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DRAG HISTORIES, HERSTORIES & HAIRSTORIES

Drag in a Changing Scene
Volume 2

Edited by
Mark Edward & Stephen Farrier

Drag Histories, Herstories and Hairstories

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This volume is dedicated to people who will never read it, the beloved brave dragsters of the past who paved the way for the rest to follow. We raise our lashes to you all.

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Contributors

Penny Arcade debuted in 1968, aged 18, with John Vaccaro's explosive Playhouse of the Ridiculous, the seminal rock-and-roll, queer, glitter/glam political theatre, which influenced everything from *Hair* to punk to Bowie and beyond. She became a Warhol superstar at 19 when she featured in the 1972 Warhol/Morrissey comedy, *Women in Revolt*. The author of sixteen full-length works and hundreds of solo performance pieces, she is a rare independent artist who has contributed to new art forms for every decade since the 1960s. A highly influential performance and experimental theatre artist, she has influenced generations of artists all over the world. Known for her highly quotable writing, she has always focused on the other and the outsider, on individuality and authenticity. Her focus on community building as the goal of performance and performance as a transformative act marks her as an original on the world stage. Since 1992 she has collaborated with former architect, video producer Steve Zehentner, in all her theatre work. They co-helm *Stemming the Tide of Cultural Amnesia*: *The Lower East Side Biography Project*, an oral history video project that has broadcast weekly since 1999.

Jacob Bloomfield, PhD, is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of History at the University of Kent and will be a Zukunftskolleg Fellow at the University of Konstanz from summer 2020. Jacob is currently working on a first monograph with University of California Press on the history of drag performance in modern Britain, as well as a research project on the musician Little Richard.

Alyson Campbell, PhD, is an award-winning theatre director whose work spans a broad range of companies and venues in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. She has collaborated closely with Sydney playwright Lachlan Philpott since their production of his play *Bison* in 2000 and the establishment of their queer assemblage wreckedAllprods in 2001. Works together include *Catapult, Bustown, The Trouble with Harry, GL RY, Colder* and, most recently, Alyson directed *Cake Daddy*, a hybrid cabaret/theatre/cake event on queerness and fatness co-created with Philpott and Ross Anderson-Doherty. Alyson is an Associate Professor in Theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality in performance, particularly questions of queer dramaturgies and HIV and AIDS in performance. She is co-editor of the collections *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where*

Performance Leads Queer (with Stephen Farrier, 2016) and *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the 21st Century* (with Dirk Gindt, 2018). She has recently published on 'feral pedagogies' in *Viral Dramaturgies* (2018) and in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics* (2019).

Isabelle Coy-Dibley is a doctoral researcher in English, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster. She holds English Literature degrees from University of Westminster, King's College London, and Birkbeck, University of London (Gender, Sexuality and Culture). Her research focuses on women's experimental writing, with an interdisciplinary approach to addressing the interdependent relationship between touch and relationality. Her theoretical experimentation with notions of relationality, performativity and identity politics in relation to gender and sexuality concentrates on queer theory, corporeal feminism, memory studies and the field of neuropsychology. She has worked for many years in education as a visiting lecturer as well as an Academic Learning Adviser, supporting students and developing academic writing resources. She was a steering group member for The Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network (PGCWWN) and has been involved in organizing events such as S A L O N-London's 'Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Feminist Inclusivity in Practice and Theory'. Other areas of interest include performance art, drag performance and playwriting, along with previous work reviewing plays for playstosee.com. She has presented numerous conference papers, undertaken extensive archival research and published articles such as '"Digitized Dysmorphia" of the Female Body: The Re/disfigurement of the Image'. She is currently developing a new play for the next Edinburgh Fringe Festival and is due to receive her doctorate in 2020.

Chris D' Bray started his career, aged 16, as a Bluecoat at Pontins in the mid-1970s. His current PhD research, at Edge Hill University, UK, is a detailed history of the northern British fun pub, and his chapter in this book is a condensed version of his investigations. He has performed cabaret acts since 1983 and is now regarded as a seasoned performer and an accomplished comedian in the northern LGBTQ+ community, being regularly asked to write jokes and scripts for other performers. He has played drag characters on screen, radio and in theatre; in 2005 he played the role of Lola Cabanna, a drag character in the TV soap *Emmerdale*. Also, in 2005, Chris hosted his own radio show on the Isle of Man – in full drag! Chris holds a master's degree from LIPA and a certificate in education from UCLAN and teaches in all aspects of the performing arts; he specializes in delivering classes about drag – both practical and academic. Chris enjoys exploring the history of drag, such as lip-synching and intertextuality. Furthermore, due to his heritage from fairground performers, Chris has an abiding interest in English

and continental cabaret, fairground and the carnival, and music hall and its antecedents. Indeed, he hopes his completed PhD thesis will show that the northern fun pubs were a modern version of the music hall genre.

Simon Dodi is a doctoral researcher and visiting lecturer at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. His doctoral thesis is a practice research examination of male camp identity in British popular performance. His research focuses on the work of Kenneth Williams, Frankie Howerd and Larry Grayson. His practice combines archival research alongside queer strategies of performance re-enactment and queer historiography. As a lecturer, he has taught across the fields of applied theatre, performance studies, solo performance practice and queer studies. Aside from his research, he works as a Programme Co-ordinator for public lectures, conferences and study days, in the Learning and National Programmes Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Mark Edward, PhD, is a pracademic and Reader in Creative Arts at Edge Hill University, UK. He is the author of *Mesearch and the Performing Body* (2018) and the co-editor of *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers*: *Drag in a Changing Scene* (Bloomsbury, 2020). Mark has published in the areas of mental health and identity, risky ethics in autoethnographic and autobiographical performance research, queer and LGBTQ+ research ethics and counter cultural dance in the UK. He has performed with Penny Arcade in her work *Bad Reputation* (2004) and with Jeremy Goldstein in his *Truth to Power Café* (2018). Mark has worked for Rambert Dance Company and toured his own dance theatre works. He is the writer and producer of the film and immersive installation *Council House Movie Star* (2012) featuring his drag persona, Gale Force. He has featured in TV documentaries on drag and activism and contributed to many BBC radio interviews and news articles on drag and class, drag and ageing, dance and fat (in)visibility and queering ballet and contemporary dance. In 2019 he was commissioned by the Arts Centre at EHU to create his autobiographical performance research work *What Have YOU Done to Deserve This?* He is currently working on an autobiographical book and accompanying gallery exhibition titled *The Road to Wigan Queer*. In 1988 Mark was part of the UK acid house and ecstasy rave culture and the same year became involved in protests against Clause 28. He holds a PhD by practice-led research in mesearching and performance autoethnography, an MA in Dance Studies and a BA (Hons) in Creative Arts (specializing in live art, dance and drama). Mark is a lover of vintage clothing, especially velvet suits, and a collector of 1970s and 1980s Sindy dolls. In his spare time, he salvages Catholic religious chipped iconic statues from charity shops and queers them up into rejuvenated glittering art pieces. He practises

mindfulness and often dreams of migrating to warmer climates with a balcony overlooking the sea. He would love to eat cream cakes and drink champagne on a daily (hourly) basis.

Stephen Farrier, PhD, is a Reader in Theatre and Performance at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, where his work focuses on queer theory, performance, gender and the relations of theatre and performance to community. He has co-edited and written on a number of queer ideas; in particular he works on the relationship of temporalities to queer theatre making and connects this work to community. He has written and presented on queer intergenerational work, the relation of temporalities to drag performance, queer histories and the playwright Joe Orton, drag performers and informal training, HIV and AIDS on stage, and queer research methodologies, in particular queer practice as research methodologies with Alyson Campbell. He has presented his work at conferences and at invitation across four continents. He co-edited with Alyson Campbell *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (2016). He sits on the editorial board of the journal *Studies in Theatre and Performance* and on the advisory board of *Contemporary Theatre Review*. From 2009–2012 he co-chaired the Theatre and Performance Research Association's (TaPRA) Performance, Identity and Community working group. He regularly directs shows at Royal Central and elsewhere, he works in devised theatre and has directed work for festivals with well-received shows on cancer and queer identity, growing up gay, and his co-devised show *Hetty the King (and Other Women I Have Loved)* was nominated for the LGBT prize at Brighton Fringe, UK, 2016.

Nick Ishmael-Perkins has worked as a journalist, media trainer, project manager and theatre maker for nearly thirty years in Africa, South Asia and Latin America. He started his career in theatre as a member of Stage One, a Barbadian company, eventually leaving the island to train as a journalist at Ryerson University in Canada. His interest in communication for social change led him to Zimbabwe in the mid-1990s, working across Southern Africa. He founded the consultancy group Media for Development, where he designed and oversaw campaigns for various sectors in public education in nearly twenty countries. He has completed post-graduate studies at the University of Sussex, UK in anthropology and a Writers Residency at the Market Theatre in South Africa. He became Head of Research Communication at the Institute of Development Studies before taking over as Director at SciDev.Net, an online news service for science and technology in the developing world. He now works at CAB International as an advisor in development communication and extension. In 2017, he established Wretched

Theatre, a touring company with a mission to do innovative intercultural work. The company's first production, *On Missing*, opened the 2018 Viola Europe Festival. He currently sits on the Advisory Committee for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Nick has also written extensively on communicating for behavioural and policy change.

Gabriel Mayora, PhD, is an openly gay Venezuelan immigrant queer of colour critic. He currently holds the joint position of Instructor in the Center for Women's & Gender Studies and the Department of English at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. He earned his PhD in English from the University of Florida in 2016. His graduate research on Latinx gay and trans representation and performance in contemporary media earned the Delores Auzenne Dissertation Award. He went on to receive a Consortium for Faculty Diversity Emerging Scholar Postdoctoral Fellowship for two consecutive years at Franklin & Marshall College, where he eventually held a joint visiting faculty position in Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies and American Studies. With the support of Franklin & Marshall College, Mayora developed his research on Latinx queer and trans historical figures such as Holly Woodlawn and Sylvia Rivera. Mayora's publications include the journal articles, 'Her Stonewall Legend: The Fictionalization of Sylvia Rivera in Nigel Finch's *Stonewall*' (2018) and 'Rise Up!: Nuyorican Resistance and Transcultural Aesthetics in *Hamilton*' (2018), as well as the essay 'Cover, Girl: Branding Puerto Rican Drag in 21st-Century U.S. Popular Culture' for the edited volume *The Makeup of Rupaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows* (2014). He wishes to thank Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier for their invitation to contribute to this volume and their invaluable support and feedback throughout the development of this manuscript.

Trish McTighe, PhD, is Lecturer in Drama at Queen's University Belfast. Previously, she lectured at the University of Birmingham and was an AHRC post-doctoral researcher on the Staging Beckett Project at the University of Reading (2012–2015). Her book, *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett's Drama*, was published in 2013, and she co-edited (with David Tucker) the double volume *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland* and *Staging Beckett in Great Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2016). She has published in the journals *Modern Drama*, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* and the *Irish University Review*. She is theatre reviews editor for the *Journal of Beckett Studies*.

Joseph Mercier, PhD, is a choreographer, performance maker and academic, working across disciplines, primarily in dance, live art and contemporary theatre. He is the co-founder/director of the performance company PanicLab. His work has been supported and commissioned by: Dance City, The Place,

Homotopia, The Unity Theatre, The Albany, Cambridge Junction, Soho Theatre, MDI, Yorkshire Dance, GLYPT, Barbican Plymouth, Chisenhale Dance Space, Live Art Bistro and Fierce Festival. In 2016 PanicLab's show, *Theseus Beefcake* was awarded best British production at BE Festival Birmingham. Originally from Canada, he now resides in West Yorkshire where he is a lecturer in Creative and Contextual Studies at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. Joseph trained in classical ballet at the School of Alberta Ballet. He studied theatre (playwriting) at Concordia University. He completed his masters and doctorate at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Nando Messias, PhD, produces work that straddles performance art, dance and theatre. His performances combine beautiful images with a fierce critique of gender, visibility and violence. Nando has performed at prestigious venues such as Hayward Gallery, V&A, Tate Britain, Roundhouse, The Gate, Royal Vauxhall Tavern and ICA, among other spaces across the UK and internationally. As well as a practitioner, Nando is movement director for Theo Adams Company and a researcher of queer theory and performance. Nando's publications include 'Sissy that Walk: The Sissy's Progress' in *Queer Dramaturgies* (eds. A. Campbell and S. Farrier), 'Visibility: Performance and Activism' in *Performing Interdiscisplinarity* (ed. E. Bryon) and 'Injurious Acts: A Struggle with Sissy in Performance' (*Choros International Dance Journal*). Nando's solo work has been curated by the Live Art Development Agency as part of the programme 'Just Like a Woman', shown in the City of Women Festival in Ljubljana (2013), New York and London (2015). In 2015/16 Nando completed a national tour of *The Sissy's Progress* to much acclaim and press interest, followed by a tour of *Shoot the Sissy* to prestigious LGBTQ festivals and venues across the UK in 2017. *Death and the Sissy*, the closing performance of his sissy series, was presented in 2017 in London. His latest performance, *The Pink Supper*, was created in 2019 for a LADA commission.

