

DITA

She's the burlesque artist whose individuality inspires starlets and designers alike. Now Ms Von Teese is poised to work her "Cointreauversial" magic in Australia, writes *RACHEL SHARP*. Photographed by *PIERRE TOUSSAINT*.
Styled by *CHRISTINE CENTENERA*



Dita Von Teese wears
Dior dress, \$15,000;
Alexander McQueen shoes,
\$1,695, from Miss Louise;
vintage earrings, \$250,
from *The Way We Wore*;
on her left arm: **Bulgari**
Serpenti bracelet, \$85,700;
on her right hand: **Bulgari**
Serpenti rings, \$24,500
and \$13,800.

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er status as an alternative fashion icon may have softened her risqué stripper image, but it still takes burlesque star Dita Von Teese a mere five seconds to shock BAZAAR.

Standard procedure when journalists interview overseas stars over the phone is for an anonymous staff member to transfer the dialled-in call from another location, or for the talent themselves to call from a silent number. But when BAZAAR punches in the pre-arranged digits, a buttery soft mid-American “Hello” after three rings makes it obvious we have direct dialled one of the world’s most famous performers mid-morning in her Paris home.

Von Teese is disarmingly easy-going, and put no prior conditions on the interview bar not mentioning her ill-fated marriage to Marilyn Manson. Her voice is measured at times, but warm. She’s honest. She laughs a lot. Anyone listening would presume we’d already met.

But Von Teese is also clearly an expert at controlling the image that helps her command fees of five figures for a 10-minute performance. Sparking this interview is her new ambassadorship for French spirit brand Cointreau, which has secured her as the centrepiece of its new Be Cointreauversial campaign. It was the shock-tactic campaign name, she insists, that sealed the deal.

“Obviously, I’m very well known for taking a bath in a giant cocktail glass. [A martini glass, to be precise]. But I wanted to reinvent the act for Cointreau [which is bringing her to Australia to perform the act this month], make it bigger and better,” adds, unquestionably, the most famous burlesque artist alive today.

“I’m not deliberately trying to provoke people or make them upset [with my act]. But I believe in burlesque performance. I like the history of strong, powerful women coming up with the fantasy of the show and presenting it themselves.”

Cointreau has certainly found an ideal ambassador. Von Teese’s particular brand of seductive, empowering entertainment has never been so on-trend. She may have started the vintage-glamour

revival back in the ‘90s when grunge was the look *du jour*, but today a host of young starlets (hello Scarlett Johansson, Megan Fox and Christina Hendricks) have joined her on the retro Hollywood glamour bandwagon, as has the fashion world. Case in point: Marc Jacobs’s And God Created Woman collection for Louis Vuitton A/W 10-11.

“I’ve been doing this before it was cool, when the only audience I had were fetishists and strip-club patrons and I had nothing to gain,” has been Von Teese’s repeated confession. Now she is a bona-fide fashion icon, a regular front-row fixture and sometimes model at Paris fashion week (she’s notched up two walks for Jean Paul Gaultier and performed at Louis Vuitton’s Champs-Élysées store opening in 2005). “I didn’t actually see the [most recent] Vuitton show. But obviously I’m on board, especially because I look at [the collection] and think ‘Yes! Clothes I can wear!’ I do get excited when fashion swings around to the eras that I love. But I really wish it could go back to a moment of decadence [when] even on the street, women didn’t feel uncomfortable wearing a dress or a hat and gloves.

“I was just wearing a big straw hat the other day, bicycling around Paris

“You have to feel good about yourself. If you look for the approval of others, you fail as you’ll never really get it.”

and I can’t tell you how many people I had telling me how much they enjoyed my hat. [I wish] more people would do something extravagant in real life. People appreciate it. And I always believe that if you take a moment for yourself before you leave the house, put on your favourite lipstick or make sure you’re wearing your hair the way you like it and do your best to make an effort, you’ll have a better day.”

Von Teese’s transformation from the self-described “plain-looking” natural blonde Heather Sweet, living in the shadow of two “prettier” (again, Von Teese’s own words) sisters in small-town Michigan, to a porcelain-skinned burlesque star is well documented. Dita was a homage to 1930s German actor Dita Parlo, and her part-time job working in a lingerie store during high school sparked a life-long obsession. (Von Teese has a whole room at home solely for her lingerie. “I’m a lingerie

snob and I believe that you can have fit and quality and beauty and glamour all in one because I wear my good lingerie every day under my clothes.”)

But while she may live a charmed life now, splitting her time between her luxury Los Angeles home and a stunning apartment in Paris, Von Teese hints she paid her dues early. “I got made fun of a lot for dressing the way that I dress or for wearing my makeup the way I wore it. I did take a lot of people shouting things at me on the street. But I just did it because I liked it and didn’t really care about what other people think ... You have to feel good about yourself and if you look for the approval of others, then you fail because you’ll never really get it. Then, eventually it all came around.”

