

Parties Where an ID Is the Least of What You Show

By WARREN ST. JOHN

Published: January 11, 2004



A swinging scene run mostly by women for a new young audience, with an application process that can require an essay.



Charlie Gammone for The New York Times
woman to name Palagia, above, says her parties for One Leg Up are "to help the masses feel comfortable with their sexuality." At top, guests dance at a Celine party.

AAnna, a 22-year-old graduate student in Manhattan, said she remembers clearly how she was introduced to one of New York's sauciest underground social scenes. It was via an instant message from a stranger who had seen her personals ad online at Nerve.com. A local promoter of erotic events called One Leg Up was organizing a party in a TriBeCa loft on the theme of the film "Moulin Rouge," her suitor wrote, and he wanted to know if Anna would be interested in going "with me and my hot tattooed girlfriend." Anna mulled her reply, then fired off an e-mail message.

"I was like, 'Yeah, dude, I'll check that out,' " she recalled.

To gain entry, Anna first had to send an erotic essay and a photo of herself to One Leg Up's founder, a husky-voiced, 33-year-old proselytizer for sexual experimentation who goes by the name Palagia. Anna made the cut, was given the party's location and a pass phrase — "untie my corset" — and on a chilly night last year donned fishnet stockings and high heels and headed out to her first sex party.

The gathering was awkward at first, she said, but at 12:30 a.m., a gong rang, signifying that guests should strip to their underwear, and things soon began to heat up. Anna said she spent most of the evening entwined with a couple she had just met — not the one that invited her — and besides the minor annoyance of having to locate all her clothes at the end of the night, she

said the experience lived up to her expectations. She has since been to 15 similar parties in Manhattan, and though just a year above the legal drinking age, counts herself a full-fledged member of what insiders refer to simply as "the lifestyle."

Her take on the scene is uncomplicated: "I think sex is cool and people should have a lot of it," she said.

The idea of swinging may evoke an image of middle-aged, ennui-riddled suburban couples of the 1970's — think of key parties and the movie "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice." But among a certain adventurous younger crowd in Manhattan these days, swinging — or at least a high-velocity form of sexual exploration that resembles swinging, but for the dearth of actual spouses (many participants are shy of marrying age) — is thriving with a twist. Unlike the dismal, failed swinging attempt in "Carnal Knowledge," in which two husbands make a surreptitious deal to seduce each other's wives, the younger scene is driven largely by women — many of them erotic-party promoters who use the Internet as both a marketing tool and a screening aid, to keep their crowds enticingly attractive and to keep paying customers coming back.

Mindful of the cobwebbed connotations of swinging, most of these women refer to their events as "erotic networking." They have names like Flirt NYC, Skin NYC and Cake, and the organizers frame the gatherings as political acts rooted in a postfeminist interest in women's sexual empowerment.

"It's not just, 'I'm going to go to this party with my boyfriend to have sex in front of other people,' " said Melinda Gallagher, 30, a former graduate student in human sexuality at New York University and a founder of Cake. "The philosophy is that women need their own space to explore sexuality. The women in the room direct whatever happens."

To the untrained eye, at least, it can be hard to distinguish political soirees from basic sexual ones. Just before the holidays, at Carnaval bar on East Houston Street, One Leg Up sponsored a mixer for couples interested in learning more about the scene. (Palagia, the group's founder, calls such events "takeouts.")

Those who knew the pass phrase — "I'm sexy" — were allowed into the bar by two hulking doormen, and once inside found that perhaps a quarter of the women — most in their 20's and early 30's — were topless, save for dabs of body paint on their nipples, to comply with the city's public nudity laws. Downstairs in the midst of a crowd of around 200, half a dozen women were packed tightly together in a sort of group rub, undulating in time with the techno soundtrack. In a corner, a stunning young woman with blond hair preppily styled like Gwyneth Paltrow's was making out with one man, while another sat with his arm tucked into the waistline of her skirt. He wore the nonchalant expression of someone playing a video game for the thousandth time.

A balding 36-year-old named Ron, who said he works in technology in Manhattan, stood against a wall with his wife, surveying the scene. He said they were looking for another woman to take home. "You just go with the flow," he said. "Most of the time you have a drink and look at the nice people and then go home." A naughty smile flickered across his face. "Sometimes you meet someone and they go home with you."