Helen Newall, PhD, is a Professor of Theatre Praxis at Edge Hill University, and a professional playwright, photographer and digital artist. Her many plays include the award-winning *Remote Control* for HTV-West Television Workshop, *Dumisani's Drum* for Action Transport and *Over By Christmas* for Theatre in the Quarter, for whom she was Writer in Residence. Her digital scenography and performance projections include: *Orpheus*, *The Book of the Dead*, Edge Hill University; *A View from the Hill*, Brindley Arts Centre; *Illumination*, Glossolalia; *A Christmas Carol* and *The Snow Queen*, TiQ, Chester. Her installations include: *The Ghost of Someone Not Yet Drowned*, Victoria Baths, Manchester; *Blodeuwedd* and *A Fairy Tale Not Yet Told*, Picton Castle, Pembrokeshire; *Sounds & Visions*, Lisbon, Munich; *Silence*, Pound

Arts, Wiltshire; *Remember Me*, Bluecoat, Liverpool, Chester Military Museum, Narberth Museum; and *Lost Morecambe*, for the Morecambe Variety Festival. She is a co-contributing editor of *The Road to Somewhere* for Palgrave Macmillan. Helen advocates strongly for practice-research. She currently creates images of fat ballerinas with Dr Mark Edward to study image, photo-documentation, representation and camp; and interrogates commemoration, history and memory via digital installation experiences of animated historical photography for one-to-one audiences.

Rosslyn Prosser, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide and is currently working on the project LGBTQ Migrations: Life Story Narratives in the South Australian GLAM Sector with the History Trust and Migration Museum. Ros publishes in the fields of life-writing, creative non-fiction and experimental writing.

Simon Sladen is Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Performance at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and Senior Tutor (Performance) on the Royal College of Art/V&A joint History of Design Masters programme. Recent exhibitions for the V&A include *Censored: Stage, Screen Society at 50*, *Ivan Kyncl: In the Minute*, *Laughing Matters: The State of a Nation* and *Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser*, for which he co-edited the accompanying publication. Simon's own research focuses on the field of popular culture, in particular comedy and British pantomime. He is interested in how celebrity often disrupts structures of performance and can lead to new interpretations and practices, as well as how perceptions of tradition and nation are inherited, interpreted and enacted. Recent research has focused on cross-dressed performance, costume, iconography and training. Simon is Chair of the Society for Theatre Research, on the editorial board of the British Theatre Guide and Founder/Co-ordinator of #PantoDay and the National Database of Pantomime Performance.

Ben Walters, PhD, is an independent writer, researcher and producer based in London. His doctoral research at Queen Mary University of London was produced in collaboration with queer performance collective Duckie, whose weekly residency at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) began in 1995. Ben's research conceptualizes Duckie's community projects with homeless people, isolated older people and young LGBTQ+ performers. As 'Dr Duckie', Ben shares this research through talks, workshops, performances and events, including the experimental performance symposium 'Queer Fun: An Ivory-Tower Vaudeville' (RVT, 2017) and a range of free online resources. As part of the RVT Future campaign group, Ben wrote the successful application to Historic England to make the RVT the UK's first building to be added to the

national list of statutorily protected buildings because of its history of queer use. He has also been involved in campaigning work to protect other threatened queer spaces in London, emerging from his time as cabaret editor of *Time Out London* between 2009 and 2013. Ben has published articles in *Performance Research* and *Research in Drama Education* and chapters in *Urban Claims and the Right to the City* (2020) and *The Routledge Companion to Applied Performance* (2020). He has produced performance events including *The Prime of Ms David Hoyle* (Chelsea Theatre, 2016) and *BURN: Moving Images by Cabaret Artists* (2010–2016). His documentaries about queer performance include *This Is Not a Dream* (2012), *Vinegar to Jam* (2013) and *Cut To* (2014). Ben also contributes regularly to *Sight & Sound* and blogs at nottelevision.net. Resources related to his research into homemade mutant hope machines can be found at duckie.co.uk/drduckie.

Mark Wardel, aka TradeMark, is a contemporary artist whose work explores issues of identity, portraiture and the artificial self-created personae prevalent within the entertainment industry, club and urban LGBTQ+ subcultures. His distinctive hand-painted work draws on influences from traditional portraiture through post-punk graphics, New York urban art of the 1970s/1980s, Soviet era propaganda posters, 1950s physique photos, pop art and contemporary high-fashion imagery, and has been exhibited in galleries and museums internationally including London's V&A museum where he created an edition of 300 David Bowie life mask sculptures as part of their record-breaking *David Bowie Is* exhibition in 2013. Clients include Soho House Films, Absolute Vodka, David Bowie/Isolar New York, Homotopia Festival, Dazed and Confused, Boy George, EMI Records, Defected Records. Mark Wardel lives and works in London.

Acknowledgements

The initial idea for this volume, and volume 1, has been swirling around in both our heads for several years. After many late-night email discussions, early-hours rambling text messages, endless telephone conversations, Skype and Zoom chats (while wearing 1960s camp and flowery house coats) and vulnerable periods of self-isolation due to the COVID-19 lockdown, we have finally felt confident about letting our creative and critical work settle onto the page. We have taken a shimmy back from the labour of love that it has been and want to acknowledge the amount of generous support we have received, without which this project would not have been possible. It is difficult to know where to start and probably when to stop. In the words of Maria von Trapp, let us start at the very beginning with the largest amount of gratitude going to our contributors, without whom this volume would not be possible. We thank you for your patience and generosity, especially when we asked for changes and were perhaps pernickety and demanding. The volume is all the stronger for your contribution and forbearance.

We would like to thank the institutions who supported the project, Edge Hill University and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, for funding, teaching remission and much-valued support. In no order thereafter, we are most grateful particularly to Dr Nikki Craske, Professor George Talbot, Professor Kevern Verney, Dr Anastasia Konstantopoulou, Professor Matthew Pateman, Professor Steve Davismoon, Professor Victor Merriman, Professor Maria Delgado and Professor Simon Shepherd. We are thankful to Bloomsbury, especially the senior commissioning editor, Mark Dudgeon, for commissioning this and the first volume, *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene* (2020). We extend grateful thanks to our editorial assistant at Bloomsbury, Meredith Benson, for the smoothness of the process and speedy replies to our questions and requests. We appreciate the time and effort given by the series editors Professor Enoch Brater and Dr Mark Taylor-Batty; their positivity and helpful feedback suggestions have influenced what we have produced. We are equally appreciative to the artist Mark Wardel for providing such amazing artwork for the book covers. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to the fabulous Penny Arcade for her enthusiastic and gritty foreword.

Mark has valued the support from his colleagues on the BA Hons dance degree at Edge Hill University and Edge Hill University's Arts Centre

manager Dr Cathy Butterworth for acting as a wise springboard for Mark's daily tête-à-tête. Mark is most grateful to Dr Christiana Hadjidemetriou and Dr Louise Mercer for their ongoing support in his journey towards optimum well-being, and Pat for her spiritual wisdom. Respect goes to all those fabulous Wigan queens from the 1980s, especially the Clowns Bar and Henry Africa's posse, and to Chris D'Bray for his long-standing friendship, and to the late (and wonderfully fierce) Gary Bradshaw for his irreverence, queerness and bravery. Mark would also like to pay tribute to all his friends, alive and deceased, from his youth who applauded his dragging up in his sister's dresses (even though he looked terrible) and encouraging him to continue in his pursuit of drag queening. During the research process for this volume, Mark's father, Joseph, died. He was rather proud that Mark and Stephen had secured a contract with Bloomsbury and even more proud of the fact it was going to be about drag. Joseph would have appreciated this book. Mark is fortunate to have a caring mother, Sylvia, who has shown Mark constant love and support throughout his life no matter how queer, crazy and unruly he may have been. Mark's siblings, Val, Liz and Barry, have been soul-building and enabled him to grow and understand (dys)functionality. In many respects, Mark's contributions to this volume pay homage to his late sister, Denise, who first introduced him to men in makeup and platform boots and, like his true friends, encouraged his androgyny and glamour because of her love for David Bowie. Finally, Mark is eternally grateful to his partner Chris for his personal encouragement, unconditional love (until it comes to doing the housework and laundry!) and endless supply of cups of decaffeinated coffee.

Stephen thanks his colleagues at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, for their support in enabling him the time and space to take part in the project. It is too easy to forget that we rely on the understanding and flexible support of our colleagues for projects such as this. In particular, Stephen is grateful for the encouragement, support and guidance of Maria Delgado, Dan Hetherington, Joe Parslow and the team in the research office, as well as the Contemporary Performance Practice degree team. Likewise, the open discussion with colleagues, PhD researchers, students and graduates working in drag and queer has been enriching for this project and Stephen's journey through it. And of course, thanks to Stephen's partner, George, for encouragement (and curtseying).

Mark would like to thank Stephen for his calmness and his ability to stick a soothing plaster over the sometimes turbulent research process. Stephen would like to thank Mark for his impish ways and for ripping the plaster off, allowing the turmoil when needed.

Finally, we acknowledge previous drag scholarship and the range of performers that we write with and about. Their intellectual contributions, onstage effort, sweat, swagger and glamour pave the way for this book to be a valued neighbour on the shelf or on the hard drive. Move up! Make room. We are here.

Mark and Stephen

Note

Foreword: Such A Drag!

Penny Arcade

The roots of drag are lost in history and even pre-history. While drag once resided in the very outskirts of society (pardon my pun), like tattooing and burlesque, the domain of the socially disenfranchised, today drag is firmly mainstream, it is no longer anyone's secret life.

Now drag is everywhere! On television drag is now a contact sport as in the ubiquitous *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, but today there are also women doing drag and children doing drag. Yes, in certain places in the United States, young boys, even heterosexual boys, do drag for fun or even competitively. There are even child drag stars! Not drag queens but drag princesses!

In an amusing, if not worrying, turn of events, the biological women who practise drag have been highly criticized for what some men are calling appropriation. Yet, despite the criticism, the movement of women who practise drag is growing, a kind of souped-up sisterhood to ultra femme lesbians, who practise extreme femininity, employing female drag to accentuate their femme personas. Dolly Parton has been doing this for decades!

Like the tradition of the UK's music hall and television, comedic cross-dressing has long flourished here, too, in the United States. Men wearing women's clothing goes back to American vaudeville and continues into television in the careers of Milton Berle, Flip Wilson and others, not as extensive as in the UK but still very visible.

I am a contemporary of the first wave of public drag in the 1960s, not only as a member of The Playhouse of the Ridiculous, John Vaccaro's seminal, queer, political, glitter/glam, rock-and-roll theatre, or in film as an Andy Warhol Superstar, but on the streets of New York. Believe me when I say that *all* contemporary and current drag phenomena have their roots in the street, from New York, to London to Sydney to San Francisco and just about everywhere else.

I first met drag queens at age 14 in Hartford, Connecticut. Hartford is the capital of the state of Connecticut, created by charter from Charles the II in 1662. Every town and city is named after somewhere in the UK. By day, white collar workers employed at the various insurance companies made Hartford the insurance capital of the United States, returning at night to their suburban bedroom communities. After dark, in sight of the gleaming gold dome of the state capitol in Bushnell Park, the bar at Tony Romano's Steakhouse, down by

the train station, came roaring to life as a gay bar. Tony Romano's attracted homosexual men from miles around. There were appearances by lesbian couples and heterosexual women, called fruit flies or fag hags, but their presence was limited. Once a year there was a huge tri-state drag competition at a gay bar in Springfield, Massachusetts, thirty miles away. Queens from Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts competed in a drag catwalk for the title 'Most Real'.

