

IN

Panties Inferno: An Interview with Peter Larkin

By [Wesley Strick](#) January 15, 2015

AT WORK

Making a pop-up book about burlesque.

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PETER LARKIN

My mother Racelle, a painter, met the production designer Peter Larkin in the midsixties when she went to work for him as a scenic artist. After my parents divorced, Peter and Racelle became an item, eventually marrying. Peter had a long, Tony Award-winning Broadway career and then moved into film, designing pictures like Tootsie and Get Shorty. He's a brilliant illustrator, as well—Ralph Allen, who'd conceived the musical Sugar Babies, collaborated with Peter on his book [The Best Burlesque](#).

*Burlesque, it turns out, is one of Peter's great obsessions. Over the past twenty years, he's created a mass of drawings, mock-ups, and maquettes for *Panties Inferno*, a pop-up book on the subject. Now eighty-eight, he continues to refine the work, though publishers have told him the book is too expensive to manufacture and publish—something about the glue points. But his pop-ups and drawings are wonderful, a testament to his comprehensive knowledge of the old burlesque scene. I called him to talk about his process and the basis of his fascination with burlesque as well as its history, which he*

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feels has been mischaracterized since burlesque began to die out in the late fifties and early sixties.

Where does burlesque begin, for you?

The word *burla* is some kind of antique Italian. It means “joke,” and the first burlesque was imitations of what went on uptown. It was a family affair. People brought their lunches and stuff. Florenz Ziegfeld had *The Ziegfeld Follies*, which probably cost a lot of money—that show had nude ladies in tableaux, but they were forbidden to move. The curtain opened on Aladdin’s cave, say, or an artist’s studio, and all the ladies were still.

But in the early twentieth century, forward-thinking people like the Minsky brothers, of *Minsky’s Burlesque*, made it so that for a lot less money you could go and see the women moving. It changed tremendously through the years. These acts started out with a preponderance of acts and comics and maybe one or two strippers, and as it went on, more and more time was given over to strippers. The comics were furious. They started to use bluer material, to get even.



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Compared with what goes for Internet porn now, this was like kindergarten. But as a very young guy I didn't have many opportunities to find smut. There were magazines I wasn't allowed to buy. You had to get an older guy to buy the magazines. *Film Fun* and *Beauty Parade* and *Femme Mimics*, the drag magazine. There wasn't much for us then. You had what we call the lifted-skirt photos, where the obliging cocker spaniel has wound his leash around the legs of the lady and she's horrified.

So discovering burlesque in Boston, in the forties—there was this incredible area, which is now all business, called Scollay Square. It was like a Brigadoon of vice. There was the Old Howard, there was the casino, there was a bar in a hotel with a roof that opened to the sky. The sailors were running around from the navy yard, and there were a lot of drunks. Everybody was there for a good time.

Boston had its favorites—Carrie Finnell, who had incredible control over her bosom and would make it appear and disappear on individual musical cues. And Sally Keith, the tassel woman, who had tassels in the front and also behind. And Peaches, who somehow managed to disrobe by shimmying. The dress went up all the way and just fell off. How she achieved this, I have no idea.

What about in New York?

Well, LaGuardia had closed burlesque in New York in the late 1930s, before I was ever there. Everybody loved burlesque—there were continually running shows, and people were making money—but the vice commission was set on closing it up, which they did. They wouldn't issue licenses. When I first went to the city, I think in the fifties, there was no more burlesque, but you could find what remained of it in Union, New Jersey. That's where I saw it.

You told me there used to be tiers of show business, starting with the lowest—

Carnival. That's the geek and the chickens and the girls doing terrible things back of the curtain. Then you had burlesque, then you had vaudeville, then you had legit show biz.

There was a hierarchy within the burlesque casts, too. You'd have the straight man.



second banana, third banana. You'd have the tit serenader—

What is that?

