

New York, new hedonists

After the Twin Towers attacks, a frightened city indulged in 'terror sex' for comfort. Ten months on, the middle classes can't get enough of erotic parties - and it's no longer just a reaction to fear.

Tanya Corrin and Anna Moore in Manhattan

The Observer, Sunday July 21, 2002

Just after midnight on a Saturday night in New York City, 30 couples and a handful of single women stand awkwardly about in a sprawling loft in the Garment District dressed in nothing but sheer chiffon togas and expensive underwear. The guests are all under 40, attractive and professional, and include an actress from a hit television series, two lawyers, a doctor, a screenwriter, a model and a professional blackjack player. But who does what or makes how much is not important tonight. Everyone is equal in his or her underwear. This is Caligula's Ball, an invitation-only orgy.

'May I massage your arm?' a married man in Calvin Klein boxer briefs asks a solo twiggly brunette. His wife, a petite blonde, stands beside him clutching a glass of merlot and smiling stiffly.

'Um, ok,' replies the brunette and shoots a glance at his wife. The husband reaches out and strokes the brunette's arm tentatively, just above the elbow.

'This is weird,' says the brunette, and looks at the wife nervously. 'Doesn't this bother you?'

'No, my husband and I discussed this already... it's OK,' she replies, but doesn't sound so sure.

Parties such as Caligula's Ball, which is hosted by 31-year-old Palagia, the city's reigning queen of tasteful debauchery, are part of a growing trend. New Yorkers are becoming more adventurous, playful and exhibitionistic. Young professionals are looking into light BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Submission, Masochism), pursuing three- or foursomes on the net, and passing weekday evenings in multi-level nightclubs that provide free condoms, flavoured lubes and stints in the 'spanking room'. At the same time, 'swinging' has been reborn, repackaged and is now known as 'play'.

Why all the sex? Many New Yorkers still chalk it up to 'terror sex', a term coined by the internet magazine Salon.com. Ten days after the terrorist attacks, the site ran an article describing the phenomenon. Couples who had been separated for the day of the attacks told how they spent the next few days in bed. A gay man who was late for work at the World Trade Centre and watched the tragedy unfold from the Brooklyn Bridge said he spent the night online looking for sex, and when he found someone, they 'had sex as if it was our last time'. Events had caused a shift in priorities, the piece claimed. Suddenly, work and possessions didn't matter. Only relationships were 'real'. The article ended by anticipating a baby boom in nine months' time.

Although official figures will not be released for another year, the baby boom theory seems to have panned out with many New York hospitals claiming a 15-25 per cent increase in births this summer.

Hard, casual, non-procreative sex was an alternative response, claims Amy Sohn, the New York magazine sex columnist and author of *Run Catch Kiss*. '11 September did a mix of two things,' she says. 'It made some people want to settle down, have children or look for a mate. There was a surge in internet dating straight afterwards, and there were lots of couples who had broken up getting back together again. Then it made others party harder and pursue sex with whoever they could find. There was a feeling of "party all night because you don't know when the party is going to end". In other words, it made some people live for the future and others live for the moment.'

While most of the economy tanked, the sex industry boomed. New York's *Spectator*, a listings and sex news magazine, reported a surge in advertisers. Toys in Babeland, a brightly lit sex toy store in the Lower East, claimed that sales increased in the weeks following 11 September by 30 per cent. Adam Glickman, president and founder of *Condomania*, a sex toy and novelty website with several stores including one in Manhattan's West Village, says that sales to New Yorkers increased by a third despite the dramatic drop in tourism.

Pepper Schwartz, professor of sociology at the University of Washington and author of *Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong*, says that sex is a natural, physiological response to catastrophe. 'There really is a third 'F' to the 'Fight or Flight' theory that no one mentions,' she says. 'In times of upheaval and terror, people look for confirmation of life, and there's no more obvious antidote to death than sex. It's a way of saying: "I'm functioning, I'm alive and I'm not alone."'

There are numerous historical precedents, points out Gail Wyatt, sex researcher, sex therapist and professor of psychiatry at UCLA. 'It happened between British women and American GIs during World War II, it happened in Korea and Vietnam,' she says.

