

Life's a Drag, So Be a Queen

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In the navy blue darkness by the river, industrial lights illuminate abandoned warehouses and rubble along the path to an inconspicuous building labeled only with a pink neon “Z/S.” A police car rolls by; then, the street again is silent. Eventually, a car pulls up and a lean, fairly muscular man with a black t-shirt, sweatpants, and a crew cut steps out into the crisp night air. He has rigid cheekbones and slightly sunken eyes, but a smirk is painted across his face. He grabs a grey toolbox and a massive suitcase almost half his height and enters a hardly-noticeable door under those lit-up letters. He marches leisurely through a pitch black showroom around tables, chairs, platforms and stripper poles, ultimately stepping down some stairs into the silent lights of a back kitchen area. Dozens of cardboard boxes are stuffed haphazardly along the walls, and dull metallic tables line the corner of the narrow room. He stops, places the toolbox on the table with a thud, and flips open the suitcase. Out pop a green dress, a bleached blonde wig, and deep red nipples on the enormous breasts of a chest piece. Mark Milligan, his name while not performing, grins and turns back to his toolbox, sets up his three-paneled mirror, and lays out his dozens of brushes, at least eight colors of makeup, creams, and foundations. “I’m going back to my slut look tonight,” he remarks through bright white teeth making up a devious smile. Somehow I have a feeling this is supposed to be a positive notion. Coming from Ms. Eclipse, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.

“On Thursdays, my job is to make customers get naked and dance,” he says without much inflection. He picks out a brush and begins applying a cream-colored layer of foundation to his skin. “It’s easy for me ‘cause I’m a whore,” he smirks in my direction, holding back the brush for a moment. Being a “whore” is another way to say “performing in drag” for Mark – but he wouldn’t straight-up tell you that way, because it would be too plain, too boring. He needs to add flair to the conversation, give some bite to the statement – make it last. Drag is, as Mark would say, and as scholars would agree, the act of on-stage impersonation of another gender. Mark never has seen drag as something to just “do,” and it isn’t just some job for him– it’s meant to cause a scene, to rouse a reaction. Drag, for Mark, is an explosive, reactive gesture, and it has been all his life. First, he was naked and strutting around the house in his mother’s high heels; soon, he was a Marine, showing up to training with makeup smeared across his face; now, he convinces men to tear off their clothes. Drag lets Mark be Ms. Eclipse, an even more over-the-top, out-of-the-box, overwhelming force of nature, of pure energy, punch, and charisma, than he is while not transformed. For Mark, drag is a powerful tool of self-empowerment. Not that he needs to be self-empowered: “I’m one of those people who’s never really cared about other people’s opinions,” he comments, finishing up the first layer and glancing into the mirror before moving on, “As long as I’m happy with myself. Which is probably why I’m still single,” he adds, smirking again, entertaining as always. Drag is an outlet for this constant outpouring of energy to amuse, to please, to show off, to impress, to shock. To induce a reaction. And while this is how he has always seen drag, American culture’s perception of drag has definitely gone through its own growing pains.

In fact, drag's general acceptance today is only the current stop on a path that has been traveled for over one hundred years in American culture – and what a bumpy road it's been. The drag that we know today, in which gay men are often the performers, originates in the drag balls of New York, starting in the 1890s. Founded by gay men, they were a “subcultural response” to more mainstream masquerade balls at the time, but by the Roaring Twenties they were on the cusp of the mainstream. Some of these drag balls, often called “Faggots' Balls,” were held at popular locations such as Madison Square Garden, the Astor Hotel, and the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. Performers wore “lavish costumes,” often with “plumes, jewelry, and feathers,” all of which are still heavily used on drag costumes today (The Nat'l Museum & Archive of Gay and Lesbian History 164-172). However, when the Depression hit, the Hoover administration decided that they wanted “values adjusted” and men and women to “pick up the wrecks from less competent people” (qtd. in Eaklor 62). Similarly, the Hays Code was established, which controlled what “values” could be portrayed in cinema and other public arts. Meanwhile, there was a growing fear of countercultural movements, as socialism and communism were stigmatized during the Depression and after in the Cold War. These were all precursors to the swift disappearance of drag culture from the mainstream public. In fact, drag was not brought back to the forefront of American culture until 1969, when the Stonewall riots struck. Considered a blowback to thirty- plus years of suppression, the riots at this gay club against police were believed to have been started by drag queens, and sparked a revolution – the gay rights movement. This in turn led to additional hard-won fights, bringing drag and gay culture as a whole to the level of acceptance it has reached today (Eaklor 122- 123).

It was quite a progression – but queens weren't exactly pretty while doing it, Mark notes. Touching up around the cheeks, adding colorful striated layers zigzagging between lines and curves, he mentions, “Back then it was mostly just men in dresses – not that that isn't what it is today. We're just slightly more contoured.” Some would say Mark is missing the point.

