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These dancers play with fire, but it's strictly business.
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Goodness Gracious, great poi of fire

Shows a fusion of dance, fireballing

Props go back to Maori weaponry

DANCE

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TORONTO STAR

Natalie Fullerton and Lara Ebata are two young dancers who, contrary to Mick Jagger's growly dictum, DO dare to play with fire.

If they say to someone, "Hey stranger, got a light?" it's strictly business.

They are fire dancers, a rare breed of cat adept at wringing fiery balls in rhythmic rotation to carve circles of red paint out of the darkness.

"We're spinners who are into fusion," says Fullerton, meaning they incorporate modern dance movements into their choreography, along with requisite circus skills and a mere hint — that double-directional twirling! — of the tassel tricks of old-time burlesque queens.

The duo's main props are poi — not the Hawaiian bar snacks of the same name, but baseball-sized spheres made of Kevlar and fixed to a length of lightweight chain. For each routine, the dancers soak the poi in gasoline and set them ablaze. Then they spin them in pairs about their bodies to create swirling fire trails. It's a captivating sight — a significant notch or two up from campfire gazing.

Poi owe their origins to Maori battle smarts in New Zealand. As such, they have a place in mankind's hallowed arsenal of nasty swinging weapons, such as the sling mace, flail, Trebuchet catapult and rope dart.

Fortunately the Toronto dancers choose to use their poi for goodness rather than gob smacking. In fact they call their troupe Goodness Gracious, a tip of the hat to rock's fireballing pianist Jerry Lee Lewis.

Fresh off a repeat gig at the annual Hot and Spicy Food Festival (a logical booking), the Goodness Gracious duo will add two spinners for their show, *Autobiography in 5 Chapters*, choreographed to Aretha Franklin music, at the Toronto Fringe Dance Festival. The stagings are tonight through Saturday at 10 p.m. in the District Distillery.



Goodness Gracious dancers paint the night with circular fire trails. That's Lara Ebata on the left, with partner Natalie Fullerton.

Further into the FFIDA schedule, on Aug. 20 and 21, the two will spin poi in support of hip-hop troupe HoneyKatz, who are performing a piece called *This is What We've Got, Part 2*.

Also at the festival, the two-some will take part, sans fire, in a modern dance program by DLNW Productions on the Indie Mix stage.

Fullerton, 27, got the fire bug first, while studying dance in Munich during a globetrot after university. "My teacher was from Brazil and when I went to see her spin poi one night, my jaw just hit the ground — I begged her to teach me."

"And when Natalie came

home, she taught me," explains Ebata, 28, her dance partner, flatmate, and close pal going back to Scarborough schoolyard days.

Playing with fire, no surprise, has downsides. Normally a mirrored wall is a dancer's best friend in rehearsal, but fire spinning is an activity to be taken outdoors, for obvious reasons. "Mirrors don't work, so we mostly go by our shadows while rehearsing. And dusk is about the only time for that."

One time, the two were spinning poi in the gathering gloom at a Riverdale park when a fire marshal driving home from work pulled to the curb and shut them down. "He was nice about it, but firm," Fullerton says. "No open flames in a public space without a permit."

That's the thing about fire: there's that dark side. The duo's



bookings had a dry spell a couple of years back after a rock band's pyro went seriously awry in a Rhode Island nightclub and 100 lives were lost.

As it is, the dancers keep wet towels and fire extinguishers at hand during their act, observe other safety protocols and stay alcohol-free before shows.

"Believe me, you never make the same mistake twice," says Fullerton. "The first time I tried spinning, I lost tempo and the

poi crashed into my face, singed my hair a bit. That's never happened again."

Just the facts

Who: Goodness Gracious fire dancers
Where: Le Foot Club Cabaret @ Gibson and Jessop Gallery in the Distillery District
When: tonight through Saturday, at 10 p.m.
Tickets: \$10