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SEX AND THE CITY FAITHFUL CITY

THE NEW UNDERGROUND MONOGAMY



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PHOTO: JOHN GENTHINE, COURTESY OF FARELOAR

Sex and the faithful City

A new breed of New Yorkers look to strengthen the ties of monogamy through open sexual relationships

by STEPHANIE SELLARS

In a candlelit room, a gorgeous nude woman is leaning her arms on a white-sheeted bed, while a hot man penetrates her from behind. Next to them, another attractive couple is in the same position, and the woman's breasts are spilling out of the lacy top of her French Maid outfit. The two women kiss and fondle each other with a delight that comes from the awareness that they have only just met and find themselves in this mutually pleasurable situation. A few feet away, a couple of women are on their knees, playing with each other's tits while another hetero couple is heaving to the rhythms of missionary sex that is everything but traditional.

Sounds like a fantasy, right? Or a porn film? It's neither. It's a real scene from something that can be experienced at least once a week in New York City, in the fascinating underground world of sex parties.

These aren't the standard parties that somehow, through a steady stream of libations, turn into spontaneous orgies. "Sex Parties" are like live porn, only better, because you are directly involved. Whether they are called Swingers Parties, Play Parties or Erotic Soirées, they are fantasies played out on a sensual stage where group sex, voyeurism and exhibitionism are not exactly planned but expected and encouraged in a space where people feel safe and free to

explore their sexuality on a communal level.

Roughly 1.5 million people in the United States are swingers. Also known discreetly as "The Lifestyle," swinging is any form of recreational social sex, a practice that defies the norm of sexual monogamy in committed relationships. For many young urban swingers, "swinging" is a dated term that implies middle-aged hippie orgies and suburban key parties in the '70s. According to Terry Gould, author of *The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers*, swinging started with World War II fighter pilots who cared for each other's wives if the husbands were away or missing in action. By the time the Korean War ended, these com-

munities had spread to the suburbs and the media dubbed the phenomenon "wife-swapping."

As the movement grew and found its place in the cities, it has evolved into organized clubs and parties, where sexually open people may find ample opportunity for a threesome or an orgy. My introduction to the New York scene was through *OneLegUpNYC*, a service devoted to creating regular erotic soirées in upscale venues. The first party I attended was a "Take-Out." The theme was *Moulin Rouge Masquerade*, so I wore a corset and Victorian bloomers with a Venetian mask. My date was elegantly dressed in black velvet.

COVER STORY

Scattered rose petals greeted us at the entrance and trailed up the stairs to the second floor of the lofty, mahogany paneled, gilded ceiling club. Already it felt like a fantasy. Condoms, lube packets, lollipops and candy necklaces decorated the candlelit tables. As the room filled, various characters emerged: a woman bearing colorful, glittering, naked breasts offering body painting; a buff man wearing nothing but crutch-clinging black shorts was available for back massages; and delicious dancers in elaborate burlesque sequin and feather costumes fluttering through the room, distributing pasties to eager women. My date watched and grinded behind me as I danced, kissed and caressed several women. Though I kissed a few other guys and he tasted the lips of a few ladies, it was clear that the females reigned in this space. We ended up taking a woman back to my place, hence "Take-Out."

OneLegUpNYC also offers "Side-Dish" soirées (catering to singles), and "Eat-In" soirées for those who hunger for more of a full meal. You must be a member or the guest of a member to attend an Eat-In. At 12:30 a.m., everyone must strip to his/her underwear. The underwear doesn't stay on for long.

Despite Hollywood's on-screen hedonism, we are still living in a sexually repressed culture, and people want an alternative to the anonymous plethora of porn clogging the Internet and seedy back alley DVD stores. This alternative world allows them to explore their sexuality without worrying about unwanted advances. Membership to OneLegUpNYC requires that couples submit an essay as well as photos, so the horny hogs and disrespectful swingers are weeded out immediately.

In New York, the Lifestyle is attracting younger couples in their twenties and thirties, as well as singles. For singles (women especially), exotic parties are a positive alternative to one-night stands and the conventional bar scene. It is a safer, practical way to have a sex life if you're not interested in dating. At the same time, singles may meet other singles they might want to date, as in any community of like-minded people.

All of the parties I've attended do not allow single males, not to deny single men pleasure, but to ensure that all the guests feel comfortable in a gender-balanced environment. Since female bisexuality is a major component of the Lifestyle, it is easier for a single woman to approach a couple at a

party than it is for a single guy. (Male-male activity is accepted but rare.) If the women are comfortable, the men will be comfortable, but it doesn't usually work the other way around.