'I was researching women's sexual decision-making in LA in 1992 when the earthquake happened. Many women told me that after the earthquake they had engaged in sexual activity as a way of reaching out emotionally and physically. Sure enough, nine months later, there was an increase in births in southern California.

'This kind of sex is spontaneous, reckless and usually unprotected,' she says. 'People are using sex to comfort themselves in unknown situations, when they may feel they'll never have another opportunity to connect with another person again.'

But can this explain so much 'connecting' 10 months on? At Caligula's Ball, the increase in libido is certainly showing no signs of abating. Party host Palagia, a curvaceous, olive-skinned New Yorker of 100 per cent Greek descent, started throwing invitation-only orgies two years ago but confirms that business is better than it has ever been.

Her first 'erotic themed event', Falling Out of the Garden of Eden, was meant to be a one-off, a means of financing a career in film-making. Guests paid \$60 each. 'On arrival, everyone had to undress down to their undies and we pasted leaves on to them. Those leaves didn't stay on long,' she recalls. Caligula's Ball is her twenty-fifth bash (they are now monthly), and couples pay \$150 to enter. About half tonight's guests are first-timers. In the front room filled with mattresses and pillows, a young doctor and his even younger petite brunette graphic designer date peel off their clothes under the watchful eye of the other guests and hand them to the clothes-check guy. (Lingerie is the mandatory dress code inside all Palagia's parties.) Palagia breezes by with a single luscious breast dangling out of her red chiffon wrap, carrying a bowl of condoms. She greets them with an 'Oh, you are attractive'.

She rolls out a red rug, orders up more mingling and about 1am announces that it is time for the 'icebreaker' to begin.

A bevy of male assistants, some in Roman warrior regalia, corral everyone into the back bedroom, which has a king-sized four-poster bed with leather sheets, a tall black leather bench with built-in handcuffs, which Palagia calls 'Caligula's horse', and a load of erotic toys. As they wait, several guests speak anonymously about their hopes for the evening on the condition that their names will be changed. (All names have been changed except for Palagia.)

'I've always had this fantasy. I call it "sandwich-filling",' says Julia, the young graphic designer. She and her date stand near the bed with leather sheets. Tonight is their third date.

Sandwich-filling?

'I want to be the one in the middle,' she explains enthusiastically, 'but it has to be two guys.' 'I'm just curious,' says Sam, the doctor, who seems to be on some kind of research mission. He wants to meet a couple who are in love but can still have sex with other people. 'Because,' he explains, 'I want to be in love some day, but don't think I could have sex with just one woman for the rest of my life.'

Jim and Alexis, married for two years, are hoping to find an agreeable couple and have a 'swap'. She is a photographer and looks like a mermaid with her cascading blonde curls and blue sequined lingerie. He is a professional blackjack player and wears black silk shorts with 'Caesar's Las Vegas' printed on the waistband.

'A few months ago we almost had an encounter with a couple in Las Vegas,' says Jim. 'The four of us had a lot of electricity, but nothing really happened. After that we were very curious about what it would be like ...' he pauses and gives his wife a look of adoration. Then he adds, 'You know, we're lucky to be here. The reason we got invited tonight is that I sent in a photo of my wife.'

'I do pick beautiful people,' says Palagia later, 'but I'm catering to those who really want to understand their sexuality and explore something with their partner. I receive essays from men who I don't even think have discussed my party with their partner yet. Before you come here, I want to know what you want to do with your partner and how you want to feel at the end of the night.'

Private parties aren't for everyone, of course. Some prefer the relative anonymity of larger, organised events - and here also New York is able to oblige.

In the years prior to the terrorist attack, the conservative Mayor Rudolph Giuliani invested much of the city's funds and resources into 'cleaning up' the city. 'He was very vocal in his opposition to sex clubs and adult entertainment,' says Grady Turner, executive curator at the Museum of Sex in New York. 'His administration was really responsible for the transformation of Times Square from a place with X-rated films and strippers to a tourist destination. He put a face on opposition to commercial sex.'

