



GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

GLAMOUR SHOT: Melody Flynn shows a photo of herself as a Playboy bunny in the '80s.

# Bunnyhood

They may have been little more than glamorized waitresses, but the Playboy bunnies' bond is strong.

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ATTRACTIVE women from all walks of life — ranging in age from 40 to 80 — greet one another with squeals of delight: "I haven't seen you in years, you look so pretty!" Some amble into a large banquet hall whose back wall is adorned with a montage of old photographs.

It's a reunion, clearly, but not your typical one. The hundreds of women assembled at the Stardust Hotel may refer to themselves, as Joyce Woodward of Winona, Minn., did, as "sorority sisters," but they were in fact Playboy bunnies at more than 25 international Playboy clubs and resorts in operation between 1960 and 1986. The women gathered this week for the first Former Playboy Bunny International Reunion.

Don't confuse these bunnies with the playmates who posed in Playboy magazine in their "birthday suits" (as it was innocently dubbed back then). Some playmates were bunnies [See Reunion, Page E6]

# When they were bunnies

[Reunion, from Page E1]

but not all bunnies were playmates. The bunnies were glamorized waitresses — sort of super-stewardess, only on the ground. They balanced hefty trays while wearing 3-inch heels and confining corset costumes accented by the collars, cuffs, bunny ears and tails that came to symbolize Playboy, and modern female sexuality.

Through the years, the clubs attracted the likes of the Beatles, Woody Allen, the Rolling Stones, Shel Silverstein and Warren Beatty. Like female Forrest Gumps, the bunnies navigated through modern American cultural and social history — Vietnam, the pill, the psychedelic age, women's lib and more.

"I met [the band] Roxy Music," says Katherine Dolgy Ludwig, a Toronto-based painter who worked in the London club in the '70s. She also recalls members of the band the Stranglers persuading her to slam dance for the first time. Working as a bunny has colored Ludwig's



**STRIKE A POSE:** Trish Reidy, who worked at the New York club in 1978-79, is photographed in a special bunny chair.

creative vision. Some of her pieces are on display outside the reunion at an exhibition called "Some Girls Next Door" — they're colorful paintings that center on sybaritic nude women. "It's about that coming-of-age time for women," she says, recalling her own innocence at 18 when she joined Playboy on a dare.

Many of the bunnies have matured into savvy women. Seeing a cluster of them perched around the lobby, a middle-age hotel guest is prompted to stop Kathryn Leigh Scott, a Los Angeles publisher and actress who worked in the New York club in the early '60s. "Hi, Bunny Kathryn," he says impishly. "My God, it's a hotel full of beautiful women my own age," he adds.

Scott thanks him, then notes: "Some women here haven't seen each other in 40 years."

The fact that they are together is due in part to Scott, who in 1998 wrote "The Bunny Years," which chronicled life at the Playboy clubs. She was inspired to write it, she says, after running into a dismissive Gloria Steinem at a publishing party. In 1963, the pioneer feminist worked undercover at the New York Playboy Club in order to pen a famously derisive magazine exposé about gender inequality.

Though Steinem wasn't alone in seeing the bunnies as an artifact of society's rampant sexism, Scott and many of her former co-workers felt betrayed by the article. They claimed that it did not

reflect their handsome wages and the strict management guidelines that protected them from sexual harassment. Many of them, like Woodward of the Chicago club, say they used the money to pay for college — in her case, Cornell.

## Hop to it

THE Playboy Bunny International Reunion — held Sunday and Monday — was organized by bunnies themselves for bunnies, their guests and other former club employees. James Kaminsky, editor-in-chief of Playboy magazine notes that the company is not involved with the event and that the publication has no interest in covering it. This is an in-

dependent effort by independent women. Playboy founder Hugh Hefner was invited but is not in attendance, though his brother Keith, known by the bunnies (and on his name tag) as "Bunny Father," who hired and trained the bunnies in the '60s, did show up.

Yet at this gathering, there are no ill words spoken of the robe-sporting patriarch. In fact, the opposite is true. "I love Hefner!" says Frankie Helms, the elegant former Bunny Mother, who has aged gracefully at 80. Helms' job was to hire and train the girls, whom she calls, "the children I never had." The bunnies still call her Mother.

"Hef instilled a family feeling in us," she says in her sweet, down-home Missouri accent. "The close to 15 years I worked for Playboy were the happiest years of my life." She is greeted by a short-haired blond in an orange blazer, Mo Scott from the San Francisco club (a.k.a. Bunny Dana). "You tried to fix me up with your uncle once," the matriarch says with a laugh as she greets one of her many "daughters."

Adopted families aside, family members also have their place at the reunion. Sandra Costa, a raven-haired Los Angeles bunny, dramatically sweeps into the hotel lobby in a hot pink Grecian-style gown, flanked by her two punk-rock sons. Their father, jazz pianist Tony Costa, is providing some of the musical entertainment this evening. "We met through Playboy and married in 1976," Sandra Costa says. She and Tony Costa, now divorced, haven't seen each other in years.

She has another agenda for this reunion. Her fuzzy chairs, inspired by the Playboy aesthetic, are on sale in the hotel gallery.

She is selling them under the name After the Hutch to promote awareness of breast cancer. "After the Hutch," she explains, is a reference to life after Playboy (a "hutch" being a coop for rabbits). Costa has retained much from her Playboy years.

"I've got my costume, shhh," she says, explaining that bunnies weren't supposed to keep the satin artifact, "... and my sons." You weren't supposed to date, let alone marry, customers.

Sure, there were the "bad girls" who rebelled, even in the early wide-eyed and bushy-tailed days of the Playboy clubs. But at this reunion, the term "girl next door" is the one heard most often by the former bunnies, uttered with a sense of pig-tailed pride. They look back at this as an age of innocence, a time of saucy subtext that would be replaced in later decades by an in-your-face sexuality.

Victoria Valentino, who worked at the Los Angeles club when it opened in 1964, started her East Valley cable access show, "Under Our Skin," by interviewing playmates, "to dispel the myth that we were all a bunch of airhead bimbos." Valentino is one of the bunnies who was also a playmate and proudly points to her reunion badge, which reads, "One of the Top 100 Centerfolds of the Century."

She explains that when she was a centerfold, it was topless only.

"We were icons of the sexual revolution. Most of us did the job and went on to do interesting and amazing things," the beautiful blond grandmother says. She admits, somewhat resigned, that today the tone of *Playboy* sexuality has changed. "In those days you really were the girl next door."



Photographs by GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*