

ARTICLE IN FULL

Playboy's back? We're all ears

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Last updated June 2 2011 12:01AM

From the original 1960s Bunny Girls to the women working in his new London club, we hear about the fluctuating fortunes of Hugh Hefner's Playboy empire

On a leather banquette at London's new Playboy Club, I watch a little fashion parade about the evolution of the bunny-girl costume. Except the outfit doesn't evolve an awful lot in 50 years. A cartoonish female outline encased in a fetish corset, softened and domesticated with fluffy animal accessories. Hugh Hefner may now be a strange, pitiful Viagra-chomping octogenarian, but he sure understood male fantasy. Sexy but unthreatening: works every time.

Nevertheless, the show, starring the club's bunnies themselves, provides a handy history of Playboy's fortunes. First, Classic Bunny, the sleek black satin uniform of the original 1960s Chicago club. Next, as Hef expanded into resorts, Bikini Bunny, serving mai tais by a Caribbean pool. Later, as he became a global mogul flipping between LA and London, we have leather mini-skirted Jet Bunny, who staffed Playboy's Douglas DC9, dubbed, amazingly enough, *The Big Bunny*.

But as Eighties Bunny totters out, her costume accessorised with tacky, soft-porn stockings and suspenders, you see things have gone awry. This is Not-A-Happy-Bunny, struggling for business amid the myxomatosis of Reagan conservatism, Aids and feminism. The original London club, 50 yards from my banquette, lost its gaming licence in 1981, a fatal corporate wound since by then it provided two-thirds of Hef's total revenue. By the early 1990s his entire club empire was dead.

Hey, hold on! The music cranks to a climax. Out on to the catwalk comes a diamanté-studded couture costume created by Marchesa (a one-off novelty, to be auctioned for charity) and modelled by socialite-slash-model Antalya Nall-Cain, daughter of Lord Brocket. This is Classy Designer Retro Bunny. Bunny Reborn. Or so Playboy hopes . . .

Outside, on Old Park Lane, Mayfair, wearing home-made rabbit masks crying tears of blood, are a crew of protesters from the women's rights groups Object and Feminista. "Eff off Hef!" and "Piss off Playboy!" they chant merrily at the guests arriving for this preview night, a week before Saturday's official opening when they plan a bigger demonstration. Someone in a grotesque Hef mask and trademark silk robe holds a bowl of rabbit droppings. Playboy: serving the same old sexist s**t since 1953, is the message.

Enormous bouncers view the feminists with bemusement, but inside the leathery, low-lit swank of the club, Playboy PRs vibrate with unease. Indeed, this seems a very nervous operation. I am asked repeatedly what tone my piece will take. I am expressly forbidden to talk to the bunnies. The PRs freak out when I ask about bunny wages or whether the girls get

to keep their tips. (The answers were: no comment, and tips are pooled then shared with, apparently, no house deductions.) Over and over, I am reminded that this Playboy Club is totally separate from *Playboy* magazine, the Playboy Channel, the six-series US TV show *Girls of the Playboy Mansion*, and the rest of Hef's mighty porn operation, which followed his club interests.

But when I meet the feminist campaigners earlier they say quite the opposite. "Hefner paved the way for the global sex industry," says Anna van Heeswijk, of Object. "The mass commercial exploitation of women, which has allowed porn to seep into the mainstream, began with Playboy." Bunny-logo merchandise, such as pencil cases and T-shirts — sold, until an outcry, in W H Smith's — these feminists see as a means of grooming girls for their place in porn culture.

Back inside the club, such talk is heresy. Nostalgia is the vibe Playboy is riding right now, the gorgeously-lit recreation of the early 1960s in *Mad Men*, where Don Draper is Hefner's original Playboy man incarnate: restless, intellectual, frustrated by the confines of marriage and suburbia, the stuffiness of Eisenhower conservatism, driven by a wolfish libido, a connoisseur of beautiful cars, drinks, suits, women.