After 11 September, everyday rules were suspended, feelings changed and priorities shifted dramatically. 'There were greater concerns about security, and anthrax. The police and the administration had other things to do than clamp down on strip clubs,' says Turner.

In January, Michael Bloomberg, more liberal and a bachelor, replaced Giuliani as mayor. Within weeks, Prada-clad patrons were dancing on the tables at Bungalow 8, a plush lounge in Chelsea, and the strippers at Babydoll Lounge in TriBeCa began peeling off their itchy-bitsy bikini tops after years of extended tease. Both topless dancing in adult nightclubs and dancing fully clothed in clubs, such as Bungalow 8, that don't have a cabaret licence, are technically illegal; however, the new administration was turning a blind eye.

The Imperial Orgy is proof of this loosening up. Held on a Wednesday evening in a multi-level nightclub called Webster Hall, the event attracts a combination of New York's fetish scene, young professionals and party people.

One of the evening's early attractions is a sex toy shopping buffet, where women in tight latex ballgowns buy Pocket Rocket vibrators and fill their bags with free condoms. At a booth nearby, the Eulenspiegel Society, New York's oldest BDSM club, provides free how-to brochures and offers a sign-up sheet for an introductory class called 'BDSM light'.

Waiting in line for the 'spanking room' are Melanie and Chris, dressed head-to-toe in black and matching masks. Melanie is the director of a well-known SoHo art gallery and Chris is an artist. Who's spanking whom? 'I'm spanking Chris, of course!' she says. Melanie blushes and beams while Chris smiles and giggles.

By 2am the 'lapdance room' has become a more popular option. Inside the low-lit pillow-strewn side wing off the main dance floor on the fifth level, women wearing little more than lingerie and masks straddle their partners and sometimes complete strangers (both male and female), delivering passionate full-frontal, body-heaving, pelvic-grinding performances.

A man with slicked-back hair, dress trousers, white button-down shirt and no tie caresses his girlfriend, who wears a purple feather mask, through the outside of her white La Perla bodysuit. A camera flashes and she touches her mask to ensure it is providing proper coverage. Eventually she moans and sinks deeper into the pillows and the crowd moves on.

I assume she is a paid performer but later learn she is a human resources manager for a financial services firm. Her partner is a research analyst.

According to Turner, diminishing fear of sexually transmitted disease is another reason for events such as the Imperial Orgy. 'Hedonism really took off in an organised fashion when Plato's Retreat opened its doors in 1975,' he says. 'Then the scene died down in the Eighties or Nineties, largely due to Aids. Rightly or wrongly, the sense of panic and dread around Aids has subsided tangibly in New York, especially with the development of drugs that have made it seem treatable.'

Amy Sohn agrees. 'There is a general, almost unspoken feeling that after all the paranoia, it is hard for a straight man who doesn't inject drugs to contract Aids, which makes women feel less at risk too. Many of my friends use condoms intermittently at best.'

The internet is also a driving factor, says Turner. 'I think it's the single most important reason. It gives novices a very good comfort threshold, the chance to try out ideas and find similar people without having to find out about a commercial club, work up the nerve to go inside one, then possibly have a bad experience which signals the end. Though many people are going to the bigger events, a lot more are using the internet to organise private parties at home or in a hotel room.'

So on a Monday night when there is nothing much to do, a New Yorker might visit Nerve.com or Matchmaker.com and arrange a threesome or perhaps a more intimate date with a non-committal polyamorous type. The personals sites offer search criteria such as 'Polyamorous', 'Playing' and 'Married but can sneak out'. So once you decide what you want, it's pretty easy to find it. Even Craigslist.com, the site for 'folks to help each other out with "everyday stuff"', has added a 'casual encounters' message board, where people can hook up and share information.

Yahoo.com members are also creating private gatherings that cater to every imaginable fantasy and whim. One of these, Rendezvous, was started by a group of professionals in their twenties and thirties (including a lawyer, an art broker and a cable TV account executive). Rendezvous throws monthly 'couples only' parties at popular bars and restaurants with an 'after-party', typically in someone's apartment. In one year, the group has grown to 45 carefully screened couples.