The queens spent a year putting together their 'look'. Wigs! gowns! makeup!! One by one the queens took the stage – each more bodacious than the next. Big and bold, with huge bouffant hair, exaggerated bust lines, their eyes caked with makeup and false eyelashes. They presented a vision of 1950s female glamour. Their looks were based on larger than life female movie stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Jayne Mansfield. We watched them take the stage – each bolder than the last. We stood calling out. We laughed and squealed, 'Fach for days!', using the Italian word for face, 'faccia', a Gay slang we share with Polari in the UK.

Then onto the stage stepped a local hairdresser from Hartford who we all knew from Tony Romano's – Billy Hansen. But right away we knew something was different. You see, Billy wasn't wearing a wig. Billy was in his own hair, blonde and straight, just touching his collar. Billy didn't have on any makeup, not even lipstick. Billy wasn't wearing a gown. Billy was wearing blue jeans and a white tee shirt that floated on his flat chest. Then Billy walked across the stage, and Billy was barefoot. Barefoot! Billy walked across the stage like he was strolling to the corner store and in his hand he carried a lady wallet.

The crowded room fell to silence and then everyone started to applaud. Everyone realized that Billy was the realest one of all. Billy won first place in the drag competition of 1966 and in my mind the concept of drag was changed forever. In the spring of 1967, I was whisked off by a carload of queens to Provincetown, Massachusetts, the vacation capital of Queerdom in the United States. It was the first place the British Puritans landed in 1620. A beach resort not unlike Brighton in the UK but without the boardwalk, gay men and women converged there all summer long from all over the United States. P-Town was ruled by the mores of the conservative English and Portuguese fishing culture that had deep roots there, at the tip of Cape Cod. The locals put up with the yearly invasion of holidaying Gays and Lesbians, in order to make ends meet over the long coming winter, much as they had with the wave of early twentieth-century Bohemians: playwrights and poets like Eugene O'Neill and Edna St Vincent Millay, who had made P-Town a world-renowned artist colony and brought us the term 'Free Love'. Female impersonators were the main entertainers, impersonating the lady stars of the day and, except for a lark at a private party, people did not do drag. In

1992 Quentin Crisp told me that he himself only went out in drag once in his life: "I got dressed and took the bus with a friend. We went to a pub and then I came home. It was a great success in that nothing happened! But I only dressed in drag that one time."

In the fall of 1967, I washed up on the downtown shore of New York City's East Village, a queer, homeless, teenage Aphrodite. I became an adolescent flaneuse, walking the city all day and night. My daily beat was a trek from the crash pads of Alphabet City, through Tompkins Square Park, up East 8th Street, to Second Ave and St Mark's Place.

After a twirl or two around a parking meter in front of Gems Spa and a 25 cent egg cream, I would make the long walk across East 8th Street to Christopher Street, the great Gay rialto of my youth. Small groups of adults mixed with young, homeless, hippie runaways and gathered on the stoops and sidewalk, talking and dishing the day's news and gossip from our world. Street dishing was an art form and was how all news was communicated. Depending on who I ran into, I would walk down to the ragged piers that lined the Hudson River. At night it was a furtive cruising ground but during the daytime, until 1984, there was still a teeming waterfront, with sailors from different countries, marine repair shops and boating suppliers. It was down there that the street queens gathered, mainly people of color. This was where I originally met Marsha P. Johnson, who called herself Black Marsha in those days. We would stop and talk in the doorways and, if any of us had a little money, we would treat the others to coffee at the Silver Dollar Diner. At dusk we would head over to the Sunset Pier and later we would circle back up Christopher Street, to see who had shown up. We would park ourselves on one of the building's stoops and talk and dish and cruise and people watch till the early morning hours.

Pretty much everyone I would come to know for the rest of my life, I met there, on that stroll, between those two points, East and West. That landscape encompassed my world and it was there, below 14th Street, where I would witness the evolution of drag.

In 1963 the filmmaker Jack Smith made his opus *Flaming Creatures*. His concept drew from his fascination with two people who lived in drag across the hall from him when he first moved to New York in 1950. Jack decided to immortalize their lifestyle in his film. Most of the performers who cross-dressed in *Flaming Creatures* were queer men on the spectrum of androgyny, not drag queens, with the exception of Frances Francine who frequently dressed in drag when he was not working as a uniformed doorman. Mario Montez, who eventually found success as a drag queen, working with Andy Warhol, considered himself an actor and throughout his life tried to make that clear, but in the 'trans and drag'-obsessed era of the late 2000s, that plea

fell on mostly deaf ears. The notorious demi-mondaine Joel Markman was a flamboyant homosexual but he dressed as a man in everyday life. He was neither drag queen nor actor. In *Flaming Creatures* he performed what was then considered the deeply transgressive lipstick scene and for at least two decades he was considered the film's unofficial star. Yet by the 1980s the transgressive impact of his eroticized lipstick application no longer read as transgressive. There were also several biological women in the film: Marian Zazeela, Judith Malina (of The Living Theatre), Beverly Grant and Sheila Bick.

Flaming Creatures would capture a generation's conscious and unconscious imagination and influence artists from Andy Warhol to Federico Fellini to John Waters. *Flaming Creatures* opened the flood gates and within four years of its premier, the East Village was filled with queens in various outré expressions of drag. It was 1968 when drag took centre stage in the form of Jackie Curtis. Fuelled by a beatnik poet sense of rebellion mixed with a psychedelicized vision of freedom, Jackie Curtis would change drag forever with one simple action: Jackie did not try to pass as a woman. Drag would never be the same.

Contemporary drag owes a debt of courage to Jackie Curtis, born John Curtis Holder on the Lower East Side of New York, son of a ten-cents a dance, Times Square taxi dancer and a returning World War II Tennessee soldier. Jackie was raised in a household of women, the grandson of the notorious bar keeper Slugger Ann, whose famous bar of the same name was one of the last connections to old vaudeville and the famous Bowery theatres and bars from the turn of the century. Two years after Curtis's first play, *Glamour, Glory and Gold* premiered and heralded the debut of the then unknown Robert De Niro, Jackie's next play *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* broke into the mainstream.

Jackie was by then a member of The Playhouse of the Ridiculous and played Heaven Grand with an outrageous, glittered cast of thirty, directed by the queer performance visionary John Vaccaro, as a circus side show. It was reviewed in the *New York Times*, which quoted Jackie in a two-page banner headline, proclaiming "Not he, not she, just me Jackie", anticipating current gender trends by five decades, not in a zine but in America's paper of record in 1969!

Today it is almost impossible to explain Jackie's impact, influencing performers as diverse as Bette Midler and David Bowie, just as s/he influenced John Waters and Divine. Curtis's influence reverberated past the 1970s into the 1980s and beyond, through the films of Andy Warhol. Jackie's appearances in films like *Flesh*, *Trash* and *Women in Revolt* (along with cohort Candy Darling) influenced the drag queens of New York's Club 57, The Pyramid and Wigstock.

I first witnessed drag on the, then, mean streets of New York as a courageous action, an attempt at a fuller expression of self and self-defined identity. Then I watched as drag became a performance of identity and politics and, finally, I have watched drag become an art form.

Today, many of the legendary drag queens of the street are forgotten. Bunny Eisenhower, Minette, Alexis Del Lago, Marie Nemo, Estelle Bayuda, Taffy Tits, Brandy Alexander. Some did drag for outrageous fun and began performing in the new late 1960s downtown theatre like Jackie, Candy, Holly, Agosto Machado, Bunny Eisenhower, Marie Nemo (Paul Ambrose), Estelle Bayuda (Douglas Fisher), Alexis Del Lago, Wayne County (Jayne County); others, like Brandy Alexander, International Chrysis, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson and countless, other, forgotten queens of colour, worked the piers, hustling in the Meat Packing district, that stretch of 'No Man's Land' that ran along the Hudson River.

In the 1980s to 1990s, AIDS erased much of the world I came of age in. This history is remembered by the few left who witnessed it. What is left in its place is a simulacrum, an academic version of queer life, sanitized and made to fit in with the increasingly politically correct theories in Queer Studies. In other words, the erasure of inconvenient histories and inconvenient lives.

The history of drag is extensive and not the subject of this short foreword. I am writing from my personal memory and history of drag. It behooves us to study personal histories, to fight against the erasure of history and to honour lineage, because it belongs to us all. If we do not – we too will be marginalized, hidden, made obscure and devalued. It has also been said that something cannot become an art form until it is able to be practised by anyone.

I salute all of the contributors in this volume and their work to expand the understanding of everyone by expanding the dialogue. I give my deepest thanks to Joseph Mercier for braving the complexity of undertaking the investigation of my work in the face of drag, a kind of cultural anthropology that he has carried out with vision, integrity and empathy. I commend and congratulate the editors, Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier for your rigorous and generous inquiry and the inclusiveness contained herein. Thank you for bringing the world this exciting, informative and challenging volume. I have no doubt that it will spark conversations and further investigations for years to come. Blessed Be.

Penny Arcade. New York City. 11 May 2020

Preface

Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier

Welcome to the second volume of *Drag in a Changing Scene*. In this book we have picked up some of the threads left over from the previous volume (though you need not have read volume one to find volume two enjoyable or useful). We remain committed to highlighting lesser known performers and performance, and innovative thinking about drag as a practice. The volume in hand is the next step in the direction of bringing to drag studies (or the studiers of drag) some histories about practices and performers. We want to do this while keeping some of the energy of our subject and so value playfulness and, where possible, a bit of naughtiness.

We started this playfulness in the title of the book: histories, herstories, hairstories. We designed it this way to be purposefully disruptively queer (and memorable). Yet there is some serious intent to the nomenclature 'hairstories'. Like drag performance that is both funny and deadly serious, the idea of hairstories indicates the importance of hair in drag performance, on which there is great focus. But we also extend hairstories to think plurally; accordingly, we set our hairstories as [t]hairstories – *thair* is an archaic way of spelling 'there' and 'their'. With the play on [t]hair, we look at 'their [hi]stories', 'their' indicates (often) a queer community practice of plural genders and identities, and 'there [hi]stories', in which practices are situated historically. For instance, in drag performance communities and venues, at least in recent times, there is a growing sensitivity to plural pronouns, trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities. 'Their' moves beyond the gender binary, and allows for gender fuckery and fluidity, both core to drag practices. *Thair* allows us to conceive of the historical expression of 'their' in present day articulations of identity. Yet, rather than choosing 'thairstories', 'hairstories' allows a queer pun, but it also reflects how hair plays such an important part of the performance of drag on many levels.

One of the key parts of drag work across many forms is the application of hair through wigs and by sticking hair onto the body. The application of hair in the form of a wig can range from mirroring hairstyles found in non-drag contexts to enormous constructions reminiscent of eighteenth-century cartoons. Likewise, the application of hair to the face or chest can be formed through makeup or the application of hair stuck with spirit gum. Hair for kinging is important in the presentation of various forms of masculinity; even

when a character appears clean shaven, the performers will still accentuate eyebrows and sideburns. Certainly in the work we have seen, 'male pattern' body hair/baldness forms an important part of kinging performances. Although some performers are very adept at using hair to transform their look in a way that closely imitates stereotypical hair growth associated with men, there is often no need for the hair to be believable. Indeed, even where the performer has facial hair that they have grown themselves, often it functions on stage as a sign of drag performance, rather than a clear indication of the performer's identity on a gender spectrum (though it does function in this way too sometimes). Thus it serves differently for different performers: for some, it appears as imitation, for others, as a proudly displayed and celebrated step in personal transition and affirmation processes. Even at the level of hair, the resonance of the context in which the performance work appears is crucial to understanding its relevance and resonance. Drag ruptures, parodies and plays with all of these categories. Hair, its lack or replacement with other materials, is a key part of the arsenal drag performers have to transform their look, but also engage with their audiences. Hair is not a simple thing.

In the middle of the twentieth century in the United States and in the United Kingdom, the wig at the end of drag queen performances was removed on stage to show the audience that the performer was in fact male – in case anyone had been misled by the performer. In some ways the removal of the wig was a protective measure in a hostile homophobic cultural context: it indicates that the performer has no desire to deceive and reveals that the entire performance was trickery – allegiances to gender normativity in the space can be resumed. Furthermore, it allows plausible deniability should the performer come into contact with the authorities. The wig for the queen is central to thinking about the history of drag.[1] Hair is both part of a performer's costume and deeply connected to the identity of the artist and the community in which they play. It is an indication of plurality, of a [t]hair – both their and there – a way of thinking about a who and a where that deeply connects drag performance work to a plural history, a history that is as vibrant and disorganized as a drag show in a local bar.