As one taste of a good thing whets the appetite for more, this curious cat recently attended a bi-female Play Party sponsored by Premium Events. A hefty man greeted me at the door of the swanky Noho loft. I thought I was in the wrong place, but no, this was the guy to whom I had emailed my photo, height, weight and age for membership acceptance. After he introduced me to the Coppertone complexioned hostess and a

few of the "dancers" who were hired as entertainment, a voice inside my head began a one-phrase monologue of *bridge-and-tunnel*. When I realized I was in the minority of women not hired for the night, the voice said, "I'll give it about 20 minutes before I'm out the door." How threatening could a roomful of women in lingerie be? I felt more comfortable as I eased into a conversation with two dancers who knew each other from college. One had majored in cultural studies and talked about her thesis on the empowerment of strippers. The other intrigued me with details of her urban studies project on feminist geography in the subway. Twenty minutes had passed and I was not headed for the door. This was too interesting.

The party didn't really get wild until after the hot buffet finally arrived at midnight. The two Jacuzzi bathtubs were bubbling and soon there were five naked girls in a tub. I had the pleasure of receiving a lap dance from Myla, an Amazonian beauty who identified herself as a bona-fide lesbian. When I told her I never had a threesome with two women, she suggested we go find Lulu, the sexed-up Thai girl who had arrived around the time everyone was eating lasagna. The three of us got cozy on the black leather couch, and I'll just say we played a hot, multi-cultural game of pussy-in-the-middle. Before I knew it, it was 3 a.m. How did 20 minutes become five hours?

Premium Events also hosts couples parties and lap dance events catering to single men. Though not as sophisticated as OneLegUpNYC, Premium Events parties are affordable and spicy, especially if you meet some interesting strippers. Palagia, the owner/founder of OneLegUpNYC, has been criticized for her high prices, but what distinguishes One Leg Up from other Lifestyle parties is in the details. And details

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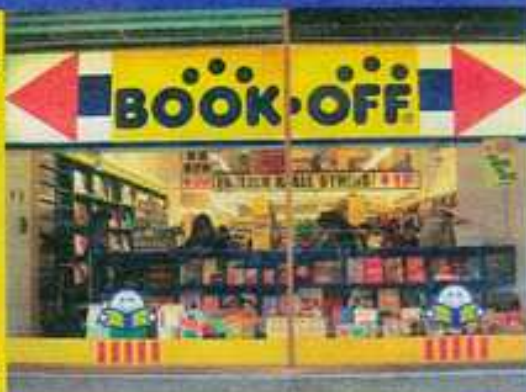
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COVER STORY

are expensive. Palagia is Greek, and she brings a historic Grecian sensibility to the source: sophisticated entertainment, quality music, specific themes and at the East Inn, generous platters of rustic breads, whole fruits and vegetables, like a feast for Eros and Aphrodite. *OneLegUpNYC* is

taking the swinger scene to another level. In fact, any variation of the word "swinging" is nonexistent on the website. Instead, it is referred to as a "Sensual Movement." In Palagia's words, "It's not about coming to have sex. It's not about swinging. It's about erotica."

And erotica is as broad a term as any to describe this fascinating lifestyle. From painted breasts to full-blown orgies, fantasies come alive. If you're an exhibitionist, you'll have your audience. If you prefer to see your boyfriend get it on with another chick, you'll have your pick of willing women. It is acceptable to simply stroll through play areas and observe others in action. The beauty of the Lifestyle is the common understanding that "no means no" while promoting the freedom to fulfill individual desires.

For many of those involved, swinging is not just about swapping anymore. It has moved beyond breaking up the routine of monogamy. In a recent national online survey of 1,092 swingers, 62.6 percent found that swinging improved their marriages/relationships (*Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 2000). Among those with unhappy relationships, 90.4 percent said their relationships improved after swinging. The respondents also rated their lives as more satisfying and exciting. According to the numbers, the Lifestyle appears to discourage jealousy and cheating while promoting open, honest

communication between couples and other sex partners. In Palagia's forthcoming book, a compendium of essays penned by party attendees, one couple says, "Being able to have sex with others at the same time, being in the trusting and loving presence of each other is the ultimate joy for us!"

ULTIMATELY, THE ARGUMENT BEING MADE BY THESE COUPLES IS: INCLUDING YOUR PARTNER IN OUTSIDE SEXPLORATION ALLOWS GREATER INTIMACY



Ultimately, the argument made by these couples is: Including your partner in outside sexploration allows greater intimacy. Another couple in the book asserts, "One of the things that we have always appreciated about my girlfriend's sexuality is her openness and willingness to explore...I love being with a woman who understands herself and who is not afraid to tell me and communicate her needs in an intimate setting." Swinging is slowly becoming an anchor for many couples who find themselves awash in a society that upholds a double standard when it comes to committed relationships: monogamy is the romantic ideal, but deception and torrid affairs make the movies.

Despite the benefits, the Lifestyle is not for everybody and is still considered taboo in mainstream circles. But in an era where at least one partner will have an affair in approximately 80 percent of all marriages, rigid monogamy is as outdated as house phobia. Perhaps in the near future it will be trendy to be a swinger. In the meantime, if you want to live out your fantasies, there are plenty of options from which to choose. You may just find a beautiful naked masseuse slowly sliding her breasts and down your torso, as the voices of voyeurs make you feel as though you are just as much in the scene as you are on the sideline, watching. ■

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