



Drag Shows: Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Drag performer Lady Bunny.
Portrait by Sasha Vaughn, courtesy ladybunny.net.

Female impersonation appears to have existed through the length of human civilization and the breadth of its cultures. Ancient Roman literature and history feature a multitude of male cross-dressers, while in numerous Native American cultures, cross-dressing *berdaches* were respected as prophets and seers who were able to glimpse the world through both masculine and feminine perspectives. In the late nineteenth century, Richard von Krafft-Ebing observed in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1887) that the smallest German hamlets often featured drag culture. In contemporary India men who choose to live and dance as women are regarded with particular religious reverence.

Female Impersonation and Sexual Identity

Female impersonation need say nothing about sexual identity. For example, many male actors in Elizabethan England and in the classical Chinese theater performed female roles because women were generally banned from the stage. Whether or not these performances blurred the sexual identification of the actors remains a point of debate in social and theater history and a focus of recent films such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).

Although transvestism, a term coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910 and derived from the Latin for "across" and "dress," is practiced mostly by heterosexual males, the performance of female impersonation has come to be associated particularly with glbtq culture.

Why this should be so is not altogether clear, but it may be that gender transgression is a component of sexual transgression or at least evokes empathy among those crossing sexual boundaries, particularly when these boundaries seem difficult to define. Certainly, cross-dressing calls into question rigid constructions of sex and gender.

In any case, notwithstanding the fact that most transvestites are heterosexual men who fetishize female clothing, drag has for a very long time been almost an institutionalized aspect of gay male culture.

The origin of the phrase *drag queen* is unclear. It may derive from Elizabethan slang (*quean* referring to a strumpet) or may have come to be applied to female impersonators as a consequence of the extravagant drag balls of the earlier twentieth century, a precursor of the drag shows that became associated with gay bars and nightclubs in the period between the world wars.

Why is it that a man performing with over-the-top female clothing and exaggerated mannerisms provokes such fascination among gay men? Kate Millett suggested in her landmark study *Sexual Politics* (1970) that the thrill produced by a drag queen arises through her denaturalization of gender, her demonstration that femininity is donned like a masquerade and rendered completely irrelevant to biology.

More recently, Wayne Koestenbaum has observed in his book *The Queen's Throat* (1993) that drag queens,

like opera divas, perform the kind of freedom that most gay men can enjoy only vicariously. Both these explanations may be correct because drag exists in multiple manifestations that individually seem to support both authors' theories.

Low Camp and High Camp Drag

The drag of low camp, for example, stresses the masquerade itself. In this type of drag, the performer often reclaims fashions and songs that were once serious but that now, many years after their introduction, seem a hysterical failure. The drag queen of low camp evokes this hysteria by emphasizing exactly those features that make the work's failure all the more obvious and entertaining.

An impersonator of Connie Francis, for example, may exaggerate the singer's famous early-1960s hairstyle or extend her long breathless notes in order to stress those features that defined her style. That this style no longer reigns makes its status as a masquerade easier to detect and funnier to view. Indeed, the fact that a man dons this masquerade as he plaintively sings "Where the Boys Are" makes it all the more obviously, and comically, a construct rather than any genuine expression of femininity.

This is the type of drag whose humor constitutes a gender critique with which gay men can empathetically identify. Performers such as the Kinsey Sicks, Mona Foot, Sherry Vine, The Lady Bunny, and Flotilla de Barge offer good examples of low camp drag.

The drag of high camp, by contrast, takes a far more serious approach. This type of performance tends to idealize rather than criticize, offering the impersonation as an authentic expression delivered anew to an adoring audience.

For example, an impersonation of Judy Garland might stress her exact look at any one point in her career, or the exact quality of voice she would have possessed at that time. The gay male audience enjoying this kind of impersonation tends not to laugh but to wait on every note with bated and excited breath. Witnessing this type of drag performance, gay men might identify with the diva, allowing her to perform the forceful expressions that they choose to stifle.

Drag Queens and Stonewall

Through the mid-twentieth century, the drag queens of high camp generally took for themselves the right of open self-expression that closeted gay men consistently declined. That may be why a cohort of these high-camp drag queens, having adopted a life of fearless self-expression, were so prominent in the 1969 Stonewall riots that ignited the modern gay liberation movement.

One of the riots' participants, Sylvia Ray Rivera, noted that she rose at Stonewall not only to protest yet another police raid on her regular bar but also to express anger against all the indignities visited against her because of her open drag identity. She noted further that many drag queens were particularly agitated then because their idol, Judy Garland, had been buried the very same day. Such empathetic identification and expression were typical of these rebellious drag queens.

Charles Pierce, Candy Darling, and High Camp Drag

One of the greatest of high camp drag performers was the legendary Charles Pierce (1926-1999), who earned fame even in the homophobic 1950s (when full drag was illegal in most jurisdictions) for his extraordinary impersonations of a host of larger-than-life figures. He was especially known for his renditions of Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Tallulah Bankhead, as well as some fictional creations, such as Doris Day's sister "Doo-Dah Day."