We start, in Chapter 1, to speak about the ways in which we might tell drag history. By outlining what we have called a sequin method, we look to show the shiny practices or performers who may have been obscured, or plain forgotten, by other histories. We also wrestle with the idea of a drag history in the singular, understanding that we want to engage with histories in a way that does not seek to become a dominant narrative. We remain committed to looking to the sparkle less dominant works provide; as such, we note practices and performers who are under regarded or who had limited reach as a performer. We articulate this as both a political and an ethical position.

In Chapter 2, Ben Walters focuses on London (UK) queer bar the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT). The RVT has deep historical connection to sexual subcultures and queer performance and is a mainstay of the London queer performance and drag scene. Ben's chapter traces less the deep history of the venue than it makes an analysis of how the venue and the drag performance it entertained uses or references historical material in performance. By emphasizing how fun can be seriously used in performance, the chapter looks to specific performance events held in the venue (and in some other places) to make sense of the past in a way that deals with the present and an uncertain future for queer nightlife venues in a city that has been open to drag performance in many ways.

Following this commitment to queer practices and places, in Chapter 3 we look to a specific location. Chris D' Bray's contribution zones in on a specific region of the north of England in the early 1970s. Chris' chapter notes a surprising root for the development of drag in a working-class region – straight bars. It plots the development of the northern 'fun pub' scene up until the early 1990s, both in terms of the way that straight audiences lapped up drag performance and how the development of the venues gave life to particular forms of drag performance. By analysing and recording the development of and performers in the northern fun pub scene (Chris' own performance work included) the chapter traces its inevitable decline as it sought to replicate itself in other parts of the region as enterprise. Chris helps articulate the important role of pubs/clubs/bars in the development of drag work, albeit in a predominantly straight context.

Jacob Bloomfield's work in this volume (Chapter 4) offers an insightful examination of straight audiences and drag performance in the post-war theatre landscape. Jacob writes about ex-service men in drag performing concert party turns in theatre venues – often to huge audiences. Through an analysis of drag and cross-dressing, Jacob examines how the performance rendered gender and sexuality ambiguous in a social and legislative context understood to be rather more encouraging of gender normativity off-stage. Key in the discussion is the way that the reviews of the performance clearly state that the men in the shows had served their country bravely but now can perform convincingly as something altogether more feminine. These shows were developed and popular in a time when male homosexuality was punishable by imprisonment and theatre censorship still existed, which prohibited the representation of homosexuality on stage. Yet these shows tickled queerness, in part by playing to the censor's inherent class bias and also by couching it as family entertainment. It is clear again in Jacob's chapter that straight audience members enjoyed the naughtiness and agency drag brought to the stage.

Of course there is a cogent argument that makes the point that such agency and popularity may be bestowed by the patriarchal context in which these performances appear. This position is one that preoccupies Stephen Farrier's contribution (Chapter 5), but Stephen's chapter looks to an earlier period (starting in late nineteenth/early twentieth century) of male impersonators. The chapter seeks to align some of the historical performance work of male impersonators with current kinging performance, looking to see how watching kinging in the theatre (rather than in bars) can link some of the same energy that key music hall performers brought to their audiences. By reading a performance featuring a drag king in the theatre, the chapter unpicks some of the messiness of connecting kinging unproblematically to historical male impersonators; in so doing, it sketches an account where attention moves from dominant histories of queening to those of kinging.

Chapter 6, by Isabelle Coy-Dibley, describes how women were also taking to the stage in the early twentieth century, this time in Japan in the Takarazuka Revue. The performance form is one in which heterosexual representation appears on stage, but is played only by women. This happens in a context where performance was associated with men and yet requires a kind of drag or cross-dressing, which opens up some interesting and unexpected power dynamics as only women occupy the stage. The power play of desire commingled with celebrity status means that the works present a challenge to normative gender relations and hint at another kind of desire. Isabelle looks to a moment of a kiss that happens on stage, the management of which is a combination of controlling the performers so that they do not overstep a heteronormative boundary, but in such a way that a destabilizing (what we would recognize now as) queer desire is fully brought into the performance space.

It is clear then that the representation and stimulation of non-normative desire plays a strong part in the histories of drag, as does camp. Camp in this context is the playing out of gender non-conformity and in Chapter 7 Simon Dodi works through how camp might be analysed and shaped by looking at it as both a name given to a type of drag performance and to a type of person who might claim it as an identity position. By thinking through the way that camp is deployed across historical contexts, Simon looks to the way that drag as a term and a position changes meaning over time but maintains a relationship with its own history. To do camp drag in this sense is to gesture to the past and to, as Simon notes, require some realignment or reclaiming of historical discourse around camp.

Rosslyn Prosser notes in Chapter 8, camp men and women have often found a home in drag settings. Rosslyn's chapter focuses on Vonni Diva, an Adelaide performer in her late sixties who has made a career in drag settings, playing in cabaret and stripping. Vonni's life narrative as a performer has seen

her connected with drag communities as a transgender person, working on the circuit and whose history connects the historical relationship drag has with trans communities. Rosslyn looks not only to Vonni's performance, but also pays attention to costumes as a key component of their longevity and relationship with a drag lexicon manifest in costume. It is more accurate to call Vonni a showgirl, but one who has a deep connection to the location in which they work and an intimate understanding of drag's function and construction. Certainly, Vonni is a mainstay of the community in which they work. Likewise, the next chapter turns to another mainstay performer who is deeply connected to the queer and drag performance community.

Penny Arcade and Joseph Mercier write together but each with a different focus. Joseph writes an analysis of Penny's work, while Penny reflects on her history and biography. Starting from a position that Penny Arcade is the drag name, or performance persona, Chapter 9 looks to see how drag discourse and connection with drag's material cultures renames individuals and allows (or not!) a criss-cross of identificatory practices that can circumvent normative identity boundaries. With a look to the past (Penny having used the name for fifty years) the chapter explores shapes and ideas that help articulate Penny as drag.

Gabriel Mayora in Chapter 10 also looks to a single performer, Puerto Rican transgender performer Holly Woodlawn, who appeared in art-house film. In Gabriel's chapter Holly becomes emblematic of the legacy of Puerto Rican and Latinx queerness – a legacy often effaced – for the LGBTQI community. Through an analysis of Andy Warhol's *Trash*, in which Holly starred, Gabriel traces how Holly became more present in the minds of the public after her death than she hoped while alive. The chapter thinks through this role in terms of drag aesthetics and brings to bear critical discourses of race, ethnicity and power in the analysis of the memorialization of Holly through her roles and performances.

The examination of the conditions for memorialization connects to Nando Messias' chapter that looks at an old alter ego drag persona Nando developed in early 1990s Brazil. In Chapter 11, Nando traces a narrative of their drag persona, Bibi, as a complex of self-discovery, risky resistance to gender normativity and a performance requiring skills of self-belief in a violent social context. But Bibi's role in the chapter and in Nando's life is not only one of looking back, of recording and noting, but also one of paying ethical mind to the past, giving voice to a persona who might otherwise have vanished – after all there is no evidence of her. This leads to an understanding that forgetting Bibi for Nando is deeply connected to growing up a sissy, a gender non-conforming child in a context where drag performers showed Nando to Nando. In part the chapter is an homage to those drag performers

who struck something in Nando that encouraged an authentic expression of self in a time and place where that was not an easy option. Drag functioned to switch on courage.

In Chapter 12, Nick Ishmael-Perkins looks to the character Mother Sally in the Barbados carnival as a character whose bold courage is stitched into her representation. Nick's chapter examines the way in which Mother Sally functioned as a character on a number of stages: colonial, global-economic, tourist, gender. The discussion traces how Mother Sally has been deployed in a number of ways to both exemplify the radical potential of carnival/crop over and also its harmonization and commodification articulated as important for global tourism. Drag in this context is both an historic expression of the relationship of colonizers with the colonized (though that binary is nowhere as simple as it first appears) and a source of joy as Mother Sally salaciously flirts with men. Mother Sally is traditionally played by a man, though this is by no means universal, and Nick describes how she has been played by women (in part so as not to offend the apparent sensitivities of tourists). Certainly, in the changing utilization of Mother Sally, Nick notes one thing stays consistent: that this kind of drag performance is not connected to the ball scene so visible in mainstream US drag discourse and performance.

Mark Edward and Helen Newall too are very comfortable playing with drag outside mainstream dominant versions of it, while also tinkering with dominant norms of gendered performance. In Chapter 13 Mark and Helen make sense of some iconic ballet images and their own histories with ballet and gender normativity through drag. The chapter traces *The Buttcracker*, their follow up project to *Dying Swans & Dragged Up Dames*. Both projects involve hilariously remaking in drag iconic dance imagery. Through the description of this drag project they look to their own histories with dance and to the power that forms of dance have with their burgeoning senses of gender identity when they were younger. They work through what it means to look back while facing forward, collaborating to make images emerge while unpicking the past and the po-face of the form they lampoon.

Another performance context that both caricatures high form and connects with glamour and down-and-dirty drag is British Pantomime. In Chapter 14, Alyson Campbell and Trish McTighe interview Ross Anderson-Doherty, a performer in Northern Ireland. In the conversation, Alyson and Trish trace how panto can challenge normative gender, but at the same time also reinforce some dominant gender norms through inherited standards of the form. They note how Ross resists some of this normative humour in drag by looking to the way that Ross negotiates in the rehearsal room panto comedy built on easy misogyny. The interview brings forth the complex interplay of queerness, gender, class and religion in the geographical context

to describe one way that drag performance has been deployed by Ross to boundary cross in a political situation where in non-drag costumes such crossings are trickier to do.

Following the panto discussion is Simon Sladen's chapter. In Chapter 15, Simon looks to the history of panto to trace a narrative of the emergence of the drag villain in order to account for the character's ebb and flow in relation to the economics of the form. By writing an analysis of the rise of the drag villain Simon is able to describe not only the way in which drag/cross-dressing forms part of the character and the form, but also the negotiation the character has with recent developments in gender politics and identity positions. Though the chapter does not minimize these concerns, what emerges in the end is a statement of confidence enacted by a drag performer – for agency over the stage and the audience – and the opportunity to play in drag a character who is deliciously (and glamorously) evil.

Same salad but a different 'dress'ing

In volume 1, *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene* (2020), we gave the reader an over the shoulder (pad) glance into our everyday working professional lives coupled with writing about our queer backstories. Here we shared memories of our youth and adulthood as 'we want to join those writers in the area of gender and sexuality who offer a little bit about their background in relation to their experience of the world, of class, race, gender, sexuality and other markers of identity' (Edward and Farrier, 2020: xxix) and so we thought we would yet again lay on the page for the reader some more campy transgressions of our pasts and our tattered rags to bitches story. We are senior academics in higher education. We have both attained the title of 'Reader', in our contexts a recognition of our national and international contribution to research and knowledge in performance research. Mark is Reader in Creative Arts (although he prefers to be a category dodger) at Edge Hill University in the north-west of the UK and Stephen is Reader in Theatre and Performance at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in the south of the UK. In terms of our research and practice we are both insiders and outsiders of drag performance as well as consumers (or huge devotees) of drag. We have become seasoned 'draguates' and have, between us both, seventy years of drag experience. We share a love of all things outrageously confessional, kitsch and shiny, especially sequins, diamantes and trashy gossip. Often we can be heard late at night on our phones or Zoom laughing raucously at some strange activity that has taken place in our lives that week. We have longings and a burning flame for campy

plastic glamour. Mark is the more impish and outrageous of the two of us. He loves to ruffle feathers (huge boas) and sprinkle 'fuck you' fairy dust everywhere he prances. As we noted in volume 1, as a child he would often queer his toys and upset some of the neighbouring children for doing so. His favourite queering, besides dragging up his Action Man and his Steve Austin-Six Million Dollar Bionic Man, was making his friend's Girl's World head more masculine by crayoning on a black beard, huge dark eyebrows and then adding blue eye shadow makeup, red lipstick and styling the blonde hair into a huge bouffant. He loved the combination of the feminine and the masculine.[2] Mark grew up in a working-class community in the north-west of the UK, where money was sparse in his household. His upbringing was filled with love and support from his mother and siblings, but he was also policed by his father who wanted Mark to be more masculine and not be shown displays of affection.[3] His father was worried that Mark would become soft and feminine in a working-class men's world. As Mark grew older and became a teenager, he would engage in acts of educational rebellion and non-conformity in terms of fashion, choices of music and having sex with boys his own age and with older married men.[4] He did this while trying to avoid the physical and verbal abuse from the constant homophobia he would receive daily in school (Edward, 2014). Mark also relished in having blue and white bleached hair and a well-developed fierce attitude, and he became well known for being a school refuser by the local education authorities and school welfare officers.[5] He left school with no formal qualifications.[6] However, he was able to recite the whole of Karen Finley's 'Tales of Taboo' song (given to him by drag queen Chris D' Bray) and he had a natural dance ability.[7,8] Also, he was becoming a seasoned tart-tongued queer.