Back at Caligula's Ball, performers named 'Caligula' and 'Drucilla' put on a highly choreographed show of lovemaking. From time to time they lift their gaze to the circle of beautiful bodies barely covered by lingerie and flowing chiffon. After the show ends, compliments are exchanged ... nice bra, nice bottom, beautiful breasts. The temperature rises.

A lot happens quickly and it is difficult to keep track. In the front room, Jim and Alexis have a 'swap' just 10 feet away from each other on faux-fur-covered mattresses on the floor. In the small, loungy middle room, a tangled foursome harem recline on a double love-seat, kissing, touching, and feeding each other grapes. In the back bedroom a sevensome frolic on the king-size leather bed.

At 3:30am a woman pulls on a wrap dress while her husband stumbles into his trousers. They thank Palagia for 'bringing them closer together'. Sam, who has just finished sandwiching his date, approaches them and exchanges a few words before they leave.

Then he reports his findings. 'They've been married for nine years,' he says, flushed and excited. 'They're both smart and down-to-earth people. They seemed amazingly attracted to each other. I think they're in love, and they say they're coming back.'

Palagia hopes so. Half of her business is repeat customers and she's expanding into Miami and LA this year. In the summer of 2003 she's heading for Paris and London. When pressed to describe the theme of her London party she closes her eyes, smiles mischievously and then says, 'Judges. Oh, I would love to see them with those grey wigs. Hold on ... For the women ... Concubines! That would be great! Judges and Concubines!'

'Why London?' I ask.

'I've had the best lovers from London. Very open. I mean in bed, not on the street. I mean, they're ridiculous on the street. But the minute you close that door the guard is let down. They're completely immersed in the vibe.'

By 3:45am, most of tonight's guests have hugged goodbye. Palagia yawns and retreats to the back bedroom to appreciate the frolicking sevensome that just won't quit.

'I'm so tired!' she says.

Right on cue a hand reaches out and pulls her onto the bed.

Dr Judy Kuriansky, clinical psychologist, certified sex therapist and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to a Healthy Relationship*, has attended various sex parties as an observer and attributes their popularity in part to the tendency (more pronounced in New York) to delay childbirth. It's the Sex and the City generation, except more women are acting like Samantha than Carrie Bradshaw.

'People who don't have the distraction of children have more energy to invest into their sex life, and childless couples may well find, after a few years together, that their sex life has become boring,' she says. 'Without children to fill their time and focus, it's hard to keep the sexual energy between you. So the seven-year itch becomes the two-year itch.'

Kuriansky is concerned that couples who choose to 'play' are not always prepared for the consequences.

'I support people having fantasies and exploring their sexuality,' she says, 'but actually creating a scene where they can act out can be dangerous from the psychological point of view. Couples may go to these events with an open mind, and be totally unprepared for their spontaneous, uncontrollable trigger response.'

'Jealousy is the obvious problem. Seeing your partner have sex with someone else. Making comparisons. Destroying what makes your own relationship special.'

Another note of caution is sounded by reports of sexually transmitted disease in the city. Cases of syphilis have more than doubled in New York over the past two years, although nationwide they have dropped. 'There is anecdotal evidence that young people are engaging in more oral and anal sex without using condoms,' says Adrienne Verrilli, director of communications at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States.

Though it is hard to put an accurate figure on rates of HIV (until recently, it was not obligatory to report infection), state health officials have expressed concern that numbers are spiralling. Meanwhile, community-based health organisations are complaining that funding to promote Aids awareness has been slashed since 11 September, which has diverted funds to other causes. An extra \$5 million in the city budget for Aids prevention was shaved to \$2.5m at the end of last year.

The new sexy vibe in the city might come with some warnings attached, but there are still ways to enjoy the renewed sense of sexual freedom without putting yourself at risk of getting a STD. Amy Sohn, the sex columnist, has already attended two of Palagia's orgies but seemed genuinely more excited to talk about ... kissing.

'I was trying to get into the VIP room at a club recently and this guy blocked my way, really flirtatiously. Instead of stepping around him I made eyes at him and we started kissing. It didn't go any further, it was a free love kind of feeling.'

