



Once a month, a roving erotic masquerade party called Sanctum is held in secret locations in Beverly Hills. We take a behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood's latest obsession

Eyes Wide Open

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“Did you witness the whole-house orgy?” my friend texts me the day after the sex party. “In every room in the house, people were screwing.” Unfortunately I missed it, despite having stayed until 2:30 A.M. After eight hours, I thought I’d seen it all, including a man in a tuxedo lashed to a column while being choked out as a woman stroked his penis; a woman wearing a black-bob wig and a strap-on dildo having sex with a nearly identical-looking woman in a black-bob wig; a man in a leather bunny mask and velvet slippers spanking a topless woman bound by Japanese *shibari* rope; and a lot of marathon fucking. What I did not observe was a full-blown, believable orgasm. Call me old-fashioned.

But not *that* old-fashioned. In my life I’ve witnessed a couple of ménages à trois, various X-rated bachelor-party shenanigans and a basement bondage party, yet I hadn’t exactly sought out public group sex. Then my friend Sean invited me to a black-tie sex party in Beverly Hills. (Some names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the sources.) Sean said participation wasn’t mandatory. I said what the hell.

On the spectrum of “seen it all,” Sean falls near the extreme, having worked on adult-film shoots. “Dude, it was like a real *Eyes Wide Shut*,” he said to me the day after he attended a sex party thrown by a small Beverly Hills company known as Sanctum. In the two years since it started, Sanctum has established itself as the premier high-end erotic-event party in a city with boundless and brutal impatience with that which isn’t novel. Seen-it-all Sean was impressed. “It was at a mansion up on Mulholland,” he said. “The whole driveway was Maybachs and Bentleys and Lamborghinis. You have to wear a mask, and it’s strictly black tie. I saw [insert name of formerly famous starlet] get fingerbanged while a dude held her throat. There were hot chicks everywhere. It was insane. If you wanted a glass of bourbon, you needed to take it from a table that was actually a woman on all fours.”

Sanctum could be called, among many things, a traveling sex party, an erotic masquerade ball or a pop-up nightclub with benefits. The basic model goes like this: In a house in Beverly Hills or the Hollywood Hills, an all-night party will commence once a month. There will be a bar serving \$20 cocktails. There will be live music: classical piano and violin, a sound system playing trance. There will be red up-lighting. And there will be sex, most of it performed by attractive professional adult performers with nine percent body fat, continually erect penises and flawless breasts.

To Sanctum founder Damon Lawner, these performers are crucial to a successful evening. “Within the industry, they’re tested and safe,” says Lawner. “They trust each other. Sanctum couldn’t happen without the support of the adult industry.” As another friend who has attended Sanctum events tells me, “Watching porn stars fuck is one thing. Watching normal people fuck can be traumatic.”

Unless, that is, you are a closet voyeur. Or a budding exhibitionist. Or a housewife with an underexplored *Fifty Shades of Grey* fantasy. These are the sorts of experiences Lawner wants attendees to explore. “Normal” (a.k.a. straight, vanilla or heteronormative) couples make up, by Lawner’s estimates, a quarter of those in attendance on any given night; they are the demographic he is trying to reach.

“These aren’t people who’d necessarily want to go to a swingers party or a bondage party,” he says. Lawner is a passionate pitchman for Sanctum, which he speaks about more as a social sexual experiment than a naughty house party. “What Sanctum has done

above all is start a conversation. Say it’s a couple who love each other dearly. It’s been 15 to 20 years, and if they want something new, where else can they go? I want Sanctum to be a safe place where they can go and maybe, at the very least, talk about it.”

Lawner is lean and fit, with piercing eyes and trickster good looks. Whether he’s sporting a midnight-blue dinner jacket or a chambray shirt and sneakers, he accessorizes with *japa mala* Hindu-style prayer beads. He signs e-mails and texts with the alien-head emoji and “blessings.” He comes across as less nightclub promoter than well-heeled spiritual seeker.

The early inspiration for Sanctum came to Lawner while he was living in Bali with his wife and kids after years of dabbling in various projects in Los Angeles: art photography, real estate, a beverage start-up, writing. “Bali was a life of debauchery, a lot of parties,” says Lawner. “But also a life of spirituality, meditation, surfing.” He ended up promoting parties at hotels and eventually organized underground sex parties that catered to wealthy businessmen from Jakarta and Singapore. When he returned to L.A., he wanted to take those parties to the next level.

Lawner put together a team of performers, worked with a performance artist who’d consulted with Cirque du Soleil and got the word out. The early days of Sanctum were, by Lawner’s admission, not what he’d envisioned. “Guys felt like just because they had money they could slap girls’ asses when they were walking by. They wouldn’t wear a tuxedo, but then that black card or that \$5,000 in cash came out, and I made those concessions.”

He has since tightened up the rules and now interviews all potential guests by phone after they complete a lengthy online questionnaire and submit both head shots and full-body shots. For as little as \$300 a single man can get in to a party, but he won’t have access to all the member activities or to private “play” areas. A member can, for \$25,000, actually become part of the show.