“It's not about being pretty; it's about representing a culture. Sure, it's nice to make tips and be pretty, and I'm not going to lie, it's great when people applaud you,” says Tempest DuJour, a Tucson drag queen embracing what she calls ‘drag power.’ “I'm not one for doing anything halfway and I put my heart and soul into it. Part of the reason I do that is because I'm representing a culture” (qtd. in Herreras). Tempest and Mark would agree that it's not just about being pretty, but definitely not on the reasoning behind it. For queens like Tempest, drag is about strength and unity in the community – something Mark scoffs at. He doesn't even think there is such a thing as unity in the drag community, at least not in DC – and he has a case, even if it's just a personal anecdote.

Mark, having worked as a nurse at several clinics throughout Washington and Maryland over the past six years, once found himself working under a fellow drag queen. And while some, like Tempest, would expect this unity of a shared community would empower them both, it instead only empowered the other queen – to fire Mark for wearing pink scrubs one day. Definitely not the unity Tempest envisioned. The positive, empowering culture she believes in isn't what Mark believes is expressed in DC drag culture, or in drag culture in general. He thinks many are cutthroat and vicious here – making drag brutal, serious, and unenjoyable for all. Having been through the terrors of drag in the past, Mark believes drag culture can be bitchy, even downright ‘fugly.’ But

then, Mark is just one opinion, just one voice – even if he happens to have been through a lot of life.

Mark grew up in suburban Minnesota, moving between being homeless and living in garages and basements of his friends' houses throughout the '90s and early '00s. His father left his family for Cuba when he was very young, and his mother, bipolar and schizophrenic, was “a whole lot of crazy in one body,” as Mark insists. Still, despite the upheaval and instability, he found his true love in drag. After dressing at Halloween drag balls as young as fourteen, Mark decided to make his debut in high school – coming to school in high heels, a dress, and face lavished in his best attempt at makeup. They tried to make him change, but he refused.

“I wasn't breaking dress code,” he says nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders back as he dabs on more dazzling layers of color to his face. He was expelled from high school twice – the first time, for smacking a bigoted bully in band across the face with his flute so hard that it sent him to the hospital; the second time, for stealing class instruction guides from his teachers (apparently government property). Mark joined the Marines at eighteen, entirely on a bet – his friends said he was too feminine to survive, so he wanted to prove them wrong. Still, drag stayed a part of his life throughout his journey in the Marines, even up to the time when he accidentally went in with makeup still lathered across his face from a show the night before.

“I ripped the soap dispenser of the wall when I saw the makeup still caked on my face. I sat in a stall and scrubbed till it was painful,” he details as he softly dots his cheeks, preparing to move on to his eyes. Luckily, no one saw him – but that wasn't enough to stop him from eventually getting discharged a few years later – for being gay, of course, in the era of DADT (“Don't Ask, Don't Tell”). Nevertheless, he wound up working in the day as a nurse at a clinic in Alexandria, and at night under the dim “Z/S” (Ziegfeld's Secrets, as it's known by the inside crowd). Here, he enjoys a much kinder circle of queens than some of the others he has experienced in the past. He has finally found acceptance within local drag community, which in turn reflects the growing acceptance of drag in society due to the gay rights movement.

Stonewall helped bring about this shift. After that cataclysm, gay and drag cultures were back at the forefront of counter-culture, fighting for their rights as a movement. Queens wanted freedom to express themselves, to be out and open in the world, and it is a battle they still fight to this day, although many of their wars have since been won. Drag's journey reached its zenith in the '90s – RuPaul, a gorgeous, African American queen, had a hit song, and Kurt Cobain, lead singer of grunge band Nirvana, celebrated him – a moment of stars colliding and shining even brighter together. According to Darragh McManus, grunge, an alternative rock scene demanding freedom from social alienation and apathy in society, fit hand in hand with drag. Although entirely opposite in look, they were united in their counter-cultural origins and goals (McManus). Both, also, were embraced by the mainstream as it continued its liberalizing path, shedding the conservative values the country had embraced for decades along the way (McManus). Today, RuPaul has his own TV show, a drag competition he hosts, called *RuPaul's Drag Race*, seen by millions of viewers each week (Rogers). And drag's influence is spreading beyond just those who watch the show or listened to Nirvana. Some parents, like mommy/blogger Joy Martina-Malone, even want their children to hold drag queens up in higher esteem than Disney princesses – after all, you don't have to have a perfect body or marry royalty to become a queen in the land of drag.

“Drag every year becomes more accepted,” he notes, applying an ample amount of powder to his cheeks and nose. This is apparent, given the ratings juggernaut that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has become. However, this is not to say drag culture doesn’t still have its detractors. “The main group of people who look down their noses at drag are gay men,” Mark huffs, shaking his head as he pulls away the heavy brush for a moment. Blurring gender lines is frightening for so many gay men because of their insecurities about being seen as effeminate. Or perhaps it’s that, a theory Mark proposes, “Bitchy little queens need something to complain about!”