Performers of such high camp drag have largely faded from fashion as gay men have claimed the right to

speak and act as they please. This type of performance, however, continues to thrive in an area colloquially referred to as the "Drag Belt," the southern United States, where many gay men continue to feel deeply oppressed. Examples of these drag queens are Candy Darling, Jimmy James, and a myriad of local impersonators who enliven small-town bars.

Candy Darling (1946?-1974) probably represents high camp drag's apogee. In the late 1960s, at the age of 20, she entered Andy Warhol's avant-garde circle and soon became an icon of the Pop Art movement. Born in Massapequa Park, Long Island as James Lawrence Slattery, she came to Warhol's attention because her female illusion was so convincing. His appreciation was also based on her unusual ability to impersonate Hollywood divas so convincingly.

Darling's skill as a drag queen enabled her to assemble the features of such divas as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor into a striking concoction of high-Hollywood feminine masquerade. The resulting image, augmented by a copious use of hormones, stirred a particular sensation when Darling appeared in Warhol's film *Flesh* (1968).

Her image was further popularized by Lou Reed's song "Walk on the Wild Side" in the lyrics "in the back room she was everybody's darlin'." Although Darling craved the cinematic fame of her idols, her own fame was on a much smaller scale, achieved through small roles in underground films. Her death of leukemia at the age of 27, however, served to solidify her image as that of a glamorous, forever young, exquisitely beautiful tragic figure of almost beatific sweetness.

Low Camp Drag Performers

As high camp drag has slipped from fashion, low camp drag has gained popularity. While gay men--at least in big cities--increasingly feel the freedom to express themselves openly, the demands made on drag have shifted. Now, rather than seek the vicarious experience of open expression offered by exacting impersonations, gay men tend to prefer the masquerade and humor so important to low camp.

This trend is not altogether new. Legendary performers such as Ray Bourbon, for example, specialized in low drag, performing what one audience member described as "doyen drag," when he impersonated a foul-mouthed cleaning woman.

Mona Foot, as an example of a newer generation of low drag performers, always allows her muscular body to show through her skimpy dresses, purposefully impeding any illusion that she may be a true woman. Moreover, like The Lady Bunny and Jackie Beat, she has built a unique drag persona that overwhelms any celebrity she chooses to impersonate.

In fact, many of these contemporary drag queens de-emphasize musical impersonation in favor of spoken comedy, particularly that built around the overstatement and failure of their female masquerade. Quite distinct from the reverential aura surrounding high camp drag, this contemporary alternative often makes gay men and even drag queens themselves the butt of humor.

RuPaul

RuPaul represents a good, though subtle, example of the recent transformation from high camp drag into low camp drag. Born in 1960 in San Diego, the son of an aeronautics electrician, RuPaul Andre Charles grew up a "sissy." His persistent good nature allowed him to cope with his effeminacy quite well and this, in turn, allowed him to become one of the most acclaimed, politically gay-identified drag queens in the United States.

RuPaul got his start in Atlanta's informal Now Explosion drag troupe, which styled itself "punk drag." Like others in this mid-1980s group, he combined wigs and wild make-up with clothing that clearly exposed his

male body. In the early 1990s, however, he moved into the "glamour drag" for which he is most famous, characterized by enormous blonde wigs, stiletto heels, and tight groin tucks.

Yet despite this highly worked masquerade so reminiscent of high camp drag, RuPaul normally performs his own songs. When he does sing songs other than his own, he performs them as "covers" of anonymous works to which he applies his own distinct performance styles, as in his "Little Drummer Boy" (1997).

Also, rather than attempting to emulate celebrities, RuPaul, unlike high camp drag performers, consistently affirms himself, creating a distinctive drag persona of his own. He makes clear that he is a black gay man under the pounds of make-up and costume in which he performs.

This reality check allows him to embrace gay rights and other causes as a black gay male advocate; and he frequently performs at benefits and demonstrations. His musical hits such as "Supermodel" (1992) have won him a large and devoted following based on his own persona rather than on the impersonation of others.

RuPaul's female "realness" and chatty affirmation mildly break the rules of low camp drag where self-deprecating comedy and obvious masquerade have largely become the rule. These components of low camp have not only given drag a new life among gay men, but they have also given the practice a broad appeal well outside its original constituency.

Movies and plays such as Edouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982), Stephan Elliot's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), and Jenny Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1991), music videos by performers such as RuPaul and Joey Arias, and New York's annual Wigstock festival all demonstrate the increasing popularity of drag for a diverse audience.

The queerness of a gay man offering bitchy banter in a dress has become as acceptably entertaining as an overweight Roseanne Barr telling jokes about her size or comedian Margaret Cho musing on her Korean parents. These various forms of comedy offer a humorous view from outside the confines of normality, even a self-deprecating view to which many in today's audience seem sympathetically inclined.

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