In the last series, his British colleague Lane Pryce is even shown in the New York club besotted with a black bunny girl. (Perhaps to mitigate against its dire sexual politics, Playboy loves to stress its anti-racism, that its Deep South clubs were integrated pre-civil rights movement and it championed black artistes and girls.) In *Mad Men's* slipstream the US network ABC has created *Pan Am*, about the raunchy exploits of 1960s air stewardesses. Strapline: "They do it at 30,000ft." Meanwhile, there is NBC's *The Playboy Club*, a drama which might as well be an advertorial, that glamorously mythologises the bunnies and clients of the original Chicago club itself.

Because in uncertain economic times, how beguiling the past appears: a simpler age, when men were unquestionably in charge, while women looked like women and knew their place, ie, smiling and serving a drink.

The staircase leading to the casino at the new London club is lined with black-and-white portraits of Sixties bunnies, taken when the club's members were the hottest stars of the age: Sean Connery, Tom Jones and Sidney Poitier. Woody Allen performed on the opening night. James Bond, I am reminded, produces his Playboy key in *Diamonds are Forever*. The PR tells me they are seeking members of equivalent calibre. "We don't want Katie Price rolling out of here," she says. "Or too many footballers. We're going to have a strict vetting panel." Though with membership fees at £1,500 a year, plus a £1,000 joining fee — high even for London clubs — you wonder who but footballers could pay.

So was working for Playboy in the 1960s as glamorous as nostalgia paints it? Or was it more like the cheapskate, exploitative operation revealed by the feminist writer Gloria Steinem in her 1963 undercover investigation *I Was a Playboy Bunny*? I meet Catherine MacDonald, one of the first six British bunnies. She is 68 now, small, plump and adorable.

Bringing over our tray of tea I joke that I should serve her using the trademark "bunny dip". She stands to show how it's really done, an awkward, stylised manoeuvre whereby you stand with your back to the table, knees bent, back arched, and serve drinks over your shoulder. "It was so we didn't flash our cleavage as we leant across the table," she says.

MacDonald worked for Playboy for nine years and as we flick through her album — snaps of her serving Liberace, Marty Feldman, James Coburn, Graham Hill — it is clear that this was the most vivid period of her life, before a couple of disastrous relationships, jobs she hated and scraping by raising two kids alone.

A middle-class girl from Scotland, she was a bit-part actress before she dated Victor Lownes, the infamous London club manager — “Oh, everyone did. He was a terrible womaniser.” — and was chosen as a pioneer bunny, sent to America to train, then introduced the bunny arts to Britain. In Chicago, she lived at the Playboy Mansion with other girls, six to a dorm. “We paid rent,” she says.

Hef’s bachelor pad was in the same building and she recalls him drifting around in pyjamas, his revolving bed, the basement pool like an aquarium so men could check out girls frolicking. Didn’t people swim naked? “Well, not when I was there,” she says, ever discreet. Bunnies were supposed not to date members, but she had a long affair with one. “It was OK if Victor approved.”

She recalls a life of mixing with movie stars at Hef’s Sunday brunches, flying around the world, being bought watches by rich Arab clients, combined with hard waitressing toil, remembering cocktail garnishes and fluffing up her cotton tail with a steel brush to avoid a fine. She says the bunnies positioned their ears to express their moods: “Ears pointed down, meant you were feeling a bit blue. That was backstage,” she adds quickly. “Out in the club your ears had to be up and perky.”

It must have been an unforgiving costume if you gained weight. “Oh the girls would be sent away for two or three months if they got too fat,” she says. “And if they no longer matched the Playboy image they’d be taken into the office and fired on the spot.” What does she mean? “Well, the ideal age was 18 to 25. If you looked old you were out.” MacDonald, who had a sweet, young-looking face, stayed until the geriatric age of 30.

In the London club, I disobey the PRs and speak to the new bunnies. They are an arresting sight, lined up immaculately costumed and smokey-eyed in the requisite back-arched “bunny stance”, statuesque in their ears and 3in minimum heels. I ask a bunny with an East European accent if the costume is comfortable to wear. “Give me your hand,” she says and, grimacing, directs it to her waist.

