the neighborhood transformed, so did the people who walked into Pumps looking for a job.

Stephanie, who graduated college with a performing arts degree while training as a ballet dancer, is currently enrolled in circus school and also works part-time at Pumps. I first encountered the voluptuous beauty last Fall at a Bizarre Bar production called *Tooth Box: A Vagina Dentata Competition*, the purpose of which was to embrace the old myth based in male paranoia in order to subvert preconceptions of female beauty. It was a night filled with cross-dressing, severed penises, big bushes and cheers to the downfall of the patriarchy.

After one performer at the competition severed a fake blood-filled strap-on dildo from her body and tossed it into the crowd where it smacked an unlucky guy in the face (the winning act), Stephanie went onstage to do a go-go routine that struck me as something more likely to be found in a strip club than at an avant garde burlesque show. After I complimented her moves and the anaconda tattoo that wraps around her body from her toes to her shoulder, Stephanie confirmed my suspicions about her second job.

A few weeks later at a coffee shop in the LES, I asked Stephanie about burlesque and its relationship to its seedier, less respected cousin. “Because the frame for this is burlesque versus strip, I think that, for me personally, it’s on the same spectrum,” Stephanie said. “Everything that happens in a burlesque show, or in a strip club—it’s all the same idea.” In her experience, stripping and burlesque are not mutually exclusive professions, and this is especially the case for Pumps.

The reason for working in a strip club is typically financial for many other performers at the strip club. Stephanie explained, “You can hands down make more money stripping than through any other dance medium.” Or as Bianca Dagga, who dances at Pumps and was GO Magazine’s “Sexiest Burlesque Performer” of NYC in 2009, told me in Andy’s office: “The difference between burlesque and stripping is that you can fit your costume in your pocket as a stripper, and in burlesque you are *paying* to create your costume.” And boas/feather fans/blood filled strap-ons can really run up your performance budget.

Emily, another burlesque performer who works at Pumps, told me after my interview in Andy’s office that she is a “fire eater and sex worker’s rights activist” and chose Pumps in part because there are no house or DJ fees, which can be up to \$150 before the dancer even gets onstage in some clubs. “So when do you have a sex worker rights activist working at a strip club?” Andy said in a moment of hubris, to which the fire-breathing activist armed with four-inch stilettos immediately retorted, “Most of the time.”

For Stephanie, who does not need the income and only works at Pumps a couple of nights a month, it is a well-managed strip club that allows her to express her unbridled sexual self. “I am there for fun. It is the great existential feminist performance art experiment of my life, right now.” She is not the only Pumps dancer that feels that way.

Dawn is a twenty-three year old performance artist and model who has collaborated with a number of New York-based artists, including Bushwick local Michael Alan. After moving to New York last summer she quickly realized that her artistic endeavors did not cover the costs of living in the big city, so she picked up a few shifts at Pumps.

Dawn is making pretty good money modeling and doing various other performances these days, charging on average \$150 per show; however, she still relies on the \$400-600 a week to have a steady income that pays the rent, and she doesn’t see that changing anytime soon, “I would say that, if you want to be an artist in New York City, you either need to do some kind of sex work or have rich parents. Period.”

Dawn works three or four 9PM to 4AM shifts a week at Pumps, some of which can be pretty slow (not everybody wants to head to Whale Creek on a rainy day). But a Pumps employee always finds something to do—whether it’s reading Voltaire in the basement, learning new pole tricks from a friend onstage or working on their next burlesque routine upstairs in Andy’s state-of-the-art music studio.

Andy’s unofficial policy regarding his employees using the studio is: “If you want to go up there and sing, if you want to go up there and draw, or if you want to go up there and, whatever, further yourself, I don’t care.” It seems to be that freedom and encouragement to pursue other career goals, even if they might be at another strip club, that has made Pumps such a popular place to drop a resume. That and the fact that Andy appears to be beloved by everyone who works for him.

Dallas, a former dancer and co-producer of *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (a burlesque event that the club put on in May), has no reservations in expressing her admiration for the management. “To have not only a boss, but an owner of an establishment to forfeit his time and money to boost moral so that we can launch our careers, it’s huge. Huge,” she told me over a few drinks at the bar in April.

Andy must have enjoyed our first conversation in November because afterwards he offered me a Pumps t-shirt. While he was unlocking the storage closet tucked away behind his office, he quietly told me that, these days, he wouldn’t mind if his daughter danced at a place like Pumps. I later asked him to explain what he meant by email. He responded [sic throughout]:

“I don't want my daughter to become a dancer (because I would like her to become the first female president or cure cancer) not because of what the job entails, but if she did I wouldn't mind it as much because of what the job enables these women to do. Such as having the freedom to pursue there passion of the arts /school or just the financial independence to do what they want and not have to rely on a ‘man’ for support...”

What I really meant to say was that the women of today dancing at Pumps are more independent, dynamic and goal oriented. Where as 18 years ago the girls came here made money and usually found a husband (for the good or bad) got married and left the business, today for the most part the girls leave to pursue other avenues in there life for themselves.”

The demographics of the patrons of the club have also slightly shifted along with the neighborhood. Dallas has noticed a lot of Tinder dates lately. Andy says that there are certainly more women than there used to be—perhaps because many of the dancers are gay—which is fine so long as they tip just like everybody else. (According to some of the dancers, ladies don’t.) But there is still an “all-sorts” vibe about the daily crowd that rushes in. In April, a surly looking employee of Andy’s told me, “If it’s on this planet, it’s in Pumps.”

“If you ask anybody about this place, it is definitely like a Cheers. And I would rather have that than some crazy, bottle service, suck-fuck joint upstairs,” Andy told me in November. After a handful of visits to the club, I might agree with him.

Pumps is a far cry from Brooklyn’s current aesthetic—you won’t find intentionally exposed brick or weathered wood here, the lighting isn’t natural or warm, and the acoustics can be a bit grating (thanks in part to the mirror-covered walls). But Cliff and Norm didn’t keep going back because Cheer’s was pretty; they went back because it felt like home and nobody from the outside world would have the nerve to bug them.

From the music—which bounces aimlessly from Radiohead to Eminem to Metallica—and the cheap(ish) beer, to the ladies who just want to work on some moves and be your dollar-a-song therapist. From the lighting that seems like it was stolen off the sign of a '50s diner, to the doorless lap dance rooms and the miniature Nascar models hanging from the ceiling, this place has an atmosphere that are unlikely to be copied, bought or made family-friendly, unlike most everything else in this city.

Here is Andy's unofficial pitch: "So you get bored of the Charleston or talking to the same guy for four hours, and you say to yourself, 'I want to see something else going on.' For almost the same price of the drinks, you come here and see topless dancing. And all we're asking is that, when a girl comes over, give her a dollar."

I recommend a bit more than that. She just might be saving up for a blood-filled dildo to cut off and toss in the face of the patriarchy.

Upon request, several names have been changed or omitted for the purposes of this article.