Victoriana, Complete With Corsets

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Photographs by Gale Zucker for The New York Times

Kandie Carle onstage at the Grassy Hill Lodge in Derby, performing her "Victorian Lady" for the Derby Historical Society.

By SUSAN PEARSALL

KANDIE CARLE knows how to get the attention of a chattering audience.

At a recent tea for the Derby Historical Society, attended by more than 200 well-dressed women and a dozen men, the East Haddam performer took the stage for her one-woman show, "The Victorian Lady," wearing a long, silky dressing gown. Then she removed it, to reveal the underwear of the 1860's or 1890's. The chatterers were reduced to mice in a minute. There was a certain air of prurient interest, despite the fact she was covered from shoulders to toes in a cotton chemise, gathered drawers and plain, white stockings.

"Because it's underwear and it's lacy and it's white, everyone just gets so embarrassed," Ms. Carle admitted later, with a smile. "It's really the essence of mystery, and I think people really respond to that."

In her shows, Ms. Carle spends an hour or more dressing from corset to gloves in vintage and reproduction clothing she sews herself, all the while offering little-known details of Victorian life and etiquette with a dose of playfulness.

Since last year, she has been performing throughout New England. (In her day job, Ms. Carle is a voicing actress who tours with the National Theater of the Deaf.)

Before approaching her corset, a woman of the 1860's would sweep her long hair up into a twist, decorate it with ribbons or combs and put on her shoes, Ms. Carle told her audience. Ideally, a corset could whittle a waist down to 17 to 20 inches, but left a woman unable to touch her head or her toes.

"Corsets, generally speaking, were not an option," said the actress as she began fastening a heavily boned, pale blue satin model, reinforced with steel at the bust and around her middle. Corsets were considered essential; girls began wearing boxy, lightly boned ones when they were 6 to 8 months old.

"It was all to get the support, the walking tall" Ms. Carle explained. Women slept in looser, lightly boned corsets, and pregnant women wore ones with wide straps under the belly

When an enthusiastic volunteer gave a sharp tug on the corset laces crisscrossing Ms. Carle's back, her waist narrowed visibly by two to three inches.

"There are a couple of things inherent in getting a teeny-tiny waist," Ms. Carle conceded. "It shoves everything up, and it shoves everything else down" making for hourglass figures.

Corset in place, Ms. Carle stepped into a crinoline cage, a floor-length, full skirt fitted with graduated hoops of steel. This was considered "a modern masterpiece of fashion design," she said, because it freed women from layers of stiff, heavy petticoats. The broad base made a small waist appear even smaller.

"I actually have photos of shop girls doing all kinds of factory work in crinoline cages," Ms. Carle said. Farm wives found them impractical, but they did wear corsets, she added.

She piled on three more layers: a coarse overskirt to hide the hoop lines; a fine, silky skirt, then a lace ball skirt, trimmed with rosettes trailing ribbons up the sides. Next, came a boned bodice in matching faux silk, attached to the skirt with numerous hooks and eyes. More hooks and eyes marched up the back, hidden by a placket. (Ms. Carle copied the gown from a picture in an 1864 Godey's Ladies Book.)

Zippers were not invented until the late 19th century, when they were used for shoes, Ms. Carle said. A wide strip of lace was snapped over the placket to make it difficult to determine how someone could get into the dress. She completed her outfit with earrings, necklace and bracelet, all in a floral theme, and short, white gloves.

It was not unusual for middle- and upper-class women to dress up two or three times a week.

"They loved to have a good time," Ms. Carle said. "We look back on the Victorians and think of them as stodgy, prudish, boring, severely religious, non-fun-loving individuals." That, she said, is is bogus.

Indeed, Ms. Carle's research indicates the Victorians were sentimental souls who enjoyed flirting, parlor games and dances.

When a husband left home to fight the Civil War, his wife often sewed a button, dabbed with her perfume, underneath his collar. In 1895, Montgomery Ward offered a mail-order service for turning hair samples, usually a wife's, into watch fobs, necklaces or bracelets.

Proper Victorians followed complicated rules for every social encounter. At balls, for instance, dance cards insured that no man danced with one woman more than three times an evening. If a woman declined a man who requested a free dance, she had to sit out that number.

The rules of behavior were spelled out in "Etiquette for Every Occasion: A Guidebook for Ladies and Gentlemen," recently reprinted by LaserWriters Publishing in Pipestone, Minn. In such a book one could find guidance on how to sit down in a crinoline cage (not on the rungs, and don't slouch) and how to maneuver down stairs in it (hold the sides; never grab the front or reveal ankles).

Men could speak volumes with the flowers they gave to women, as detailed in "The Language of Flowers," reissued by Penguin U.S.A. A striped carnation, for example, meant refusal, Ms. Carle said.

Women flirted by making eye contact across a room and sending various signals with fans. An open fan, closed slightly, than trailed behind a woman said, "Follow me," Ms. Carle said.

After the show, Josephine Ledell of Shelton said she planned to buy copies of the flower book for her two grandsons, both in their 20's, so they might convey the right messages to their girlfriends. "I think that's very

A one-woman show informs while the giggles go on.

romantic," Mrs. Ledell said. Presumably, they no striped carnations are involved.

Other people found the whole thing a bit tortuous.

"I never saw a lady dress like that before," said Robert Fitzgerald of Seymour. "I'm glad I wasn't a young guy in those days. I don't know whether I'd have the patience."

Eileen Krugel of Ansonia said, "I'm happy to be alive today, instead of 100 years ago."

The show grew out of Ms. Carle's 20-year fascination with the Victorian era, beginning when she was 12 and her grandmother began telling her about her great-grandmother's life in the 1890's and showing her family pictures. As Ms. Carle grew older, she read Victorian plays and biographies.

"I feel like I know intimately that time period, more from an emotional inside out than from a book-learning perspective," Ms. Carle said.

She joined Polite Society, a period dance group in Bloomfield, and began going to antiques stores looking for Victorian clothing, jewelry, books and magazines. Her collection grew to about 1,000 pieces, including 25 pairs of gloves, 10 parasols, a dozen fans and 4 full jewelry boxes, as well as complete wardrobes for all seasons. Recently, she paid $195 for a three-piece, watered-silk ball gown circa 1860.

The question became: what to do with all of this? With her training in singing, dancing and acting, Ms. Carle decided to try a show. There have been unexpected bonuses; after performances, people have offered her their great-grandmothers' belongings. Ms. Carle said she acquired a sable muff this way.

Why are people interested in Victorian times today?

There is "a real sense of relief that they can look at historical people and historical times, take them down off the pedestal and see that they were human," Ms. Carle said. "They were men and women just like us. They just looked different." ■