He's the man who stands by the proscenium in a tuxedo and sings futilely while the girls parade behind him. But that's his actual title. Robert Alda, Alan's father, was such a person. Then there's the "soub," the soubrette, a female singer. And then there's the nance, who would be gay—the mincing guy. And then there's walking women and talking women. They're married to the propman, say, and they're over the hill, so they don't strip anymore. They appear in the sketches and they say things like, Meet me 'round the corner in half an hour. And then after the talking women you're down to the strip women—the strippers.



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When Jersey and Boston burlesque died out, in the late fifties or early sixties, what do you think it was that killed them?

They just wouldn't issue licenses for it. There was at one time a burlesque wheel—there were these wheels of theaters all over the United States, and if you got on the wheel you had a year's work. I don't know exactly what killed it. They blamed a lot of it on Margie Hart, who apparently would flash, which was the ultimate taboo. It was an excuse. People wanted to close it because it was "dirty." I loved it when I went, but eventually, at the very end, they just showed strip movies. They didn't even have live people.

A lot of people from burlesque, like Pinky Lee, went into early television. He had a kids show—just took the material and cleaned it up, and he was the same Pinky Lee he was in burlesque. And then there was Professor Lamberti, who played the xylophone for music lovers. A woman stripped behind him, and he kept thinking that people were just enjoying the music.

What was the comedy like, in its heyday?

The comics in burlesque were not dirty. They had innuendos—in burlesque, any word more than three syllables is dirty. *Matriculate*. *Scrutinize*. Think of a young girl on a



predicament.” This is something that everybody talks about with burlesque, and they just seem to get it wrong—the sketches for the most part were awful. It was thin material. There were two or three that paid off. I remember a courtroom sketch starring a Mrs. Breastfall. But really the ability to make you laugh rested solely on the straight man and the comic. They’d race through the routine so they could get to the bar next door and get drunk. So it was a performance kind of a lot like Beckett. Some of the exchanges were impossible to fathom. Like, the comic says, I’m a twin. And the straight man says, How do you tell yourself apart? And he says, Emily is the one with the moustache. Now, that doesn’t make any sense at all. But as performed, it gets a laugh. Blackout. Badaboom.

The comics usually had terrible false teeth—it was sad. You have to realize, burlesque was big in the Depression, when it was all gray. It was the Depression that ran it. That’s really why people don’t understand it now. There’s an idea that burlesque was kind of cute, but it was kind of scary.

That comes across in your work. In these drawings you’re celebrating burlesque, but when you look closely at the patrons, and even at the strippers, there’s something nightmarish about them. And you’re using the name *Panties Inferno*—a little hellish. It almost looks like everyone’s trapped.

Sure. In the Depression, a guy who’s out, and he isn’t selling apples, and he’s trying to find a job—he could go to the burlesque show and take his lunch and sit there all day through four shows and the midnight show on Saturday night. It was a good bargain, and a refuge for the desperate—cruel, down-at-heel, tough, wonderful entertainment. The people who were in it were a family of losers, and a lot of the sketches were performed by guys who were wearing the only clothes they had. The ticket taker would get your tickets from you and then run backstage to appear in the sketches. It was a

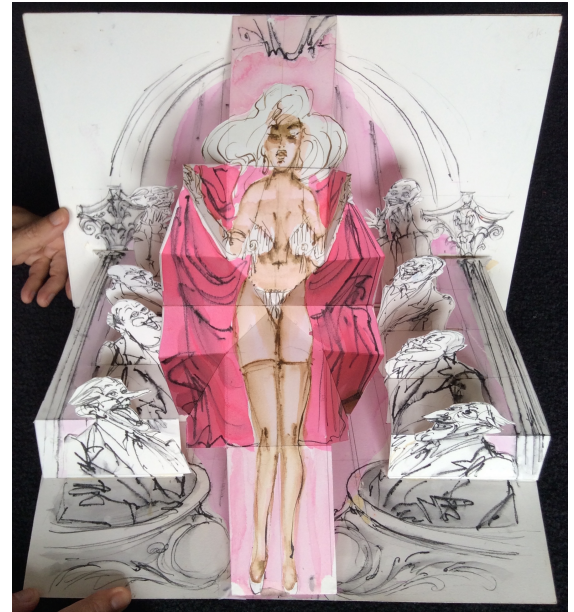
great big functioning dysfunctional family—and to be truthful, a lot of the strippers were kind of like someone’s mother. Great big—

That’s where the breasts came in.