Stephen, however, is the calmer of the two personas and fortunately is not prone to knee jerk reactions. His demeanour is judicious, combined with a dry sense of humour. He can see both sides of the makeup box and offer considered solutions when needed. He too is from a working-class background where money was extremely tight and survival skills needed to be learnt fast in order to overcome daily homophobic bullying. As many other young LGBT people are forced to, he sofa-surfed in many of his friends' homes. Although this period of his life was decentring for him as he grew much older, these life experiences proved invaluable in terms of resilience, overcoming hardship and finding a sense of self and kinship among gay communities. Like Mark, Stephen did have the foresight to queer up his sister's Girl's World but stupidly did not think to drag up his Action Man. As children, Mark would have enjoyed cheering Stephen on to do so. We could have set the toy world ablaze. Along with theatre groups he did manage to go to dance classes as a child, which he loved, even if it meant school was a bit

more difficult. He found his real dance and performance tuition much later in life, in higher education and, just as importantly, queer nightclubs where experimenting with self was normalized and where drag performance was central to the community.

As we have said in volume 1, these are not unusual stories. Many of the performers whose work is written about in this book (and those in volume 1) have similar experiences. As with volume 1 (and to paraphrase here) we share these small narratives not to garner any specific affect, but to position ourselves as people who sometimes are in a place to understand, sympathize and empathize with the specific challenges of makers in the drag context – even when that is done from the relative comfort of our current privileges. And of course with hair featuring quite so closely with history in the title of the book, we nod to our own history of having enough to style and having so far successfully avoided a comb-over . . .

Notes

1 Certainly, the quantity and quality of hair/wigs forms an indication of relative wealth and success of a performer. The more expensive wigs indicate greater wealth associated with being a better, more booked, performer. Of course there are queens who come from wealth, but, generally speaking, better quality wigs are a sign of a successful performer and encourage up and coming performers to invest in better wigs.

2 Mark also changed the faces on his 1970s Play-Doh Barber Shop dolls by having the woman grow a Play-Doh beard and the man grow a Play-Doh shampoo and set hair style. He also engaged his toy figures from his 1970s Tree House (made by Palitoy) and 1970s Boot House (made by Matchbox) in acts of sex and jealous gay rivalry between the families. He loved to cause feuds and disharmony among the male–female couplings.

3 Later in life Mark's father (Joseph) became a great support and supporter of his drag work, live art, contemporary theatre and contemporary dance performances. He would often read Mark's publications and boast to his friends in the local public house about Mark's achievements. He was very proud that Mark and Stephen had secured the contract for this and the volume 1 drag book. Unfortunately, he died in April 2018 unable to see the fruits of the labour from Mark, Stephen and the contributing authors.

4 As a sixteen-year-old in 1988 Mark went to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Palace Theatre in Manchester, UK with his older friend Jill Fishwick. On the train journey to Manchester from his home in Shevington (near Wigan) he wore fishnet stockings, a black and red basque and a pair of shiny black stiletto heel shoes. This dragging up in public at the age of 16 was a liberating and seminal moment in his life.

5 In 1987 Mark was threatened with being taken to court and placed in a home by the education authorities for severe truancy (spanning nearly five years). When Mark found out it would be a home for boys of his age he was delighted and let this be known to the intended prosecutors. Mark escaped being placed into a home for 'naughty boys' and left school four months later with blue and white hair, a leather bomber jacket, ten cigarettes hidden in the seams of his coat, neatly applied mascara and a huge relief he could now finally escape the daily homophobic physical and verbal abuse in school.
6 Attending school when gay in a small semi-rural community was hard and it was even harder trying to concentrate in class when constantly under attack through homophobic bullying. Unfortunately, this impacted on his education and his ability to achieve good high school grades.
7 See Mark Edward, 'Stop prancing about: boys, dance and the reflective glance', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 33.5 (2014): 470–9.
8 Chris D' Bray was Mark's drag mother/mentor in the late 1980s, teaching him the skills needed to make a career out of performing drag. In a lovely turn of events, at the time of writing, Chris D' Bray is one of Mark's PhD students. He writes about the fun pub phenomena of the north in the UK (Chapter 3 in this volume).

1

Dragging Up the Past

Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier

The impossibility of a drag history

Queer histories, herstories and hairstories are often unable to be told in the same way as normative histories. This is mainly because, like many other minority or non-normative lives, LGBTQ+ people have often been rendered invisible, their stories often undocumented, or only recorded in a kind of code, their secrets safely eclipsed by loss and liminality. Constructive attempts to reclaim and shape queer histories aim at uncovering aspects and details of these hidden voices, yet because these histories are often pieced together through detective work and magpie methods they occasionally run the risk of appropriation and anachronism. Similarly, we draw on the caution expressed by Laura Doan (2001) about lesbian revisionism and how that idea can be expanded to think of historical queerness per se. Historian Matt Houlbrook (2006) lays out this kind of detective work in his book *Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–57*, in which he trawls court records to piece together patterns of homosexual behaviour in a time and context when it was against the law. Houlbrook comments that his work 'has been a deliberate attempt to write queer men back into London's history and, in the process, to rewrite that history' (2006: 264).

Even the most noted event in LGBTQ+ history for the west, Stonewall, is highly contested in terms of the sources that document the incident (Carter, 2004). Indeed, Stonewall and the events leading to it function as much as myth as they do historical fact. And, of course, rich accounts of queer history were lost during the AIDS crisis even when people archived queer life (see Schulman, 2012). Thus, historians are acutely aware of the limitations of any telling of queer histories, they run counter to hegemonic histories that are situated within normative identity frames. Given that, at their core, queer approaches are ingrained with anti-normative drives, queer historians/herstorians follow a different approach, placing value on the legacy and importance of queer histories and being sensitive to where, perhaps, lives do not fit recognizably as a possible index of queerness. This approach is not

unique to the disciplines of performance or creative arts, or even history, but it is a queer project that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries in the academy itself. Biblical scholar Deryn Guest, for example, uses a lens of hetero-suspicion in her work on lesbian biblical hermeneutics. She describes this process as one in which 'the researcher is resistant to the presentation of any storyworld where female homoerotic relations are virtually absent and seeks to problematize that apparent absence' (2005: 124).

The same challenges are present when it comes to drag. There are records of drag performance, but these are often recorded in ways that were careful not to out nor incriminate a performer. For instance, the popular male impersonator Hetty King was very careful not to draw attention to the admiring letters she received from women (Dixon, 2013) and likewise almost all the famous male impersonators of the early twentieth century made sure that it was made clear in their publicity they were married (Dixon, 2013). To be clear, and not to fall foul of lesbian revisionism, the point here is not to assert that King or any other male impersonator of the era was gay, but rather to note how queerness – regardless of the apparent sexuality of the performer or their sexual activity and desire – was set aside in normative contexts. Thus we take the position that in some historical contexts the act is paramount, rather than the personal politics of sexuality because that is often unspoken, hidden or obfuscated as homosexuality was illegal. Such music hall drag was pitted against the social and legal policing of homosexuality, and later in the century the same was true when police raided bars in which queers gathered to check customers were wearing the requisite number of sex-appropriate garments.[1]

Precisely because of this backdrop of social and cultural policing of non-normative gender and sexuality, we argue that there can be no single accepted version of drag history, rather there are many threaded lineages that connect drag to many kinds of performance – music hall, pantomime, stand-up, sketch and short form comedy, cabaret, vaudeville. And there will likely always be many more local drag history-sequins to discover. Therefore, we acknowledge the impossibility of tracing a single drag history as if it were comprehensive, linear and overt. To do so would result in inherent failure, yet this failure is not in the fabulously flamboyant style of Quentin Crisp or the academic adventures advocated by Jack Halberstam. This failure runs the risk of doing damage, by privileging shiny fragments we find over ones we do not see or are unable to locate. Doing this creates drag history power structures and benchmarks that are unacknowledged in their limitation. It is our position that any attempt to carve or shape an overarching history of drag performance practice will inevitably calcify drag work into shapes most recognizable to normative readings and smooth over the messiness of the

history. Although we advocate for a contextual approach (by looking in any analysis of a drag performance for other kinds of performance work happening at the historical moment under discussion), we still hold that an attempt to present a history of drag performance sitting comfortably alongside maps of other historical forms also risks becoming a dominant account that will likely miss the nuance of the practice. An overarching dominant account also misses the performance work that did not grace the mainstage, that happened in closed contexts, at small gatherings or in situations of hiding in plain sight, such as at large-scale fancy dress parties (more of which below).

Therefore, the incompleteness, impossibility and frankly undesirable task of developing a canonical history is something we acknowledge, and, thus, we do not uphold the historical drag events and narratives located in this book to be a comprehensive overview. So the sequins of drag history, the shiny parts that draw our eye, led by our positionality, run the risk of being happy accidents, but these are sparkles in the dust fallen from an original source that can no longer be found. Our desire is not to re-stitch these sequins into an entire garment because that erases their own individuality. We see each dazzle as delight that offers clues but also exists in its own right. As well as being a source for drag pasts, they are as if sacred queer texts, pointing to individualized contexts, settings and locations, raising questions and suspicion about their own knowability and history.

Snatching drag sources

For the reasons set out above, rather than risk developing a dominant history of drag, we want to start in a different place, a place where perhaps people in the context of illegality and social disapprobation could find access to scarce knowledge of a set of practices. We start with a sequin that glinted at us. Searching popular sources, small advertisements and magazines is a useful starting point to begin working on drag history. *Female Mimics* is one such source, a magazine that ran from 1963 to 1979 in which there are pictures and articles for cross-dressers, drag aspirants and transsexual people.[2] The magazine served as a crossover of community newsletter with soft porn overtones, containing articles written about the histories of cross-dressing and drag – and firmly connects those histories together. This magazine served a portmanteau audience, those interested in what we would currently call non-binary presentations of gender. In issue 6 from 1965 there appears an article, 'Mister Actress' (pp. 13–14 and 64–66) by John Chalmers in which there is a description of the differences between transvestitism and drag.

Chalmers (1965) draws the history of drag as commonly thought at the time. It roots drag in the Elizabethan stage where boys played 'female' parts and later in the Restoration where 'breeches roles' were played by women (we will come on to think this through further below as these practices are not mirror images of each other). After the Elizabethan and Restoration theatres, Chalmers links the work of male actors playing female parts, a part he calls 'Mister Actress', to vaudeville. Indeed, the description of the roots of drag in the magazine set out in a shorter form almost the entirety of the history section of Roger Baker's book *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* released at the end of the 1960s (Baker, 1968, reissued and updated 1994). The article's focus is to separate the cross-cast performer (those who dress in 'opposite' gender clothing for performance works, such as in Shakespearean times) from the idea of drag and transvestitism. At the end of the article Chalmers laments the loss of great cross-gender parts, saying that:

> We laugh at (and with) Mister Actress today. Mister Actress makes us laugh, but in Shakespeare's time he made the audience weep. Today's theatre does not call for Mister Actress to tear out hearts to a passion. But we are coming to a new era in theatre. The possibility that Mister Actress might once more find himself as a tragedienne becomes more and more certain.
>
> 1965: 65

Here, Chalmers is referring to a recent playing of Jean Genet's *The Maids* at Café La Mama in New York. Chalmers speaks about how cross-cast performance emerges in the theatre aligned with acting and character, rather than as popular drag form. However, this separation is not as clear as it first seems, as the article goes on to mention a cross-dressed William Haywood who toured the same places as Sarah Bernhardt with a satirized or drag-like version of her *Camille* in the 1890s, which she apparently applauded, so there appears to be some commingling of cross-casting in theatre and drag performance. Current understandings of drag performance are no longer wholly connected with the idea of cross-casting; as drag can happen without a hint of crossing. What is clear from the content of *Female Mimics* is that drag's heredities are commingled: transvestism, transsexualism, effeminate men, camp and female impersonators.