Blunt, but not without backing. This issue isn’t one that only Mark is seeing – in fact, many gay men today have a lot to learn about drag, and what it really means. Jarred Stancil, a sophomore at George Washington University, understands now, but only after putting on the heels and skirt of a famous queen from the musical *Rent* named Angel. He reported in *The GW Hatchet* that before the production, he saw drag as a way for “broken and confused people to masquerade as someone else, or to fill some void within themselves” (Stancil). Mark has no voids to fill, except maybe the one in his quest to find a boyfriend. But Stancil learns quickly that drag isn’t about a deficiency – it’s about creation, at least to him. He interprets that drag queens, like the character Angel, use drag as an art form to fulfill their “burning desire to create something they love to share with their communities” (Stancil). This is just one interpretation of the meaning of drag – another added meaning, when there already exist so many. And yet, this fear of being seen as feminine isn’t surprising – although it confounds Mark.

“It’s bullshit,” he frustratingly asserts as he layers more colors onto his face.

Mark thinks it’s “bullshit,” but it’s been going on for decades. In fact, the fight about “straight-acting” and the “masc. (masculine) vs. fem. (feminine)” paradigm will likely continue for years to come in the gay community. It turns attraction into something subtly hateful, more about domination and fear than about pleasure and love. Perhaps, even, about being anti-feminist – in this context, anti-feminist meaning the suppression of women or against the equality of women. Drag culture likes to think it’s ahead of the curve, of course, and it might be – but not everyone would agree even on that. Some might even suggest many gay men fear drag because they are anti-feminist, and those who do participate are only using it as an outlet to portray their own anti-feminism for the benefit of other men. Drag historians Schacht and Underwood discuss whether drag is a subversive performance style – an act of rebellion against conservative, more mainstream culture – or whether it is really just another patriarchal tool to suppress women. Their particular study suggests that men dressing as women is inherently anti-feminist, as it perpetuates the “hegemonic masculine structure” (Schacht and Underwood). Men take on the role and image of the female, parade her around to other men, and therefore conquer the feminine as well as the masculine. This theory states that drag is not meant to be an attempt to break down gender barriers or to be a countercultural action, but instead is a means of amassing power, playing into the patriarchy, and asserting men as the dominant sex (Schacht and Underwood).

Mark would definitely not agree, at least not about all of drag culture. As he begins to draw out smooth, dark curving lines with a black pencil – outlining huge eyes over his own and up well beyond their natural size – he scoffs at the likes of RuPaul and what he calls her “pretty-girl” look: an attempt to look as much like a woman as possible. Mainstream drag, as Mark would say, is all about looking like a pretty girl, and that’s just not how it should be. Maybe that part of drag isn’t

subversive – maybe RuPaul, drag hero, has been playing into the “hegemonic masculine structure” all along.

“It’s important to be *out there* – you can’t always just go straight for the pretty-girl look,” Mark mentions, starting to color in the lines with heavy black strokes, filling out his face and drawing out his eyes. He draws on new eyebrows, high above the real brows, and suddenly his appearance has actually started to change. He is different from before, as if through our discussion the transformation occurred without me realizing, even though I watched it happen. He seems a different person – I am hearing him, Mark, but I am looking at her, Ms. Eclipse.

And the transformation into Ms. Eclipse was mirrored in the transformation of society, with RuPaul giving birth to this newfound American culture which embraces drag and its male imitation of the feminine. But Ms. Eclipse would never say RuPaul is anti-feminist, just, perhaps, that he’s boring. She would suggest, instead, that drag performers branch out and give themselves a wide array of drag personas – from celebrity impersonators, to androgynous personas, to different subcultural looks, to even more wild options. Ms. Eclipse, for example, has been experimenting with illusions for the past several weeks, an addition to her pantheon of personas.

Scholar Holly Brubach would argue that Ms. Eclipse is proof that the notion of drag enforcing gender norms is, as Mark would say, “bullshit.” In her book *Girlfriend: Men, Women, and Drag*, Brubach agrees that, at its core, drag is about imitating the female, and thus taking on the traditionally female role of using illusion through makeup. However, this blurring of the real and the imaginary is not anti-feminist in intent or in practice. Instead, according to Brubach, drag is a veneration of the feminine. It shows the flimsiness of the masculine identity, as it is adding female roles to a male figure, and acts a subversion to the gender binary and the rigid gender roles used back in the Victorian era. This explains why it was so popular at the turn of the 20th century – drag was a response to the social constriction of the previous era (Brubach 161-168).

Most importantly, this shows that drag is about blurring gender lines and promoting freedom of gender expression and sexuality, and has nothing to do with any “hegemonic masculine structure.” Looking like a woman just isn’t what drag is really about.

“It’s about playing dress up,” Ms. Eclipse says as she cleans up stray marks and lines around her face. She gets all of the finishing touches just right, trying to be 100% sure she’s as perfect as can be. She reaches back to grab her wig from the top of the suitcase, and, above her masterpiece-quality face, adorns her head with the crown of luscious locks.

“Drag is about having fun,” she adds, and I can’t think of any reason why this wouldn’t be a good enough reason for it to exist. Whether it’s about being a “slut,” being creative and artistic, being part of a community, having the freedom to blur the lines of the gender binary, or just being your zany, reactive self, drag is about having fun. So get out there and work it, girlfriend.

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