It’s a message clearly catching the attention of women worldwide craving similar empowerment. About 80 per cent of people at her book signings are female, as are the majority who buy tickets to her shows. It’s a far cry from her early ‘90s “fetish-driven” male fan base.

“I think that there’s a lot of women [who] have come to understand [burlesque] and maybe felt the same way I did ... They see fashion magazines and all these beautiful supermodels looking natural and beautiful in their bikinis with tanned skin, running down the beach and think, ‘I could never really fit into that image’.

“What I do is about self-creation and doing the best that you can with what you’ve got and creating an illusion. I don’t look like [a model] when I wake up in the morning but I can put on ... red lipstick and I can set my hair in hot rollers and I suddenly feel like a movie star.”

It’s not just the art of classic makeup that can be learnt: Von Teese is convinced that anyone can master the art of being a seductress. “When I’ve been to Australia [in the past] ... the women have been quite responsive to the idea of owning your sexuality and being a strong and sensual woman and being in control of yourself and your life.”

Perhaps it was the constant criticism in her early days that has hardened Von Teese’s resolve, but at a time when the beauty and fashion industries are embracing god-given beauty, “natural” makeup and “back-to-basics” dressing, she is unashamed of being a zealot for all things fabulously man-made.

“I love glamour and artificial beauty,” she says. “Sure, I like going to the beach, and looking at palm trees and at the ocean, it’s beautiful. But what I really love is coming into Paris and seeing these beautiful buildings and statues and bridges and artwork. For me, the man-made had always been most appealing. I believe that the most powerful images ►

Eiro dress, \$3400;
on left hand: Bulgari
Serpenti rings, \$24,500
and \$13,800; on right
arm: Bulgari Serpenti
bracelet, \$85,700;
Swarovski ring, \$190.
Beauty note: Chanel
Rouge Allure in Passion.

we remember in entertainment are not the natural beauties. They're the iconic women in entertainment who were the product of a big beauty makeover.

"When you see 'before' pictures of Rita Hayworth, she looked nothing like the Hayworth we know. She's a little Spanish girl with black hair, and kind of cute and a bit pudgy. They dyed her hair, gave her this big makeover; they even changed her hairline. Marilyn Monroe was pretty as Norma Jeane Baker, but when they did the whole makeover with the lashes and lips and the dresses and peroxide hair, it was a completely different story.

"Glamour is something very different to beauty. It doesn't depend on being young. It doesn't depend on anything. It's about creation and magic and that's what I always loved about it."

Yet for someone who confesses to being obsessed with yesteryear stars, collects vintage tea sets and drives a 1965 Jaguar S-Type she bought on eBay, Von Teese is impressively in tune with the power of Gen Y new media. "I like Twitter because it has helped me convey who I am and let people see another side of me ... I live in a modern era. I pretty much read everything on Twitter. I like to gage when people like what I do or don't like what I do. And whether people want to hear it or not, it's a great promotional tool. I sell my shows through it."

For all of her humble talk, Von Teese clearly has her fair share of commercial sense. The Cointreau ambassadorship is the latest example of business savvy shown by the artist who has supported herself financially since she was 15 and is now responsible for every part of her act: choreography, styling, makeup, producing, directing and financing.

Each new act, she says, takes between six months and four years to perfect. Be Cointreaversial's \$90,000 costume, complete with 400,000 Swarovski crystals, took a staff of 10 six months to make by hand. "We have to replace the crystals on it almost every show because they're big and go flying off into the audience quite a bit," she says, laughing.

"Most of my idols of burlesque did go on to do other things 'cause they weren't stupid," she has said in defence of her profession. "Gypsy Rose Lee was not stupid. She wrote lots of books ... a lot of women of the '40s and '50s looked up to her because she was a single mother and still considered sexy."

"I think it was [famed fashion editor] Diana Vreeland who said that a dash of vulgarity is good. It's not for me to judge, I suppose, but there's people that look at me and say there are some vulgar things about me, but I don't really care. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." ■

Prada dress, \$3980;
Giuseppe Zanotti shoes,
\$1695, from Miss Louise;
Tom Binns necklace,
\$1350, from Le Louvre;
Bulgari Serpenti rings,
\$24,500 and \$13,800.



Opposite page: **Alexander McQueen** dress, \$14,200; **Frank Gehry for Tiffany & Co.** Flux cuff, \$9200. This page: **Dolce & Gabbana** dress, price on application. In this portfolio: hair by Danilo Dixon at The Wall Group; makeup by Gregory Arlt at Exclusive Artists Management. See Buylines for details and stockists.