The roots of drag are intermixed so thoroughly with cross-casting as to be almost impossible to disentangle. Certainly we consider drag a performance form and style that is not solely about cross-gender representation. Indeed, drag can evade binary gender entirely. Kieran Sellars (2020), for example, has examined contemporary drag as it is performed by a nude body, rendering

null the idea of cross-dressing as germane to the form. Although there are historical connections with female and male impersonation, which are clearer to see on the music hall or vaudeville stage for instance, connections to parts played by cross-cast performers in the past are less clearly present in current drag work. It may also be the case that the oft-quoted connection to Shakespeare and the Restoration stage is in some sense a claim to be taken seriously, because a connection to the high/dominant arts (even if the works were popular originally) gives some cachet or validity to the performance form. The quest to be taken seriously certainly reflects how research into popular forms of performance is a relatively recent activity and, in some places, is still met with reduction and ridicule, rather than being credited for the rigour and originality which it generates (Schilt, 2018). The 'civil' partnership that drag forms with dominant history or literature is an attempt to gain validation and to render it credible through well-behaved and established disciplinary associations. While we absolutely advocate for and celebrate the interdisciplinary possibilities of drag, we note its folding into disciplines often presents a shifting ground that renders any confident strides as wobbly as a baby drag's first steps in heels. And what a spectacle, achievement and life-changing benchmark those first stumbles in stilettoes are!

Intersections of drag fragments with performance cultures

We are able to detect through shimmering fragments how drag has clearly intersected with performance cultures and histories outside the theatre. Notable examples here would be eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Molly House culture, in which rituals of drag and cross-dressing took place. Molly Houses were meeting places for what we would now call gay men, usually cafés, pubs or private rooms where they met up to socialize and to seek out potential sexual partners. Molly Houses involved mock weddings and births (surrounded by drag midwives) and, where festivities required, many of the working-class men would appear in drag (according to Rictor Norton, Molly culture was entirely working-class), some more regularly than that (Norton, 2006). Similar events also took place away from the stage, such as Servants' Balls in the 1930s: Porchester Hall (London, UK) and Temperance Hall (Manchester, UK), alongside Pars and Harlem Drag Balls (in the United States). And of course key venues – those that make the history books – such as London's Royal Vauxhall Tavern and New York's Pieces. It is essential not to underestimate the influence on drag's development and sustenance of those local performance venues that do not seem to be greatly present in the historical record.

Figure 1.1 Drag at Porchester Hall ball in 1984. Photo Julian Woollatt.

In our quest for drag fragments and sequins we offer an approach that values how drag histories function generally in performance traditions, techniques and styles.[3] More specifically, we are interested in historical practices that have yet to be fully articulated as part of drag performance. Thus, rather than see historical drag practice as part of the detective work required to unearth historical queer lives, we are interested in what the performance practice is and does outside of its role of signing potential queerness in historical contexts. This means then that we are able to examine practices of drag that are not necessarily an index of queer life (panto dames in the UK are a good example of this and not all music hall male impersonators appeared to be queer). Similarly, drag shows populated by solders during the Second World War do not all appear to have homosexual identities but those shows still pass on information about drag practice (and queerness). This also means that we are able to look at historical data to think about drag in the past and look at current work to account for its interactions with historical forms of performance. Rather in the same way that we might see drag performance as enacting or exploring (rather than representing) identity positions, we can look to drag to see how it embodies and passes on histories.

Family lineages – generative processes in passing on drag

In the context of drag, of course, much of the historical passing on of performance skills and knowledge was never documented; it happened covertly, because of the prevailing social and cultural contexts. This information then is harder to get at and requires a kind of history 'dragdar' to suss out and move beyond initial impressions. Drag mothering/mentoring the essential act/art of passing on drag skills and knowledge (Edward, 2020; Farrier, 2017) to younger fledgling or less experienced dragsters has been part of the drag makeup for many years. This hand-me-down and build-me-up approach has been a necessary act of generative processes in drag culture. Indeed, it has been made popular through TV portrayals of drag, such as American queer drama *Pose* (2019) and Jennie Livingston's important (though problematic) *Paris Is Burning* documentary (1990) and *Kiki* (2016) (a film much more related to the community it represented), which has showcased the importance of familial concepts and mentoring in order to secure drag histories/herstories are passed through generations. Here the roads to drag practices have been mapped, toured and embodied by the more experienced parental drag performers to then be shared and passed to new generations of kings and queens, and those that elude classification, to keep repertoire (and those queer youth seeking a safe haven or shelter) alive and moving.

Therefore drag is more than performance, it is about queer world making and community building. The mentoring process between drag parents and kids, for example, is a means to archive works via a bodily repository of the mentee. In a way it enables and values drag as a somatic process, one which is embodied and transferred through guidance and mentorship. The process is entirely informal and, as part of the fragments of drag history, there is untraceable socially inherited bodily knowledge. Yet drag mentees are not empty receptacles awaiting this drag osmosis. Through the transfer from mentor to mentee, knowledge is reinterpreted, restyled and, in turn, becomes generative of its own. The transfer is thus fluid, and rather than being an immovable historical object or archived text passed along from hand to hand, has been lived and understood in the fibre of the performers. Drag mentoring and sharing drag histories and drag herstories is like an escaped gas – seeping out and showing up (sometimes as a bit of a distasteful odour!) in different places in the arts allowing a re-telling of identity formation, a re-shaping of transitory repertoires. As a form drag is anchored in many nuanced and complex historical gender bending drag performances, or, at least, emerging aesthetics are indebted to the pioneering work and activism of drag pasts.

Figure 1.2 Drag at Porchester Hall ball in 1984. Photo Julian Woollatt.

Community lineages

Esther Newton (1972) and Laurence Senelick (2000) demonstrate how drag became iconic for queer communities. Even in a context where homosexuality was illegal, queer venues thrived in which there was opportunity to see drag performance (*Female Mimics* notes the Jewel Box Review in Miami 1960s (Vol. 1. No. 2), Artists Equity and Arts Student League (Vol. 1. No. 3) and Le Monocle, Frede's Cabaret, Chez Moune, in Paris for women/lesbian club (Vol. 1. No. 3)). Other avenues to experience drag with a gathering and merging of queer and heterosexual communities took place in Madame Arthur's in Paris, during the 1940s, which showcased many elegant and extravagant drag performers such as Fifi Pervenche and Coccinelle as did the Crazed Horse Saloon, also based in Paris (see Wade, 1963). These small venues (just exemplars here) are key to the development and sharing of drag practice and queer life.

In terms of performers, in Preston in the UK, the neighbouring region to the home of one of the authors, Mark, Poppy Cooper performed. Poppy changed their sex and renamed themselves Tuxedo in the latter half of the twentieth century and could be seen in review shows. Poppy/Tuxedo became a glamorous drag performer and established in her own right. She was from

a humble background working on public transport (see Kirk and Heath, 1984) yet moved on from the dominant heterosexual structures of her hometown transforming herself and setting the scene for other likeminded north-west queers to follow in her footsteps. If we take a hop, skip and a jump back to the east end of London in the UK we would be able to see Diamond Lil jooshing through the streets daily during the 1940s donning her decorative fem attire coupled with blonde hair immaculately styled and accompanied with a turban. She was backstreet chic living through Second World War deprivation, and performed in pubs singing with her life partner Maisie. These two local exemplars are glinting sequins, not famous names, and they are geographically limited in their notoriety, yet they often serve as local drag touchstones, stories of whom are circulated as part of drag history and form part of an inherited narrative in the development of new performers. Although much might be made of internationally renowned drag artists' influence and development of other performers (or as inspiration to queer people) the influence and power of these local celebrities should not be underestimated simply because of a lack of reach. And, of course, these local performers would have been playing to straight audiences too and exerting their influence there.

Figure 1.3 Drag at Porchester Hall ball in 1984. Photo Julian Woollatt.

Given that drag performance often acts as an index for queer culture it should be noted that, as with current iterations of drag performance, there is a deep connection with mainstream audiences (Edward and Farrier, 2020). Because of the social and legislative context, until the late 1960s in England and Wales and in the United States, historically drag has also relied on audiences who would not consider themselves part of the queer community. For instance, the fun pub scene of the 1970s and 1980s in the north of England was a place that enjoyed mainly straight audiences watching drag – and it was the scene in which the co-author Mark developed his practice. What is clear is that in the post-war period at least, queer audiences watched drag with straight audiences, whether that is live or on television. Indeed in Newton's ethnographic account of drag clubs in New York there are provided sketches of the space in which the performances took place. Interestingly, Newton sketches out where in the space the homosexuals watched the shows and where the straight people sat to enjoy the entertainment. In that context, lines were both figuratively and literally drawn.

Drag audiences have always been people from mixed sexualities and gender, rather than simply queer communities. Allies were always present, enjoying the dazzling gender fuckery on stage. And these different constituent parts of the audience would have been shot through with the gender non-

Figure 1.4 Drag at Porchester Hall ball in 1984. Photo Julian Woollatt.

conforming and trans people who were also present at the bars about which Newton writes. Newton is careful to make sure that she explores the extent to which performers earned enough to survive, noting for some trans and gender non-conforming people present in the context, sex work (what Newton calls 'street drag') was also part of the way to survive. As is still a current drive, the economics of the context are deeply rooted to drag performers and performance, sometimes influencing the social context and other times having a fundamental impact on the development of the form. Along with other studies (especially in working-class contexts, Jeffrey Weeks' (2007) work is notable here), Newton's work reminds us that some members of that straight audience not only tolerated homosexuals and gender non-conforming people but were also allies (and perhaps clients too).

[In]Conclusion

What has emerged for us in our work is a position where we do not want to delineate a dominant line of drag history and understand how unsatisfying that might be experienced by those wishing it. To quell that kind of energy, or by way of amelioration, what we offer is a sequin method, where we look to the shiny bits of historical narrative, fallen off more visible histories. Of course one has to be in the right position to see the sparkle – and to be looking in the right direction. In part, that positioning is what we have articulated here. To position oneself to see the sparkle and be attracted to the moments and people unstuck from a larger thing is not only an intellectual positioning, it is a political and ethical one. To pay mind to the performers with smaller reach, or to become enamoured and fascinated with a glinty fragment as a subject of serious study is a commitment to recording and analysing parts of historical minority performance. Of course, such a position can never see all the fallen sequins – because we are not in a position to see them, or our sensitivity to the light is just not good enough. But, we position our support for these minority and barely remembered practices and performers through our endeavours and continuing enthrallment with their still-glinting and raucous energy.

Notes

1 It is worth noting that in England lesbianism was never legislated against, so the sensitivity around male impersonation was rather social, or where acts were protecting their reputation and livelihood.

2 See *Ssshhh!: The Newsletter of the National Transgender Library & Archive* 2:1 (1995) available at https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/41687h474 (accessed June 2019) for a discussion of the impact of the magazine for a burgeoning trans community in the United States.
3 For this discussion we are interested in articulating the historical performance roots of drag or performance drag genealogy. Although this has been partly covered in Simon Doonan's (2019) *Drag: The Complete Story* and also Frank DeCaro's (2019) *Drag: Combing Through the Big Wigs of Show Business*, among others, our focus here is on how drag histories function in performance traditions, techniques and styles.

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2

‘Once Upon a Time, There Was a Tavern’: Metadrag and Other Uses of the Past at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern

Ben Walters

Pubs, bars and nightclubs have been imperfect but vital spaces in post-war Western LGBTQ+ experience, spaces that are not quite public, though they might bring strangers together, and not quite domestic, though they might feel like home. I want to explore how attending to and mythologizing the past of such venues, and particularly their past as sites of fun, can serve queer futurity – the insistence, articulated by José Esteban Muñoz, on imagining a collective future that is richer and more rewarding than oppressively straitened contemporary minoritarian experience (Muñoz, 2009). My focus is the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (or RVT) in south London, UK, and the animation of its specific past through several recent drag performance events produced there. As well as their mobilization of the venue’s specific past, I am interested in these shows’ use of what I want to call *metadrag*. By *metadrag*, I mean drag that recognizably appropriates another drag act’s look, manner or material. Whereas lip-synching drag queens have conventionally imitated mainstream female pop and movie stars, *metadrag* insists that prominent drag acts are no less worthy of reverent reference than, say, Judy Garland, Britney Spears or Beyoncé. Drag queens, like other kinds of star, can generate appropriable iconicity; drag can be the subject of drag. Regina Fong, a celebrated resident performer at the RVT in the 1980s and 1990s, emerges as a particular subject of *metadrag* in the shows I consider here. Through this and other techniques, these performances promoted the felt understanding of the RVT’s lineage of queer use and its persistent enabling of fluid, non-normative forms of identity, temporality and relationality, as well as the roles of drag and fun in supporting this enablement. Ongoing uncertainty around the RVT’s future, and the future of queer nightlife spaces in general in London and other cities around the world, adds urgency to such understanding.

