



Performers from "Fantasy" (left) and "Jubilee!" (right) have become icons of Vegas glamour. Photos courtesy of Fantasy and Jubilee!

BRINGING A LAS VEGAS ICON TO LIFE

From modern to classic, showgirls sweat to make Sin City glamorous

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The Las Vegas showgirl, with her barely-there sequined costume, sparkling rhinestone jewelry and towering feather headpiece, has been an iconic symbol of the city since the late 1950s.

While large-scale production shows filled with these statuesque women used to line the Strip, only two shows still feature "classic" Vegas showgirls today — "Folies Bergere" at the Tropicana and "Jubilee!" at Bally's.

The more "modern" showgirls, as seen in productions like "Fantasy," "MGM Grand's Crazy Horse Paris" and "X Burlesque" are still just as stunning, but usually wear much less opulent costumes and are expected to do a lot more dancing. Some even sing or show off other talents, while the traditional showgirl is still mainly expected to be able to walk gracefully in high heels while balancing a feathered headdress that can weigh more than 30 pounds.

It was the influence of 19th century Parisian nightlife that first brought the showgirl to Las Vegas. In the beginning, the girls mainly served as backdrops for headlining entertainers.

Many hotels had their own line of showgirls that danced behind the headliner or performed between the headliner's sets. It wasn't until the topless showgirls of "Minsky's Follies" debuted on the Strip in 1957 that showgirls became the center of attention on the city's entertainment scene.

Many productions showcasing the girls and their extravagant costumes cropped up on the Strip, including "Copa Girls" at the Sands, "Hallelujah Hollywood!" at the MGM Grand, "Lido de Paris" at the Stardust and "Splash" at the Riviera.

The audition

Over the years, showgirls have been the face of Las Vegas and have served as ambassadors and marketing tools for the city.

The behind-the-scenes life of showgirls was even the subject of a reality show, "Vegas Showgirls: Nearly Famous," on the E! television network. The job of showgirl has been a coveted position for many, but it's not an easy job to get — there are often rigorous audition processes and very specific requirements.

According to Lizzy Barrett, a dancer in "Fantasy" at the Luxor, a lot of ballet background is required for anyone who wants to work as a showgirl in a Las Vegas production. Barrett, who has been with "Fantasy" for three years, also performed with "Jubilee!" for three years. While "Fantasy" is a topless dance show with just eight girls, performed in an intimate theater, "Jubilee!" has a cast of more than 50 showgirls and is one of the most opulent topless productions in Las Vegas. Barrett said the audition process for the two shows varies as much as the two shows themselves.

"The audition process for 'Jubilee!' was very different from 'Fantasy.' It was leotards and tights with hair slicked back in a bun and red lipstick and the eyelashes and the diamond earrings. There was a ton of girls on the stage and first we had to just walk across the floor and then we had to do a ballet combo and then it was a jazz combination. It was kind of like what you see on TV."

"Fantasy was a lot different," said Barrett. "It was in our venue, which is a lot smaller. There weren't as many girls. Believe it or not, it's hard for them to find girls who are willing and are good enough."

In "Jubilee!," the showgirls' contracts last for six months, which means every six months, the girls must re-audition for their jobs. "It's not as bad as it used to be — you used to have to do a full dance audition," said Katie Currow, who has been a showgirl with "Jubilee!" for nearly three years. "Now they just allow us to come in and they need to see us in the hair and makeup and a bikini and we just have to go say our name and line up."

Besides requiring strong dance skills, showgirls have to meet certain physical requirements as well. According to the UNLV Libraries Digital Collection, "Showgirl," Jack Entratter, the entertainment director for the Sands hotel who was responsible for "Copa Girls," had a very specific formula for his showgirls. They had to be 5 feet, 4 inches tall, 116 pounds, with a 24-inch waist and 34-inch hips. The girls were also required to have an oval face with small features and black hair.

While showgirls today are much more varied in their certain heights and sizes, they still do have certain height requirements. At "Jubilee!," girls are measured during auditions and are required to be 5 feet,

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— Katie Currow, Jubilee showgirl

8 inches tall.

At "Fantasy," Barrett said there's not a specific height requirement, but anyone under 5 feet, 6 inches tall will probably be told that they're too short.