Her torso is rock hard, squeezed by metal struts that also keep her back rigidly upright.

I am chatting to a tiny Brazilian bunny about the laborious three-part Playboy recruitment process when a furious floor manager orders her off to clear a table. Then I find Sara, a croupier bunny just graduated from the ten-week “bunny school”, who works at the blackjack table upstairs. She is also a student, working in the casino to fund her PhD and is irritated by the campaigners outside. “I’ve read Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem,” she says. “I am a modern, empowered woman and this is what I want to do. This is fourth-wave feminism.” Crimson-lipped, an indie-girl quiff poking from beneath her ears, Sara, 27, is confident, sassy and clearly relishes the superpower her Christina Hendricks figure has over men whenever she sashays across the floor. She says the intensive training — a whole day learning to deal a single card — bonded the bunnies. “We are a sisterhood,” she declares and fellow croupier Hayley, also 27, agrees.

Hayley was formerly an air stewardess, where her big-eyed prettiness and kindly northern manners were exploited by another corporation, albeit with a less revealing uniform. Now she has a skill for life that could take her on cruise ships or to Monte Carlo and Las Vegas.

I am reminded of Steinem's critics, who said that as a college graduate who'd never have to seek work as a waitress she could not comprehend that being a bunny might be best among limited options.

And today, in an age when lapdancing joints are licensed in most provincial towns, stripping is rebranded as upmarket burlesque; when pole-dancing classes, making porn movies, having breast enlargements, even prostitution itself are now spoken of as "empowering" women, a bunny girl seems almost quaint.

I ask Sara if she dates the customers and she says absolutely not: fraternisation is illegal under gaming laws. She's had her tail pulled by a few, but it's women who are most curious to feel it. I ask if I can, and discover that it is no longer cotton — once the bane of bunnydom — but made from a thick coil of marabou. Casino work can be pressured, Sara says, but there's the Bunny Mother, Eileen, on hand: "I had a little cry the other day because I was tired and she was very kind." Sara has met retired bunnies at a club reunion who've gone on to be psychologists or businesswomen: like her, they saw it as a means to an end.

But the question is who will become Playboy members? The image of a frail Hefner, propped up by his girlfriend/carers, is ghastly PR and the tackier wings of his porn realm taint this venture into retro chic. The chaste bunny girl has blurred in many minds with the full-frontal Playmate or Centrefold.

I ask a pair of Sloane young male friends of Antalya Nall-Cain if they plan to join. "Too expensive," says one. "Drinks are £10 each. And you couldn't bring a girlfriend — she'd think you were a total sleaze." The other adds: "Besides, for a stag night, guys of my generation like something a lot more explicit."

But the success of the club will be based upon its gaming business. Upstairs in the casino, a table of Chinese are heads down over the roulette wheel. I spy many Middle Eastern clients: it was London's summering Saudis who in the Sixties made Playboy such huge business.

But Chris Lines, editor of *Gambling* magazine, is familiar with all the London casinos but is dubious about the new club.

"I'm surprised Playboy hasn't gone even more nostalgic," he says, above the generic disco throb. "With Frank Sinatra or jazz playing, gone properly Rat Pack. There are other London casinos with pretty waitresses."

We are accosted by Salvatore Calabrese the barman, who looks like an Italian being played by Peter Sellers. He is a venerable expert on cocktails, has written a book on cognac and some of his collection of rare vintages, the earliest from 1788, are displayed in glass cabinets. With his £2,000 cocktails and old-school demeanour, Salvatore is here to lend Playboy a little class and charm.

But there is a corporate, drearily old-fashioned — not retro — feel to the club. Chelsea and Kensington are full of buzzing, designer bars and nightclubs, frequented by London's

international beautiful people of both sexes and young British royals. Playboy reminds me a little of its nearest neighbour on Piccadilly, the Hard Rock Cafe: ersatz, coldly corporate, trading off its brief, long-ago moment of cool. Playboy is full of people taking photos of themselves with ever-patient bunny girls, like tourists at Disneyland, grinning next to Mickey Mouse.