This argument engages interrelated critical contexts including queer futurity, queer understandings of the past, performance studies and the

interdisciplinary study of fun. Queer futurity structures my thinking around the value of future-oriented collective activity. For Muñoz, queerness is utopian in its insistence on hope for a better future and queer futurity itself can be understood as a future-oriented materialist critique of the present (Muñoz, 2009). The past is vital in this context, elucidating both the contingency of present constraints and the utopic potentiality of actual earlier queer experience. Muñoz thus insists on the need 'to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things' (Muñoz, 2009: 27–28). Elizabeth Freeman has articulated various ways in which the past does things queerly in the present. My thinking here is especially indebted to her concept of erotohistoriography, which articulates how embodied and affective experiences of queerness can disrupt normative boundaries between past and present, making the past something that is erotically and emotionally felt and understood through the body as part of current experience rather than intellectually apprehended as part of an alien temporality. This is not to suggest the past can be revived and experienced just as it was but rather to recognize that it has never truly gone away. In Freeman's words: 'Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid' (Freeman, 2010: 95).

The past doing things, or doing things with the past, is also a central aspect of drag in particular and queer performance more broadly. Drag has often appropriated to rich effect material from earlier periods. Stephen Farrier (2016), for instance, notes how drag lip-synching can make available aspects of past queer experience, while Fintan Walsh shows how drag performer Panti Bliss's memoir shows serve as 'a kind of animate archive that keeps otherwise marginal and ephemeral experiences alive' (Walsh, 2016: 17). Most critical attention in this respect has been paid to the animation of (auto)biographical material, star personae and artworks such as songs. Less sustained attention has been paid to the potential for drag and queer performance to animate the spatial past. Farrier argues broadly that 'drag performance in specific locations serves to communicate or exchange historical material related to local LGBTQ communities' (2016: 192) but little attention has been paid to how the performative mobilization of the specific past of a specific site can generate kinds of feeling and understanding supportive of queer futurity.

Nor has much attention been paid to the value of mobilizing past queer fun. In queer performance contexts, the animation of the past often carries negative affective associations with suffering and victimhood (Greer, 2012; Farrier, 2015; Walsh, 2016). This resonates with Heather Love's attention to the persistence of feelings 'tied to the experience of social exclusion' such as

shame, loneliness and self-hatred (2009: 4). Feeling backward in this negatively inflected way vitally counterbalances misplaced over-optimism regarding minoritarian freedom and galvanizes necessary further action. Yet, as Freeman recognizes, bodily responses provoked by the queer past can also be 'pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding' (2010: 95). Past queer fun, I suggest, can be usefully attended to and celebrated for its refusal of abjection and its capacity to generate non-normative forms of pleasure, self-expression, relationality and world making. This is not to refute the reality of negative experiences but rather to construct fun as potentially fruitful rather than merely peripheral or compensatory. To take seriously the animation only of negative aspects of the queer past needlessly restricts the arsenal of queer futurity.

The performance events I unpack below do not ignore negative queer experience but they take fun seriously as an engine of queer feeling, thought, action and relationality. They promote erotohistoriographical understandings of the RVT site's persistent identification with queer fun and serve queer futurity through the championing of fun as potentially emancipatory and generative. Fun has received little attention in queer theory or performance studies but more in fields including sociology, computing, education and cultural studies. In the absence of a universally accepted definition, I define fun as stimulating, absorbing and enjoyable activity that is bounded in space and time and perceived by those experiencing or observing it as having low stakes. I understand fun to be performative: individual instances of fun are perceived as having low stakes but they cumulatively rehearse and normalize a wide range of social, ethical and political models. Sociological study of fun has noted its capacity to support collectivity: Ben Fincham frames fun as 'part of the glue that binds together social groups and also informs individuals' identity' (2016: 197). There is, I argue, political consequence to the identification and assertion through fun of enduring collective identity, kinship and agency. Queer fun helps build queer worlds.

In the performances I consider below, fun is enjoyed in itself, valorized as a subject (as well as a mode) of creative expression and revealed as a potent vehicle for feeling and understanding the queer past of a specific site. These performances bear out Muñoz's observation of how 'queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time' (2009: 171), offering concrete if short-lived instances of the aspirational made material. Through these shows, the structural ability of the theatrical stage (noted by Farrier and Greer) to muddle and defy normative, cohesive expectations of space, time, truth and identity meshes queerly with the erotohistoriographical apprehension of a specific site's hybrid past and present to recall, reinscribe and celebrate past pleasures and thrills. With

metadrag as a key technique, these shows render the fun of the RVT's past performative and generative, describing and multiplying the site's facilitation of kinship across time and mortality. Through them, audiences feel past fun in the present and it helps them feel forward with hope.

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern in south London is among the UK's most enduring sites of drag performance, with a continuous and ongoing history of the form predating partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967 (Walters, 2015; Avery, 2016). Moreover, it stands on the former site of the Vauxhall pleasure gardens (1661–1859), which had their own lineages of cross-dressing, experimental performance and outlaw sexuality (Borg and Coke, 2011; Walters, 2015; Avery, 2016). The RVT evoked its predecessor through its name, recalling what, by 1859, were called the Royal Gardens Vauxhall, and its fabric, including ornate iron columns, characteristic of the gardens' vernacular architecture, which might once have stood in the gardens themselves (Walters, 2015).

Part of the post-war circuit of London venues catering to homosexual customers and hosting drag performances, the RVT emerged as a pivotal site of the 1960s drag boom and later hosted residencies by prominent acts including Lily Savage, who went on to mainstream UK television success, and Her Imperial Highness Regina Fong, who purported to be the last survivor of the Romanov dynasty and was distinctive for her wedge of red hair and frequent use of participatory 'singalong' numbers (Walters, 2015). During the 1980s, the RVT was a locus of HIV-related community activism and subject to several police raids (Walters, 2015). The actor Cleo Rocos reported visiting in 1988 in the company of singer Freddie Mercury, comedian Kenny Everett and Princess Diana, who wore male drag (Rocos, 2013). Long running residencies include club night Duckie (since 1995), which combines eclectic disco and experimental cabaret, queer and trans community showcase Bar Wotever (since 2005) and Timberlina's bingo show (since 2006). The venue has also hosted regular runs by the D.E. Experience, who deploys metadrag by riffing on Dame Edna Everage's persona, as well as 'post-drag' performers such as David Hoyle and Scottee, resulting in a plurality of audiences and communities invested in the site. This can lead to contention: in 2015, regular performer Charlie Hides dropped a character, Laquisha Jonz, following accusations of blackface. The RVT's emblematic standing has been reinforced by location shooting for the films *Pride* (2014) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (2016) and critical recognition as 'nothing less than the oldest consistently queer venue in the UK' (Avery, 2016: 7).

Duckie produces numerous performance events beyond its Saturday night clubbing residency and has consistently attended to the RVT's past. Duckie host and co-founder Amy Lamé recalled her first encounter with the pub in strongly erotohistoriographical terms: 'It was just like: boom! That instantaneous feeling of, "This is exactly where we need to be" [. . .] It kind of felt like us carrying on this torch of performance history'; Lamé went on to request her ashes be buried beneath the Tavern's stage (*Save the Tavern*, 2017). An erotic connection to the RVT site combined with intellectual apprehension of its lineage has underpinned numerous Duckie projects, including *Vauxhall Pleasure Promenade* (1999), *Readers Wifes Fan Club* (2010), *Vauxhall Bacchanal* (2013), *Happy Birthday RVT* (2014), *Duckie DeCrim 67* (2017) and *Princess* (2020). This appreciation has also been expressed through activism: Duckie members protested abortive plans for the pub's demolition in 1998 and helped form campaign group RVT Future following the venue's sale to property developers in 2014 (Walters, 2015). The RVT Future campaign has strategically articulated the site's queer past. As a campaign member, I wrote a successful application to Historic England to make the RVT the country's first building listed for its significance to LGBTQ+ history (Walters, 2015), affirming Scott Bravmann's (1997) observation of how the narrativization of the queer past can serve activist projects. RVT Future also promoted understanding of the site's past within RVT and LGBTQ+ communities by publishing material online and supporting other expressive forms. These included *Royal Vauxhall* (2016), a cabaret musical about Princess Diana's visit; *Those Were the Days* (2016), a routine by the alternative drag troupe the LipSinkers surveying the site's past; the documentary *Save the Tavern* (Tim Brunsden, 2017); and the comic series *Tales of the Tavern* (Baz Comics, 2017). The venue's fictionalized incarnations included the Imperial Poppycock Saloon, targeted for gentrification in US drag storyteller Dandy Darkly's 'American Apparel', performed at the RVT in 2016, and the Goose Tavern, listed for 'its historical significance to sluts' in the 2017 RVT Christmas pantomime, *Goosed* (Paul Joseph and Tim Benzie, 2017).

I want to unpack four productions mentioned above that restage the RVT's past on the contemporary RVT stage: *Those Were the Days*, *Readers Wifes Fan Club*, *Royal Vauxhall* and *Happy Birthday RVT*. They use drag – and particularly metadrag – to facilitate erotohistoriographical understanding, cross-temporal identification, non-normative intergenerational exchange and the championing of fun as a powerful mode of queer kinship and agency. Cumulatively, they yield a kind of animate archive of the RVT itself, a collectivist, activist, celebratory, mythologized autobiography of a queer space. I watched all of these performances live. Quotations and descriptions are taken from notes made at the time and corroborated by video

documentation of *Those Were the Days*, *Readers Wifes Fan Club* and *Happy Birthday RVT* and the script for *Royal Vauxhall* provided by the works' respective producers.

Those Were the Days

'Once upon a time there was a tavern . . .' Written by Gene Raskin (1962) and famously recorded by Mary Hopkin in 1968, the song 'Those Were the Days' mythologizes a pub where time is strange and different worlds seem attainable through collective enjoyment, dreaming, choice and struggle. In 2016, the LipSinkers, an alternative lip-synching drag troupe resident at the RVT since 2013, added to their repertoire a routine set to Hermes House Band's cheesy 2004 version of Raskin's song that insisted on the site-specific erotohistoriographic power of drag while rejecting conventional narrativization of the past. In their cartoonish, polymorphous, quick-changing style, the LipSinkers embodied RVT performers including Lily Savage, Amy Lamé, David Hoyle, Timberlina and Scottee and, with liberal poetic licence, animated subjects including Princess Diana's visit, police raids, the Laquisha Jonz controversy, the annual RVT Sports Day and Vauxhall pleasure gardens.

Those Were the Days conveyed a huge volume of information about the RVT's lineage of queer use but was nothing like a history lesson. Rather, it was a promiscuous four-minute jumble of dozens of characters across eight intermingled time periods: Victorian sailors rubbing up against Thatcherite cops and twenty-first-century queens, a kaleidoscopic mélange of fun, erotic exchange and DIY creativity. A sense of radical subjective instability played out within the act, with performers frequently and visibly switching personae, and across the act's performance history, with different performers taking different roles on different dates. The LipSinkers constructed fluid identity and temporality as the lifeblood of the RVT; the site's fortifying spatial persistence enabled protean joys.

Those Were the Days illustrated with rare precision the site-specific potential of Freeman's sense of drag as 'a non-narrative history written on the body' (2007: 164) or 'an embodied temporal map, a fleshly warehouse for contingent forms of being and belonging' (Freeman, 2010: 71). The act's copious exploitation of metadrag, meanwhile, constituted a sustained claim for drag and its associated lived experiences of fun, as the wellspring of the Tavern's protean power. As part of this claim, the act placed different forms of RVT drag into conversation: Savage's chip-shop glamour, Lamé's retro-femme transatlanticism and Timberlina's bearded-faerie eco-drag happily jostled together. More capaciously, to watch the cross-temporal ménage of Lamé,

Figure 2.1 Exterior of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and (right) The LipSinkers as Amy Lamé, Kenny Everett, Princess Diana and Lily Savage in *Those Were the Days*.

Savage, Diana and Kenny Everett gleefully rutting in the pleasure gardens was to experience a coagulant cacophony of history and hearsay, metaphor and metamorphosis, *jouissance* and death. *Those Were the Days* generated erotohistoriographic understandings of the persistent queer use of the RVT site and richly fluid associated forms of identity, temporality and drag itself. Metadrag here yielded a homegrown Olympus of appropriable iconicity.

