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ENTERTAIN ME

Sex and the *New* New York Scene

story Anthony Haden-Guest

A new generation of erotic parties has women firmly in the saddle—just don't call them swingers.

A white stretch limousine was pulling up as we turned a corner. This has to be the place, I said. Thea, my date, was less certain. "Perhaps it's just a rich john, cruising," she said. But a couple got out, rang a bell. Yep. We were there. Our hostess, Palagia, Queen of Erotic New York, was looking cute as a button as the couples trickled in, paying at the door. Tonight's venue was a loft, throbbing with generic disco, bathed in rosy light. We stripped off our outerwear, handed it to a coat check, and went to the bar, where a barman was pouring from the guest's own bottles.

I downed some wine, looked around. The crowd was at least as attractive as any you'll see in an average nightclub, but there was a gender distinction, and it was as much down to fashion as anatomy. Some men were down to their Y-fronts and strutting their abs around to let the world know they had been putting in their gym time, and there were a couple of showoffs, such as a bald fellow in a satiny boxer's cape, but the guy look was mostly basic barroom jock. Not so the women. "It's kinda like a fashion parade," Thea said. "Everybody's been to Victoria's Secret."

A young creature next to me was in a feathered slip, looking like a 1920s flapper.

"That's nice," I told her. "I didn't know what to wear," she said. "It's my first time!"

"Mine, too," said a chirpy, older blond woman.

The feathered slip was up from Baltimore and would be returning in the morning. The blond would be driving straight back to New Jersey.

A girl behind me said she was in her third year of college. Was it her first time? "No!" she said with pride.

Vortices of sexual action were springing up, and a foursome was pulsing on the floor like a beached octopus. Then drama. A high-cheek-boned woman with reddish-blond Botticelli curls stood stone-faced while a hefty guy in a black T-shirt (presumably her date) harangued her for not getting into the spirit. She stalked off and sat stiff-backed on a chair, shrugging off new suitors without bothering to make eye contact.

Three women in dungeon gear were standing by a wall. One, a blond in shiny black vinyl, was beside a table laid with sex toys while the other two were paddling a fellow on the buttocks with short leather whips, not too hard, and carefully moistening the cheeks between sessions, as though tenderizing beef.

The main event was in an interior room. Miss Baltimore was getting helped out of her feathered slip at the door. Just inside, Botticelli curls, no longer stone-faced, was pounding breasts and pelvis into another woman, accidentally ramming the wall switches from time to time and flooding the room with light, which elicited protests from groups swaying on the bed. Eyes adjusted, it was possible to make out the players. A Spanish woman was taking on all comers. She grabbed one fellow's member as he approached, like a trout taking a fly, and began giving him an energetic blowjob. She snuffled and snorted and seemed well content, then opened her legs and pointed peremptorily. It was an ... order!

He prepared to enter.

"You no have condom," she snapped.

He looked down, startled.

True. It had vanished. The way they do.

He couldn't find his reading glasses, so he shuffled through a bedside saucer, looking for the extra-large size he required. Nothing.

He went back to the main room and sought out Palagia, who provided the necessary.

Word had got around that there was a customer for the XL when he returned to the bedroom. A woman weighed his equipment as though checking out vegetables in a produce store. Another swooped down when she was done. Then another. The Spanish woman was otherwise engaged, though. "You miss me," she told him. "Wait. After I take shower."

So the machine was humming, and it was the women that were running it. And that was OK by everybody.

Three women in dungeon gear were standing by a wall. One, a blond in shiny black vinyl, was beside a table laid with sex toys while the other two were paddling a fellow on the buttocks with short leather whips, not too hard, and carefully moistening the cheeks between sessions, as though tenderizing beef.

"Thank God I'm not a praying mantis," a man said cheerfully.

Huh?

"I know they're not gonna eat my head when they're done!"

Thea and I ran into Palagia on the way out.

"Are there too many people?" she asked.

"No. It's like a good party."

"It's a great fucking party. Fifty-two couples. Nobody hasn't showed up. A hundred and two people!"

"A hundred and four people," I said. "Does too much fucking affect your math?" A joke.

"There's no such thing as too much fucking," Palagia said, only half joking.