The language of Sanctum is intentionally esoteric, smacking of antiquity and secret societies. The password to one section of the website is *thyrsus*, the wand of Dionysus; the highest-level Sanctum membership is *Dominus*, a fancier take on the BDSM terminology for a dominant. A submissive, or bottom, is a devotee. Sanctum also regularly hosts sex workshops at various Beverly Hills hotels. In this friendlier, kinder, less-hardcore treatment of sex subculture, Sanctum can be seen as a sort of Dale Carnegie Center for Sexual Self-Improvement.

As my guests, I bring Kate, a chef and former go-go dancer, and Karen, a costume designer. Kate is wearing a black-leather Lone Ranger-style mask studded like a spiked dog collar. “I knew there was a reason I’d been saving this,” she says. Both had attended one of Sanctum’s first events, which Kate tells me was “shoddy.”

We arrive at a mansion in the flats of Beverly Hills for which *bling-y* is a more precise term: The double-height living room glows moodily with flattering red light. A man named Phuong walks in, smoking a pipe and wearing \$500 Stubbs & Wootton velvet slippers embroidered with an image of a screw and a capital *U*; he is probably one of the few men who may actually put the visual pun into practice. He’s also wearing a metal lion-head medallion on a chain, marking him as a *Dominus* member, and he is completely at ease.



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Clockwise from top left: A strict door policy is enforced; erotic performers at the pre-party dinner; guests don masks for the masquerade; the dessert performance; a public display of seduction; bracelets for Sanctum members.



Phuong says he has dabbled in sex in public places and joined the mile-high club. But he's found his sweet spot at Sanctum, where he was introduced to the art of *shibari* and various other bondage techniques. He now performs in character as the Bunny Man, wearing a black-leather rabbit mask, and spends much of his time at parties merrily spanking, tying up and servicing a parade of women.

I talk with Sophia, an attractive entertainment lawyer who first came to Sanctum with a boyfriend she has since broken up with. "I'm not into swinging," she says, "but I'll come to these parties and sometimes play with a couple or go home with a couple." When I ask why she joined Sanctum and attends parties regularly, she says, "I like the freedom, that people aren't uptight and that I can be myself."

This is a refrain I'm surprised to hear from other members, who clearly get off on the sexual element but also say they come for the community and the relaxed atmosphere. They are on the whole friendly, good conversationalists, eager to talk about movies or food—albeit while three people lying on the bed next to them deftly triangulate ass play, French-kissing and fellatio. "I grew up on a farm in Egypt," says a music supervisor named Gad. "This is about as far away from it as I could get."

In the mansion dining room a group of eight or so couples dine on sashimi, *côte de boeuf* and truffled mashed potatoes while enjoying paired wines. An artfully naughty performance commences with the dessert course: a violinist plays Bach's Concerto in A minor, masked and robed female sentinels escort in a pair of women wearing black bobs, high heels and nothing else. They lie on the table, where one spoons whipped cream onto the other's crotch, fingers her and then goes down on

Clockwise from top left: Dominus member Phuong, a.k.a. the Bunny Man, uses Japanese *shibari* rope to tie up a performer; sketches of various performances; a pass to a special area of the Sanctum event.

her. They move balletically and gracefully, and it is undeniably powerful and erotic. Their movements intensify, and the collective reaction of the diners is palpable. As if on cue, and as if it's almost too much for everyone to bear, the diners don their masquerade masks simultaneously. After the women strut out, Karen says, "Okay, I told myself there's no way this would turn me on. So much for that."

As the evening progresses I see naked women being shocked on their breasts with an electric wand and apparently liking it; a man being flogged by a dominatrix in an evening gown; a couple timidly fumbling around on a bed before buckling up and moving on; a man tenderly going down on his girlfriend in a room full of strangers.

The acidic, mineral funk of more than one crotch humidifies an upstairs bedroom. In the dim light a woman in a corset straddles a man, slows down and stops as two couples watch. On another bed a knot of rumpled tuxedos and clinking belts untangles. Kate and Karen call it a night, and I move on. I walk from room to room looking for something that clicks, something that feels right. Any cigarette smoker, beer drinker or coffee lover knows the first one tastes like shit, and so I keep trying. I come to the conclusion that I'm just not a voyeur. Still, a rush of adrenaline courses through me, and I feel like I'm on speed. I lose time as I explore, room by room. It's like scrolling Instagram, clicking the channel changer or jumping from click-bait link to click-bait link. It's sex custom-made for a binge culture. Wrung out, I decide to go home.

My Uber car pulls up on the far side of the hedge, the mansion obscured behind it. I ask the driver how his night is going, and he says it's been quiet. Somewhat in shock, I find myself saying the same. Little do I know that back in Sanctum the night is still young. As we drive through the streets of Beverly Hills I roll down the window, and the smell of sex is replaced by the scent of night-blooming jasmine. ■