Some older swingers find it surprising that young women seem so comfortable experimenting with multiple partners. Angelo Valez, a veteran of the New York swinging scene for the better part of a decade and the organizer of a Latin-theme swinging group called Salsa Swingers, said: "I've been getting more younger couples where the girl is 18 or 19 and the guy is 21 or 22, and I've had to turn people away for that reason. It's like, wow, I'm surprised that people that age would be into it."

In an era when young people are blogging about their most intimate secrets and videos of celebrities having sex circulate with some frequency, the threshold for exhibitionism seems to

have been lowered, and the line between public and private further blurred. Anna, the 22-year-old graduate student, for example, said she had no anxiety about being filmed having sex at a One Leg Up party for HBO's reality show "Real Sex." Her main concern was lighting.

"I think I look better on 'Real Sex' than Paris Hilton looks in that video, because I'm not green and zombie-ish," she said.

At her parties, Palagia makes introductions and acts as a kind of etiquette cop. No leering is allowed, she said, and men must ask permission before engaging with women. She said the goal of her parties was "to help the masses feel comfortable with their sexuality."

While New York has never lacked outlets of sexual exploration, the current crop of erotic parties organized by women began when Cake put on an evening at a Lower East Side bar called Fun in July 2000. The group started with 100 people on its mailing list and now has 30,000, while attendance at its parties, held at nightclubs, averages 800 to 1,000, Ms. Gallagher said.

In 2002, Palagia, who had been holding her own private events since 1999, started a Web site and gave her first party at a public gathering place; soon, Flirt NYC and Skin were formed. The four groups typically hold one or two events a month, and each group's parties have their own identity. Flirt, for example, is oriented toward bisexuals and straight women curious about bisexuality, while One Leg Up is mostly for heterosexuals. Only One Leg Up organizes true orgies; the other groups' parties serve as sexually charged meeting places for those interested in further exploration off premises. Spontaneous lap dances and lots of bare skin are common to all.

Perhaps not surprisingly, not all men who attend the events find the new paradigm particularly enticing, or even necessarily new. Rob Press, 36, a computer consultant who has attended several One Leg Up parties, said that in his experience, "women are the gatekeepers anyway" in sexual matters.

"If you're going to keep making them more empowered, then I become a commodity," he said. "It just makes it fashionable to hide behind political jargon, unless they're attracting guys with an emasculation fantasy."

At one very quantifiable level, the events are indeed contributing to the empowerment of at least a few women: those organizing them. Palagia, for example, charges \$55 a couple in advance for her "takeouts" and \$175 a couple for her private events. She does have overhead costs — she hires doormen, for example, and entertainers. (To enhance the glam-rock theme of the party at Carnaval, she hired two dwarfs to dress as Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons of the band Kiss.) But she said her profit margins are large enough to provide her a decent living.

Cake, which began as simply a series of parties, has morphed into an entertainment company; in addition to a book deal with Simon & Schuster for a "Cake Guide to Sexual Empowerment," it recently completed a pilot for Showtime for a possible series on sexual mores in New York. (In keeping with its equal opportunity pledge, television hasn't ignored male party organizers; VH1 recently shot part of a documentary at a swingers' hangout in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, run by a 36-year-old erotic-party host named Grego.)

Ms. Gallagher of Cake said the media deals were part of the sexual revolution she wants to encourage. "You can't be subversive for your whole entire existence and make the huge social impact we want to make," she said. "You have to be in it to win it."

Some worry that for all the talk of empowerment, certain conventional dangers of such a lifestyle are being overlooked, like the threat of sexually transmitted diseases. (Condoms are required at One Leg Up's intimate events.) Dr. Megan Fleming, a clinical psychologist and sex therapist at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, said that there could be potential psychological perils as well. "What can be a very hot fantasy doesn't necessarily translate into 'I'm going to enjoy this in real life,'" she said. "In a fantasy, you're in control of everything that happens. Reality is not like that."

She also cited long-term ramifications. "When sex becomes a sport, it can take away from the potential to enjoy it in a more intimate relationship," she said. "They're so overstimulated in this environment that they may not understand sexual intimacy in a more monogamous relationship." Anna said her solution to that problem was to find a boyfriend who was just as enthusiastic about the scene as she was. Despite having had over 100 sexual partners, Anna said, she is disease free and has no plans to stop going to the parties anytime soon.

She confessed, though, to one lingering fear. "I just hope I don't turn 30 and suddenly decide I want to run for office," she said.