The movers in New York's new sex life are no longer guys with rumpled bedding beneath their eyes—Larry Levenson of Plato's Retreat, Al Goldstein of Screw, Bob Guccione—but women with an agenda. They include the women from Cake and Flirt and (most especially) Palagia of One Leg Up (www.onelegupnyc.com). Palagia—her nom de high jinks—is a peppy young woman with a college-girl voice that creaks like heels in raw snow. "I don't call my parties swinger parties," she says. "Women are fearful of that word. I call them erotic parties. My friends say, 'Are you fucking nuts? You're throwing swing parties!'"

Palagia throws a mock hissy fit.

"When you are standing in front of me do not use that word!" she says. "I am adamant about it. I love giving people the opportunity to feel safe, secure, in an environment that is natural. You don't have to fuck. You do what you feel is best."

Palagia says her parties have been attended by hundreds of people—"Thousands, probably!"—and runs them like any other pro. Entrance to the "Eat Ins" is $175 a couple. The "Takeouts," which are get-acquainted events, with nothing consumed on the premises, are $55 a couple. But it's more than just a business. "Obviously I have to make money. I need to pay my rent. But this is a vocation," she says. As with most vocations, she got the call young.

"I have been a hedonist from the age of 16," Palagia says. "I grew up in a very strict Greek family. I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. It's male dominated, to say the least." This was in Washington, DC, and she is no fan of the nation's capital. "Puritanville!" she chirps. "You want to talk about Puritans and oppression?" She got to New York in 1996. Clubs like Pyramid and Mother were going strong. "Mother was one of the best parties. You could get away with a little frolicking. The whole energy of those places was about that. All of them are gone now or dying out."

Palagia's project is to provide an alternative. "I would never go out with a guy who wouldn't sleep with me on the first date," she says. "How do you know if you have a connection with someone otherwise? So I thought, *I am going to put together a singles soirée. I'm going to call it a sampler.* I wanted an atmosphere where women felt comfortable about being sexy. If they wanted to have a one-night stand, it was OK. If they wanted to pursue a relationship with this man, it would be OK, too. There are more singles in this city than anywhere else in the world. I have a serious screening policy. You have to be in a really healthy, strong relationship, because you can't just bring your partner there without telling them what's going on. There's sex involved. You're opening up a Pandora's box. A woman is never going to tell a guy how many lovers she has had. She is going to stick to under ten. She is afraid she is going to lose him if she tells him the truth. Society tells you it's OK for men to be sluts. But women can't. I disagree."

Palagia sees the heating up of the scene as a female triumph. "I get just as many e-mails from women as I do from men. Can you imagine how many women I know who pick up guys and fuck them? It's insane! That didn't happen 15 years ago! And within the last few years it has just gotten incredible. I am amazed at the people that seek out my events. You would think it would be the artist, the outcast. But now I see the most Puritan-looking people! Women that work at *Elle* magazine or in publishing. Lawyers, doctors, Wall Street! Now my parties have more women than men. How often do you go to a party where there are more women than men?

I was at a takeout party, getting acquainted. There's something about Palagia's aura that encourages the women to be assertive. One explained why she preferred giving blowjobs. "It's like the guys are just sex toys," she crowed.

Another, Eva, said Palagia had "saved her soul." A demure Texan, she moved to Manhattan in the early '90s, discovered the website. "I was like ... omigod! Here are my people! I did not know that they existed! I've been so sheltered! It made sense to me.

"At one party, someone made a recommendation that was basically musical pussy. You would turn the music on and whoever you landed on, you screwed. But nobody wanted to do it. A gentleman suggested it. *Of course!* It certainly wouldn't be a woman." Eva giggled. It sounded the way you write a giggle. *TEE-HEE! TEE-HEE!* "There's great benefit to only allowing in couples and single women. That keeps the lechery to a minimum."

Uh, what constitutes lechery at a sex party?

"You know, a bunch of horny men. That's *so* not what it's about. A lot of men say: 'Yeah! I'm sexual!' No, you're not. You're horny! *Huge* difference. Women are more in touch. If this whole scene is to get bigger and bigger and bigger, that's something men would have to get over. Men have to apologize for a lot."

OK, I do. For all of us.