Well, they came in all right. They came *out* at you.

In your book they come out.

Yeah, well, it’s not like I was making these things with saliva dripping out of my mouth. I really wanted to figure out how to make someone take their clothes off in a pop-up book. The challenge wasn’t making the clothes come *off*, but making them go back *on* when you close the book. It’s no good having them come off and then having to rearrange everything yourself.



I started doing pop-ups in 1994. My early ones were pretty crude. I had to figure out the engineering, if that’s what they call it—but I had fooled around with pop-ups before, because I used to make theatrical models for stage sets, so with my experience that wasn’t too difficult. I was a good draftsman and with a drawing board and triangles I could figure it out. You have to use the motion of opening the book to power the whole thing. Nowadays, there are guys who use string and elastic—all kinds of strange things in there, which as a purist, I would say aren’t exactly pop-ups. There’s also a certain amount of tumescence involved there. It’s sort of phallic, the pop-up. Why would you make a book that things popped up out of?



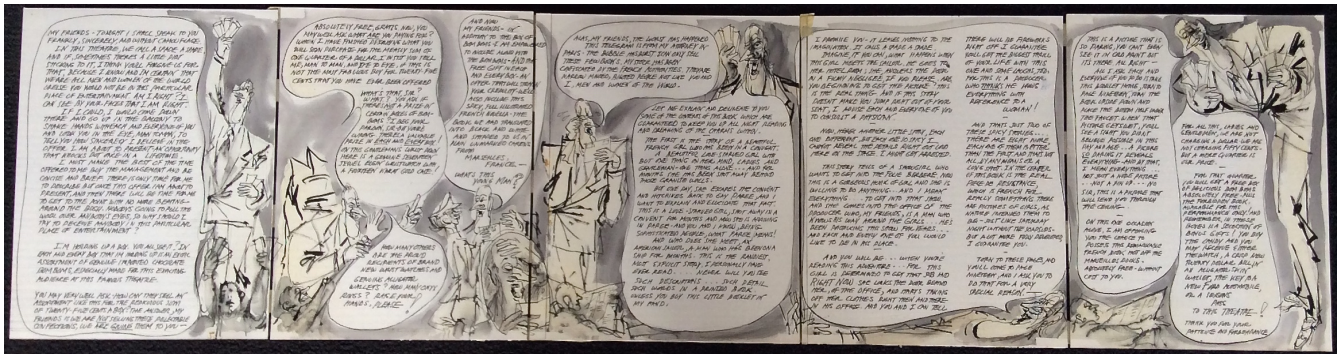
What do you think it was about burlesque that captured your imagination—that led you all these years later to make these incredible drawings and pop-ups?

I don't know. Burlesque was a continuing interest of mine. It sort of informed my career as a stage designer, as well. Let me give you an example. Toward the end, there were no more costumes in burlesque. In the beginning they did full-length sketches like "Cleopatroast" and "Julius Scissors"—and a lot of dirty stuff, though by today's standards it was pretty simple. But by the end, they were down to one backdrop, a street scene with a lamppost and a banana cart and a hydrant and awnings over it. As I watched, a buxom nurse came out in a white outfit, and she had a card table. She unfolded the legs and placed it stage right and she stood there and looked out at the audience and said, Here we are in the doctor's office. That sort of got me. I realized the stage was whatever you said it was.

