COMMUNITY

'Victorian Lady' to appear at 'strip tea'

After one of Kandie Carle's shows, a spectator told The New York Times, "I'm happy to be alive today instead of 100 years ago."

That's the thing about the "Victorian Lady" — she gives you a new appreciation for your era.

She stands before an audience and explains her layers of underwear, her constricting corsets, and why the fashions of the times require her to cinch her waist to about 22 inches, if not smaller.

She says people who watch her perform often come away with a new appreciation for 19th-century society and see its similarities with modern times.

Carle is 37 and lives with her husband in East Haddam, Conn. She recently spoke by telephone with staff writer Matthew Spina. Here are excerpts from that interview:

Photo courtesy of Kandie Carle

Kandie Carle in one of the costumes she wears when she appears as the 'Victorian Lady.'

Q What can we learn from underwear?

A If you have ever seen those pictures of 120 years ago, where everyone looks really tight and squeezed into their clothes, and if you have ever seen, especially women, covered from head to toe and wondered how they could possibly look like that, after you see me put on all the underwear, you will totally understand how they could look like that. . . . There is a reason it's called foundations. That's the way they could get their bodies to reflect the current fashion trend. You couldn't in any way put on those clothes without putting on the proper underwear.

Q How uncomfortable is it?

A It depends on how used to it you are. I don't lace as tightly as they did. I did not grow up wearing a corset.

I have actual magazines and catalogs that are offering corsets for children as young as 3 months old. They were a little different from what we envision as a grown woman wearing an hourglass-figure corset. They had straps over the shoulders, and they were for posture. But they were underwear.

The silhouette was really important. They all wore one. Even out on the farm, everyone had a corset.

How tightly you laced it, what it was made out of, and how heavily it was boned were the differences. I don't lace as tightly as they did.

Q How did you get the idea to do this?

A The love of history, the love of all things old. For some reason, I have always had it. I didn't own a pair of jeans until I was 16. It was just not a part of who I was. I was always drawn to things that were different to where I was at the time. That's certainly not say I don't have a life today. . . .

I started collecting when I was around 12, 13, 14. . . . I had also in 1992 joined a vintage dance group and we dressed appropriately . . . and so I had to create a lot of my gowns for that.

I was in my car thinking, I have all these beautiful things I wish I could share them with people. . . . So I contacted historical societies and libraries and said: "Here's my idea. Are you interested?" . . . And they said: "Sounds great."

Q What would people of the Victorian era have thought of today's Victoria's Secret?

A They would probably be quite offended. What's really interesting is in the 1890s and turn of this century, the underwear got incredibly lacy, incredibly ornate. . . . I have amassed quite a number of undergarments that were mass-produced in those infamous sweatshops that we hear about, and it's incredible to me to see the workmanship in these articles. And this is underwear, something only your closest people would see. To them, there was a complete sense of mystery. You never let it all hang out.

Q With all those garments, spontaneity between a man and woman must have been difficult. Was that the whole idea?

A No, it wasn't the whole idea. But also you have to remember that some things are a whole lot more worthwhile if it takes a little bit more effort. And I think there was a great deal of modesty.

But, believe me, they had their fun as well. And the spontaneity was completely different. There weren't cars, and there weren't back seats, of course, but it happened a lot, a lot more than what people tend to think.

Q Are people ever embarrassed during your performance?

A It's very interesting. They are only embarrassed at the very beginning because they have no idea. They don't know what I have on underneath the robe. And so I do a little explaining of my background and what has brought me to this particular point, and then I say, "OK, let's get started," and I take off the robe and you can hear a pin drop. Once they see that I am covered from head to toe, there is still a little bit of, "Oh, my goodness, she is in underwear."

But, I mean, we go to the beach and see people in things that are less than underwear now. So once they see that I am completely covered, they relax a little bit. And, of course, I have no problem whatsoever putting people at their ease.

Q How do you do that?

A Humor. There is a lot of humor in the show. I let everyone know early on that what they have to offer, whatever information they are looking for, I am there to help. I am there to share what they are particularly interested in.

Q Have gentlemen in the audience ever been less than gentlemanly?

A No, not to me directly, but actually a New York Times reporter asked a gentleman after a performance of mine, and he said, "You know, if I had been a young man at that time, I wouldn't have had the patience." I am sure that goes through a lot of the gentlemen's minds.

Q Why were women willing to spend their day in such uncomfortable clothing?

A There wasn't any relativity. They didn't know what we know now. Now we wear T-shirts and sweats and think, "Oh, my God, I can't possibly think of ever being in a corset." These were women who grew up in corsets. They didn't know other than that.

What they were willing to do to have a fashion statement is just like it is today. There are women today who will still wear 3½-inch pointy-toe shoes. Even though for decades now people have said that's what bunions are, and it throws off your lumbar and throws off your back, yada, yada, yada.

Just like today, we have liposuction and breast implants and face lifts and facial peels and hair dye and perms and all the things we think we need to do to achieve the fashionable beauty of the time.

Well, they did the same thing. There were fanatical people who would have ribs removed in order to achieve a very small waist. That was the fashion statement of the time . . . What women are willing to compromise or give up to achieve that fashion has absolutely not changed at all.

If you go . . .

Who: The Guild of the Friends of Historic Onondaga Lake
What: "A very unusual strip tea" with Kandie Carle, the "Victorian Lady"
When: 1 to 3 p.m. Oct. 18
Where: Greenpoint Manor, Salina
Tickets: $20
Information: 453-6767