



Toni Elling slips into the same costume she wore in her publicity still from almost 40 years ago.

"I wish it would catch on. And it's going to. Because everything comes around."

One steamy July afternoon, Lottie is coerced into visiting the old National Theater, the once-opulent venue where she performed often, draped in the finest of costumes, surrounded by the stars.

Today, the building has the eerie beauty that many decaying Detroit landmarks possess; the ornate architecture has eroded with time and neglect, and the lower half is boarded up and chained.

Lottie grabs the padlock chain. "This was the main entrance," she says. "And they used to be lined up down the block, with limousines and chauffeurs." She's handed her chiffon costume, and happily poses for pictures, twirling around on the sidewalk under the theater's crumbling facade. Business suits walking toward the nearby Compuware building cast her an odd glance, and a homeless person walks up and asks her for change.

"I love the music and I love the people and there's so much great hope here," Lottie says of Detroit.

Standing in the shadows of the National, her hope hangs in the air, unanswered.

**Sarah Klein is the culture editor of *Metro Times*, has performed burlesque in Detroit for the past five years, and competed twice at Exotic World. Send comments to [sklein@metrotimes.com](mailto:sklein@metrotimes.com).**

## Vamp camp

**THE EXOTIC WORLD** Burlesque Museum is a sparkling journey through past and present, for women of all ages, shapes and sizes. A dusty former goat ranch located in the middle of the desert in Helendale, Calif., just off Route 66, it was the former home of stripper Jennie Lee, and is now home to burlesque legend Tempest Storm.

The museum's curator is the seventysomething Dixie Evans, once known as the Marilyn Monroe of burlesque. Each year the museum hosts the Miss Exotic World Burlesque Pageant — which has become the Miss America competition of new burlesque. The weekend-long event also serves as a reunion for former stripteasers, and a chance for the new generation to rub elbows with the old-school pros.

For burlesque neophytes, this is a mecca. Meeting the living legends is the ultimate thrill; after spending years studying rare video and faded photos in an attempt to re-create this art form, they finally get to meet *the real deal*. They crowd around the legends, rapt at their stories of how it used to be back in the day, and the legends are delighted by the attention.

"I see Exotic World as the flickering flame of old burlesque, and Dixie is the gateway between the past and the present," says Laura Herbert, of New York, N.Y., spokesperson for the museum. "In terms of bridging the generational gap, it's definitely the hub."

The museum actively tracks down living legends and invites them out to the pageant weekend, along with a chance to come out of retirement — women in their 60s, 70s and 80s, on stage, stripping, right beside starlets a third their age. This year, the eightysomething Ricci Cortez did a number that brought down the house.

"When people from the old generation see young women who are performing who get it, they're blown away," Herbert says. "And they're renewed. I think it gives them a renewed sense of their place in history. A lot of them have put their past aside, and the majority of them have gone on with their lives."

"To see them be worshipped for a weekend rather than just being a little old lady at the supermarket, that's my favorite part."

And it also gives the new girls a chance to learn the tricks of the trade from those who know best.

"Where's the glory in letting your secrets die with you?" Herbert says. "Then the art form will die along with it." —Sarah Klein

Visit Exotic World online at [exoticworldusa.org](http://exoticworldusa.org).

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