The book is arranged as if it's a whole evening of burlesque, from start to finish. It always ended with a really awful production number. They got a set of steps—stairs—and covered it with some kind of sleazy material. Then there were all kinds of strange things. There was a guy named Mr. Paul who had a business called Stage Undies. He made G-strings. He would come to the theaters to purvey his wares. I always wondered if he had tiny books of fabric. I didn't know how he operated. A lot of his products had a

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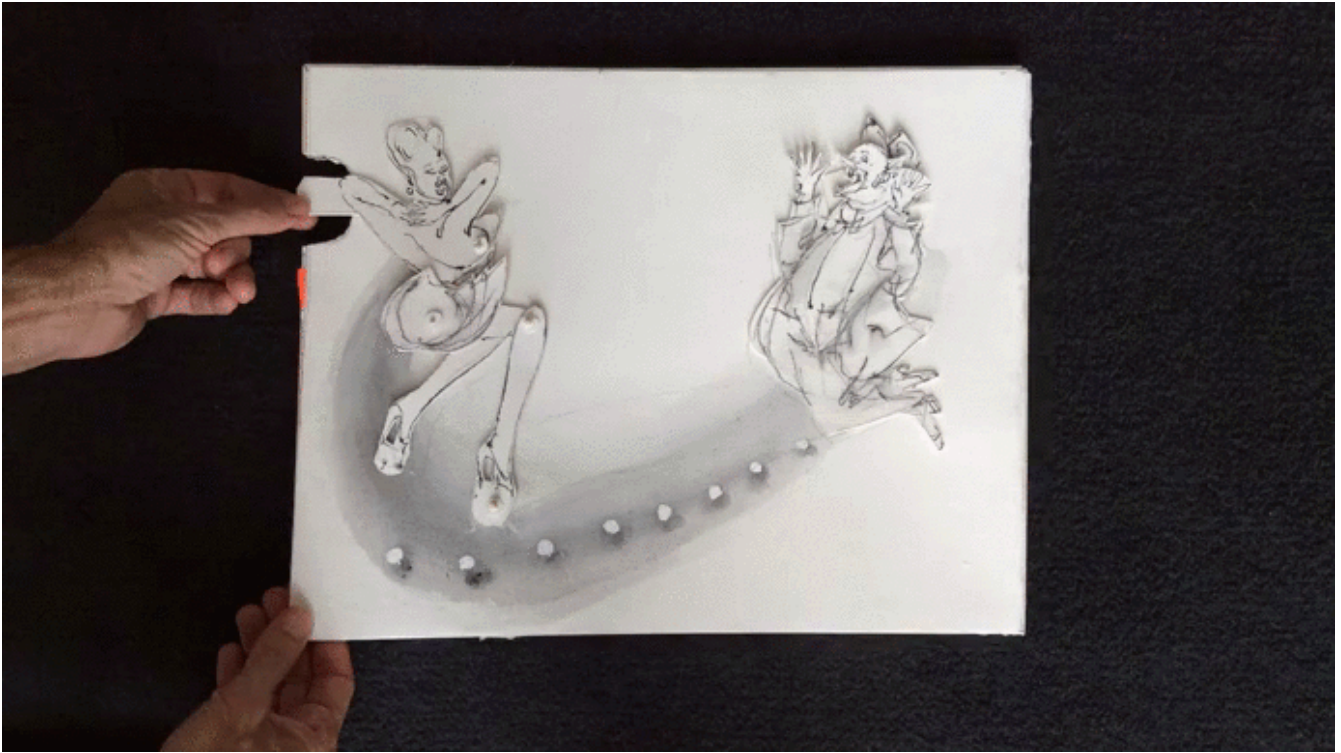


How did you decide to call the book *Panties Inferno*?

Minsky's Burlesque. There were several Minsky brothers, so Minsky's had burlesque shows all over New York—the same show, but they would change the title. *Panties Inferno* was one of the titles, the very best. There was also *Titicaca from Peru* and *Ada Onion from Bermuda*. The headliners changed, the strippers changed, but the act was the same. There were only a couple of people who were actually credited with writing the sketches in shows like that. They were sort of handed down—all the comics and straight men knew the sketches, and when one guy moved to another show, they would try and trick each other up by introducing other routines all of a sudden. There was an early kind of improvisation in what they did. It was sort of a gigantic sadistic family. It was incredible. That whole world—it was gray, it was raffish, it was tough. For a man in the first flush of youth, it was a serious occasion.

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Wesley Strick is a Hollywood screenwriter.



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