

She's known as the queen of burlesque, a fashion muse and, most recently, Marilyn Manson's ex, but when Dita Von Teese arrives in Australia later this month, her visit kicks off with a sobering duty. The 41-year-old American is the current spokesperson for M.A.C Cosmetics' Viva Glam, a charity that raises money through lipstick sales to help those affected by HIV and AIDS, and their families. Von Teese has been travelling the world on behalf of the charity and, while here, she'll hand over a \$100,000 cheque to the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, the Australian AIDS support organisation. (She's not only a proud supporter of M.A.C's charity work but a big fan of its lipstick, too. Her favourite shade is Russian Red, which you'll often see upon those very 1930s film-lip lips of hers.)

There's a certain mystery surrounding Von Teese. While she has cultivated a legion of fans with her risqué burlesque routines and *Playboy* pin-ups (she's done several), her style of dress has an enigmatic quality that has guaranteed her front-row seats at shows including Marc Jacobs and Moschino. Last year, she turned up on the catwalk for Moschino in Milan and has appeared in Jean Paul Gaultier's haute couture shows. She's also the international face for Australian label Wheels & Wellbabe, appearing in its summer 2006 advertising campaign. During her upcoming visit, Von Teese will be promoting M.A.C at Sydney's Rosemount Australian Fashion Week, where she'll also perform her burlesque *Liptease* show.

Sexual intrigue is key to Von Teese's mystery. Even her name is reminiscent of a European siren of the golden years of Hollywood – a Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo. So, when we speak on the phone, and I'm greeted by a demure, innocent-sounding voice, I'm taken by surprise. You'd think the woman who captivates audiences on stage with her sexy performances – and the soon-to-be ex-wife of the king of anti-establishment, Marilyn Manson – would sound breathy, like a panther, or ballsy, like a street-wise stage actor. In fact, she comes across more as farm girl Heather Ronée Sweet (her real name) from America's mid-west, where she grew up.

Is she as demure as she sounds? "I think if you ask someone what I'm really like, they'll say I'm fairly shy. It's not as if I have an alter ego on stage, but I'm kind of a quiet person. I've always liked the combination of the mystery, of being somewhat demure, rather than putting it out there all the time; do that on stage, so I don't need to do that in the real world. I'm not the girl at the party with her top off, dancing on the table. I don't even wear miniskirts. I firmly believe in a time and a place, if you know what I mean."

Until the age of 12, Von Teese lived in the secluded and sheltered farming town of Rochester, Michigan, where she developed a love of Hollywood's Golden Age, encouraged by her mother. "My mum was a fan of films and furniture from the '30s and '40s; I liked the films and became obsessed with the stars. The first books I ever read were movie star biographies; I loved them because they were so interesting and scandalous, and I wanted to be like those women when I grew up."

She describes the history of burlesque as a spin-off from vaudeville, stage shows that included a

series of variety acts, which were popular in America around the turn of the last century.

"Before people went to movie houses, they went to see variety shows with dancing girls and all kinds of different variety entertainment. Burlesque was more risqué and about sex; the language was a bit dirtier and the dancing girls were a little racier. It's where the modern bump-and-grind striptease, as we know it, was born."

Is it having a revival now? "It's had revivals," says Von Teese. "And now, more than ever, you can find burlesque in every major city. That wasn't always the case, though. In the early '90s, when I came onto the scene, there were only a handful of performers in the world."

Von Teese says she was influenced by actors Betty Grable, Hedy Lamarr, Gypsy Rose Lee, Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich and Ava Gardner, and the over-the-top glamour of that time, something she says is lost today.

"Stars were very 'made' and they knew their role. They had manners and knew how to conduct themselves in public. Their whole iconic beauty was based on hair, make-up and beautiful clothes; it wasn't about trying to look natural, pretty or like everyone else. It was a time when the stars were



Von Teese poses for the Viva Glam campaign (left).

"I'm not the girl at the party with her top off, dancing on the table. I don't even wear miniskirts. I believe in a time and a place,

embraced for being personalities and being true to their personalities. Marlene Dietrich played up her exoticism, and what made her different was what made her special. There was only one Marilyn Monroe, not 10. They learnt how to create and hold onto their image rather than try to conform, which is lost in Hollywood these days."

Von Teese now lives in Hollywood, although she's not part of the night-clubbing crowd. "I believe in getting lots of sleep. Basically, I'm not a party girl at all." On the contrary, she looks after herself by staying out of the sun, using lots of sunscreen and doing pilates and yoga. "I'm a better performer if I'm stronger," she explains. "It's not a vanity issue. It's not about being thin, but confident and strong."

Right now, she says what's important to her is staying busy and, post separation, creating a new life for herself. She's working on a full-length revue that will come to fruition at the end of 2008, and is writing her second beauty book, teaching people to create their own glamour. (Her first book, *Burlesque and the Art of the Teese/Fetish and the Art of the Teese* is published by HarperCollins.) She's interested in movies, but only if the roles

relate to what she does – she has no desire to be an actor for acting's sake. First and foremost, she wants to be an entertainer who performs burlesque, and she's glad of the opportunity to use her work to help others.

"Originally I was approached to be in the Viva Glam campaign with my now ex-husband, but he refused, and it kind of went away for a while to my dismay. Then they asked me to be interested in doing it on my own, which I was excited about because I've supported the Viva Glam campaign ever since it was launched 13 years ago by [US drag queen] RuPaul."

Having friends with HIV, Von Teese says it has personal significance for her to be part of the campaign and get the safe-sex message across to people, especially young women who think they're immune because they're not gay or promiscuous.

"I also remember when I couldn't afford to do it, so I like that 100 per cent selling price of these products is actually to help people," she adds.

As for her marriage to Manson, Von Teese says she had high hopes when she went into the commitment of marriage, but you can't be so sure that the other person does. I can

with every intention of staying married but, unfortunately, it didn't happen. I'm not put off marriage, I'm not bitter, either. But I'm not anxious to get married again, no idea what happens next, no crystal ball! But I'm not a woman, or the last, to have been ripped out from under their feet. I'm just fortunate that I have a career, so I'm able to support myself and not rely on anyone else.

That's the key. Marriage doesn't guarantee security, and a lot of people get confused.

One very down-to-earth aspect to Von Teese is that she does her own hair and make-up, a rarity in the world of celebrity. "So I do," she exclaims. "I like to have quiet time to do my hair and make-up before I go out. I dress myself, too – I don't use a team of stylists. That's actually part of the burlesque tradition."

So, where does Heather Sweet end and Dita Von Teese begin? "Even though I've created a persona, I'm still a blonde girl from a farming town in Michigan," she says. "Lookswise, I've turned into somebody I want to be, but my personality is the same. People who've known me all their lives know me by my real name."

One last reality check: she colours her hair at home. "I don't go to beauty salons. I've got my hair colour from the drug store," she says, laughing. "Just call me a 'do it yourself' kinda gal, but really, that's what I am." **SM**

Dita Von Teese will be appearing in-store at Myer Sydney City, April 28 at 1pm.