Being a showgirl requires a lot of physical stamina and conditioning as well. Currow said the hardest part of the job is the location of "Jubilee!'s" dressing room. "We are two flights under the stage so we walk up a bunch of stairs to get to the stage and you can have anywhere from eight to nine costume changes throughout the night, so you're constantly going up and down and up and down. It's two shows a night, six nights a week."

Headpieces in "Jubilee!" can weigh up to 35 pounds, which requires a lot of strength from the showgirls as well. "The headdresses made it more difficult on certain aspects of the body," said Barrett. "I needed more massaging just because you get more knots from wearing those heavy things. In 'Fantasy,' it's more dancing — you just need to keep your strength up in that aspect."

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Although neither "Fantasy" nor "Jubilee!" requires the dancers to train

or practice every day, most showgirls do use some of their spare time to keep in shape.

"It's kind of at your own discretion," Currow said. "They like to know that you're maintaining your body conditioning. We come in early — there's a ballet warm up, there's also a jazz and freestyle warm up, so some people use that. I do a class once or twice a week plus I do other body conditioning. It's not even just to look fit, but because of the stairs and the schedule — it's insurance for my body."

Showgirls in both shows are required to do their own hair and makeup. In "Jubilee!," the showgirls must follow a specific makeup pattern and have a similar look. "I've got it down to about 15 minutes," Currow said. "Some girls take their time but I've got it down to a science. The main thing is the red lipstick and the big eyelashes — that's all pretty universal."

A day in the life

Being a showgirl is definitely not your typical job, although for the girls it is still just work.

"It's definitely not your 9-to-5, sit-at-a-desk job," said Currow. "It is normal in that you're coming in at a certain time. It's your work. You're required to do certain things and to perform at a certain level. For the most part we have a nice time while we're there, but it is our job and it's taken that way. It's not a hobby."

Currow said even though being a showgirl is hard work, it's a job she definitely enjoys. "It's a beautiful show. It's well maintained. For a show that's been there 26 — 27 years, everything is impeccable. It's still how it was when it started. The costumes are gorgeous. I work with a great group of people. We're all separated by our lines in the dressing room downstairs so you'll be in the same room with about 10 or so girls or guys. I know I have a great time with the people I work with so that makes it really enjoyable."

Barrett said one of the biggest perks to the job is the schedule. Showgirls generally just have to do the show and that's it — they often have their days completely free, although Currow said many girls in "Jubilee!" do have other activities going on.

"Our call time is at 6:30 at night — we're there until midnight with the two shows

and that does allow me to do other things during the day and you'll find a lot of people are in school or have other jobs or are training for other things during the day."

Barrett said most of the girls in "Fantasy" don't have day jobs, but there is often "gigging" involved — doing trade shows or corporate events or meet and greets.

Currow said the showgirls of "Jubilee!" also do side gigs including conventions, doing photo shoots for travel magazines and even shooting a NASCAR commercial.

In the early days, Las Vegas showgirls were sometimes quite well known. Felicia Atkins, a star of "Folies Bergere" from the '50s through the '70s achieved celebrity status.

She often toured the country as a spokesperson for the Tropicana hotel, did publicity photos and interviews and graced the centerfold of "Playboy" magazine.

Although it's perceived as a very glamorous job, showgirls today don't normally find that kind of fame.

Barrett said people generally don't recognize her even though her image can be seen on billboards and posters. "When they had that TV show on the E! Channel called 'Nearly Famous'...that was the perfect title I thought - because that's what it is - it's like you're nearly famous. You're not famous, but your picture is all around Las Vegas and so even though nobody knows your name and nobody knows who you are, you get that status."

While there may not be as many "classic" showgirls left in Las Vegas, it is often still that image that people think of when entertainment in Las Vegas is mentioned. Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman took a showgirl with him when campaigning to bring a professional baseball team to the city and he is often flanked by showgirls at press conferences. The image of the showgirl with her sequins and feathers is still often used in advertising and publicity for the city.

Even though "Folies Bergere" and "Jubilee!" are the only two shows that still have the traditional showgirls, Currow doesn't think her show will be going anywhere anytime soon.

"I think that may depend on the audiences, but I think our show will be able to maintain as long as the hotel is there, as long as the theater is still running well."