

Nightlife



It's showbiz, baby

Geishas are out, new-halves are in. **Annemarie Luck** dips a toe into the weird and wonderful world of Tokyo's cabaret pubs

Is it a he?
Or is it a she?



Kingyo's reinventing stage is part of the magic



The warrior dance

What do you do when you're faced with a naked Japanese man on stage, a look of mock terror on his face as one of his co-performers hands you the end of a long, exaggerated elastic band while another stands behind him and holds the other end between his legs? You count down with the rest of the audience from three to one and let go, obviously, and watch the poor (or brave?) man fall to the ground as the elastic band slaps him hard where the sun don't shine. And the crowd goes wild.

This is not a quintessential show-pub experience, which is usually an eye-popping mix of Las Vegas cabaret glitz and traditional Japanese dancing. And granted, it was part of a late-night gig with an all-male cast, so even giving it the title of 'cabaret' is dubious. Yet there I was, at the end of a very long evening of show-pub hopping, faced with the shrinking genitals of a man paid to entertain Roppongi's creatures of the night.

Roppongi is littered with show, or cabaret, pubs and the level of talent, entertainment and skin-baring varies between them. Not to be confused with a hostess bar, the show pub does what it says: offers drinks and grub along with a stage show. The similarity between the two types of bars comes in that you get to mingle with the performing girls and

boys – or girl-boys as the case may be – before and after the show, making this form of entertainment just that little bit more titillating. And both are arguably descended from the geisha culture, which also sees pretty young things dressed up and selling a fantasy to Japan's overworked salarymen (these days women are customers too). As for the trend of hiring men dressed as women, and men who live as women (new-halves), I'm told



The boys at Dragon

by the owner of Roppongi Kingyo that this stems from kabuki culture, where traditionally only men were allowed to perform on stage and so had to play the role of women too. Right then, handcuff your inhibitions to the bedpost. You don't want them standing in the way of the 'Gangnam Style' dance you're about to do with a Japanese version of Kylie Minogue.

DRAGON TOKYO

Just when you thought things couldn't get any weirder than the naked-man-elastic-band incident, one of the performers crawls inside a big see-through plastic bag and his buddies suck the air out if it using a vacuum cleaner. I can only assume this is meant to be a rip off of Japanese artist Haruhiko Kawaguchi's 'Flesh Love' series, which features couples trapped in vacuum-sealed bags, but the humour is lost on me as I imagine

NUDITY RATING ★ No thrills ★★ Just a hint ★★★ Bare buns ★★★★ Torso tease (female) ★★★★★ Full Monty (male)



him suffocating to death. Nevertheless, the rest of the audience is laughing uproariously, as they have been doing for the entire show, which basically consists of some half-hearted 'Magic Mike' moves, some very enthusiastic full Monties, and some intermittent comedic routines. Fans of 'Jackass' will relish the live crude action but if you are looking for anything other than shock factor and a peek into Japan's more bizarre side, choose a different door.

NUDITY RATING ★★★★★
6F, 3-11-6 Roppongi, Minato.
03 3405 0566. 12am-3am.

ROPPONGI KINGYO

Shima Shyna, a lanky new-half dancer who's been performing at Kingyo for eight years, catwalks up to me before the show for a chat. She's all legs and arms and big hazel eyes. She tells me that it was her childhood dream to join the cast of Kingyo because the theatre, founded in 1994, was the first of its kind and stands apart from the rest as it seeks not only to entertain but also to deliver a moving message. Watching the show, it's the moving stage that really gets my attention. It changes constantly; elevating, dipping, turning into neon-pink stairs or slanted wooden ramps, all the while with the performers twirling, jumping, acrobating and even Irish dancing their way on and around it. One press of the wrong button by the stage staff and it could all go massively wrong. But the show goes off without

a hitch; unsurprising since Kingyo has built a reputation on delivering slick productions that fuse innovation and tradition. This particular one is their 25th-anniversary show and includes all the extravaganza you could want out of 60 minutes as well as more sombre references to Japan's wartime past and flashes of a futuristic world.

NUDITY RATING ★★
3-14-17 Roppongi, Minato. 03
3478 3000. www.kingyo.co.jp.
6pm-12am (two shows per night,
closed Mon). ¥3,500 (excl. drinks
and food).

ROPPONGI KAGUWA

Another show pub with an impressive reinventing

stage, Kaguwa incorporates non-stop energy and emotion into both its daily Oiran-za show and weekends-only Biou-za show. The premise of both shows is the red-light district of the Meiji era (1868-1912) when the oiran, or Japanese courtesans, were known as masters of entertainment, cultural arts and conversation. That said, the show veers from elegant kimono-clad oirans to samurai-wielding warriors, a hungry, crazy-eyed, inflatable dragon, and nerdy golf players dancing to 'YMCA' (the mind boggles). At times,

there are subtle undertones of homo-eroticism and in one scene a group of girls dressed in slinky red gowns turns away from the audience and drops their satin cloaks to waist height, revealing naked backs and the hint of a bosom curve. That's about as risqué as it gets, though, and on the whole, the show works as a fascinating summary of the beautiful traditions and odd paradoxes of Japanese culture.

NUDITY RATING ★★★★★
5-4-2 Roppongi, Minato. 03 5414 8818. www.kaguwa.com. 6pm-12.30am Mon-Fri (two shows per night), 3.45pm-12.30am Sat & Sun (three shows per night). ¥3,500 Oiran-za (excl. drinks and food), ¥2,500 Biou-za (incl. green tea and crackers).

BURLESQUE TOKYO

When I first walked into Burlesque Tokyo, I thought 'strip club'. There was a girl hanging upside down from a pole on a stage surrounded by men, and a Jacuzzi in the corner that doubles up as a bar, complete with barmaid serving drinks while floating around amidst foamy bubbles. It's a smoky, loud-music vibe with mirrored walls and shiny chandeliers and girls strutting around in teeny tiny denim shorts and cutaway crop tops. Yet it's not a strip club masquerading as a show pub. It's inspired by 'Burlesque' – the film – and as such it does a good job of putting on a musical slash cabaret show, even if there's no Aguilera rival in sight. Expect tight buns in G-strings and excitable Japanese



girls willing you to stand up and join them in a 'Gangnam Style' finale dance. Oh, and don't forget to exchange your yen for fake bills – when the dancers come round to greet you afterwards, their bras overflowing with accumulated tips, you don't want to be caught empty-handed. Still, not a strip club.

NUDITY RATING ★★★★★ (★★★★★ if a background poster showing bare-breasted ladies counts) 7F Urban Bldg, 7-13-2 Roppongi, Minato. 03 6447 2037. burlesque-roppongi.com. 7pm-1am Mon-Sat (three shows per night). ¥3,000/hour 7pm-9pm, ¥4,000/hour 9pm-1am.

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