Readers Wifes Fan Club

Where the LipSinkers offered a drag pantheon, *Readers Wifes Fan Club* (*RWFC*) celebrated a specific local hero. Produced by Duckie, directed by Mark Whitelaw and inspired by the eclectic tastes of Duckie's resident DJs the Readers Wifes, *RWFC* was an experimental drag theatre piece themed around fandom. It saw performers Dickie Beau, Jess Love and Rhyannon Styles (then known as Ryan Styles) lip-synching to audiovisual material related to a range of mainstream, subcultural and queer objects of appreciation including the Bay City Rollers, *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and RVT drag culture itself. The production incorporated footage of Regina Fong leading a 1980s Tavern audience in one of her signature routines, a singalong to the theme from *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* (1966–1970). There was also a top-40 chart of cultural artefacts, including pop acts, TV personalities, alternative nightlife figures and five RVT-related entries: the venue; *RWFC* itself; Scottee; Regina

Figure 2.2 Regina Fong (left) and Rhyannon Styles (credited as Ryan Styles) as Regina Fong in *Readers Wifes Fan Club* (right).

Fong; and 'Ryan Styles as Regina Fong'. This final entry introduced the show's climax, in which Styles-as-Fong recreated the *Skippy* singalong with the present audience.

The valorization of the pursuit of queer and subcultural fun as meaningful and rewarding, both individually and collectively, was central to the show's text and to the experience of audiences, who laughed, cheered and engaged intently. More specifically, by including the material mentioned above, *RWFC* boldly asserted the comparable value of the RVT and its associated culture to, say, pop or punk. This claim was reinforced through the show's distinctive use of metadrag to animate the past through Styles's appearance as Fong. Styles's stylized costume appropriated and adapted Fong's iconic silhouette and hair according to Duckie's twenty-first-century aesthetic, at once observing a site-specific lineage, asserting its value, reworking it on new terms and inviting the present audience to feel with and through a past audience.

The climactic *Skippy* singalong attested to the 'virtual/not-virtual' terms posited by Farrier (2013) as audiences were simultaneously not-virtual viewers of *RWFC* in 2010 and virtual viewers of Fong's show in the 1980s. The erotohistoriographical charge, primed by the footage screened earlier, was great, generating a site-specific cross-temporal frisson radiating out from Styles's body to recast the whole venue. When Styles dragged up as Fong, the 2010 RVT stage dragged up as the 1980s stage and the 2010 audience dragged up as their 1980s forebears. RVT veterans were dragged back to their lived experience of Fong's actual shows while newcomers learned bodily about the venue's pedigree as a site of non-normative identity, relationality and cultural production. Farrier also notes drag's claim to the past through the performer's body; here, that claim was made through the performer's body, the audiences' bodies and the building in which they all stood. Collective participation fostered a sense of site-specific identity across generations rooted in shared

experience and understanding not of queer victimhood but the quotidian and fortifying nature of queer fun. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as an aesthetic icon and a catalyst for transtemporal kinship.

Royal Vauxhall

If *RWFC* staged the RVT as a site of galvanizing collectivity, *Royal Vauxhall* figured it as a site of generative derangement. *Royal Vauxhall* was a three-hander musical about Princess Diana's reported visit to the RVT in male drag accompanied by Freddie Mercury and Kenny Everett. Written by cabaret performer Desmond O'Connor, it had several runs featuring various casts at the RVT between 2015 and 2017 and at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2016. In *Royal Vauxhall*, the persistence of the RVT as a site of queer expression provided an arena for the exploration of fluid identities and temporalities. Within the narrative, the venue was successively idealized as a site of escapist relief from normative pressures (Diana's marriage, Kenny's closeted persona, Freddy's anxieties around HIV), lauded for its historic value to a cornucopia of queer subjectivities, framed as a dangerously carnivalesque site of both liberation and peril and revealed as capable of catalysing radical subjective refashioning, most prominently Diana's transformation from demure passivity to determined agency.

The show foregrounded the persistence and fame of the RVT as a queer site through a celebratory song dedicated to its 'always fun and never boring' past, drawing on documented aspects of its use as well as canards such as its supposed time as a music hall. Such material disseminated Tavern lore diegetically to Diana and non-diegetically to the show's audiences, prioritizing a lineage of fun structured around non-normative sexual and gender expression over strictly verifiable historicity. The production also took liberties with its characters' biographies and perhaps its very premise; I know some RVT regulars who, Rocos's first-person account notwithstanding, consider Diana's visit to be apocryphal. *Royal Vauxhall*, then, asserted the practice of telling stories about the RVT as part of the culture of the RVT, and poetic licence as a potent aspect of that practice. Rather than dubious or deceptive, I find this defiantly emancipatory. The queer past is fragile and ephemeral, its material traces often rendered invisible by the caution that precludes their creation, the indifference that precludes their preservation and the erasure that precludes their valorization. Sidestepping literally bound evidencing, poetic licence can assert the real emotional, affective, social, cultural and political power of a given site to act as an engine of queer identity, relationality and agency.

This power is redoubled through the direct exploitation of an audience's access to a given site's erotohistoriographical material charge. At one point, as in *Readers Wifes Fan Club*, the figure of Regina Fong was embodied through metadrag to serve as a fulcrum for a hybrid temporality, hosting a show-within-the-show on the very stage used by Fong herself. This wasn't the only scene in which the contemporary RVT and its audience were called upon to 'play' earlier versions of themselves: *Royal Vauxhall* repeatedly dragged the whole site and its occupants back to the 1980s as performers marauded around the space, engaged people at the bar and cajoled some on stage. 'It happened in this room,' insisted a prologue that addressed audience members as both present-day viewers and 1980s punters, juxtaposing period and contemporary references in a way that didn't compromise credibility so much as reinforce the idea of a space resistant or indifferent to normative temporality.

Drag itself was also unstable or polyvalent in *Royal Vauxhall*. Introduced as a functional way for Diana to go unrecognized, it became a source of pleasure ('I feel good!') and vehicle for self-determination, butchly enabling assertive confidence. Later, drag came to figure a more radical destabilization of identity that resonated with the production's form: each performer assumed multiple roles and many of the characters themselves masked, lost or reshaped themselves through drag and disguise in sometimes discombobulating ways. It remained unclear, for instance, whether the Fong character was Fong herself or Freddie dressed as Fong, and the tone of her show-within-the-show was more mischievous and disruptive than the celebratory exuberance of *RWFC*, probing characters' inconsistencies, arbitrarily shifting terms of engagement and opening up space for transformations. The contingency and fluidity of identity became a narrative leitmotif that chimed with the production's temporal instability. In *Royal Vauxhall*, the RVT as a location and drag as a mode yielded a queer site in which time and identity came unmoored. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as a kind of emblematic trickster figure, a mythic representation of drag's capacity to muddle, unmake and remake self.

Happy Birthday RVT

For *Royal Vauxhall*'s Diana, the RVT and Regina Fong were vehicles for carnivalesque intervention into a life lived elsewhere. But they can also represent a life world powerfully distinct to itself. *Happy Birthday RVT* (2014) showcased short turns created during an eight-day summer school for nine young performers that was overseen by director Mark Whitelaw and formed

part of Duckie's wider *Happy Birthday RVT* project. Participants drew on other aspects of this project, including archival material and interviews with RVT veterans included in *Save the Tavern*. Technologies of intergenerational transmission therefore underpinned the creation of their acts, which animated aspects of the RVT's past including clandestine post-war socializing, changing drag styles, police raids, AIDS activism and contemporary political ambivalence. Yet the acts resisted normative structures of heredity, such as conventional narratives, reminiscence or naturalistic reenactment, instead using drag and burlesque vocabularies, stylized personae and self-reflexive audience engagement. The showcase sidestepped models of heredity predicated on older people as bearers of the historic past and younger people as emblems of hopeful futurity to insist on a hybrid temporality beyond generational conflict or continuity, producing an erotohistoriographic charge: Leggy, for instance, used a dress worn by an RVT drag performer in the 1980s while Vijay Patel invited audience members of all vintages to inscribe RVT-related memories onto bricks. Other performers presented characters who seriously and rewardingly pursued fun, including Jade Pollard-Crowe's police officer, Quinn Tuesday's party girl and Scarlett Lassoff's Queen Victoria.

A great deal of information about the RVT's past was communicated that night. So was an understanding of such information not as mere fact but as the substrate of an ongoing dynamic and conversational collectivity. One act expressed this emergent quality with particular potency. This video-interactive lip-synch piece, by Alethea Raban and Ellis D, referred to Vauxhall's distinctive sewer system and positioned queer relationality at the RVT as a kind of glorious virulence, transmissible across space, time and mortality. Raban and D remixed interview material gathered by Tim Brunsden to craft a sophisticated intertemporal nexus through whose form and text queer kinship made light of death. On an audio track, Bette Bourne, who first visited the RVT in the 1950s and later co-founded drag theatre troupe Bloolips, recalled a eulogy delivered by one resident RVT drag queen, Lily Savage, at the wake of another, Regina Fong. Savage willfully ignored, denied or overcame the fact of Fong's demise by directly appealing to her corpse to confirm Savage's anecdotes. According to Bourne, 'Lily kept saying, "Didn't it?", "Wasn't it?", "It was like that, wasn't it?", talking to the body,' By lip-synching to these words, the young performers opened up a queer colloquy, rooted in a specific site yet radically unbounded, a confluence of dissident experience, understanding, imagination, conversation and technology that knitted together Fong, Savage, Bourne, Brunsden, Raban and D, the audience of *Happy Birthday RVT*, later online viewers of the video of the performance, myself and, now, you. To insist on talking to the dead can be a way of insisting on talking to those not yet here; to assert collective

continuity and the capacity of the queer past to undergird the hopes and expectations of queer futurity. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as the presiding spirit of a wry and resilient life world that exceeded time, space and mortality.

Feeling forward

In different but connected ways, these performance events served utopic ideas of queer futurity by generating, disseminating and reinforcing knowledge of continuous queer use of the RVT site by and to multiple audiences through non-normative modes. They affirmed commonality and kinship between users of the site at different periods, and asserted the site's persistent support of fluid and hybrid conceptions of identity, relationality and temporality. They deployed drag as a powerful technology for the expression of such non-normative conceptions, placed different modes of drag into conversation with one another and, through metadrag, valorized drag culture itself.

Unusually for performance events engaged with the queer past, these shows foregrounded past fun and prioritized fun for present audiences. They showed how queer fun can function to refuse abjection and generate non-normative forms of pleasure, self-expression, creativity and relationality. Not that they ignored bad feeling: each show attended to melancholy, anxiety, self-loathing or violence, framing their drag-fuelled fun as contingent, fragile, resilient and ingenious. This fun was also exclusionary, at least by omission: these productions predominantly centred the non-disabled cisgender gay white men to whom the RVT itself has predominantly historically catered. Metadrag can also support the expression of more marginalized subjectivities in related contexts: during Duckie's *Gay Shame* event on 6 July 2019, for instance, in a railway arch adjacent to the RVT, one trans performer of colour, Travis Alabanza, reanimated to compelling effect a lip-synch act by another trans performer of colour, the late Zsarday, set to Tom Eyen and Henry Krieger's 1982 song 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going' (Revell, 2019). Rather than foregrounding fun or poetic licence, Alabanza precisely recreated Zsarday's angular choreography and imploring affect, their body rendered conduit, archive and tribute to a rare forebear. Here, metadrag enabled a devastatingly sincere mode expressive of an ongoing lineage of intolerable burden placed upon trans bodies of colour within and beyond LGBTQ+ scenes.

Feeling backward, in recognition of lingering negative experiences and affects, is vital to mitigating over-optimism about current and future prospects for queer lives. Yet feeling forward is a vital aspect of queer futurity, with its insistence on hope for a better world. To feel forward declares an investment in the future and is hopeful for that reason in itself, even if the

feelings involved are sometimes more ominous than auspicious. To promote celebratory awareness of the value of the RVT site's past is, given continued uncertainty about the venue's long-term prospects, to raise both the galvanizing spectre of its erasure (evoked in the documentary title *Save the Tavern*) and the utopic glimmer of greater power to come (evoked in the campaign name RVT Future). Insisting on such awareness, the drag performance events unpacked above invite colloquy between regulars and newcomers, performers and punters, living and dead. At the end of *Readers Wifes Fan Club*, Styles-as-Fong rallied the crowd ahead of her singalong, asking: "Are you with me, RVT?" To answer yes was to be with many, to join a mythic queer host, to find the past in the present and use it to feel fiercely forward. Those were the days, and are, and shall be.

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3

Camp and Drag in the Mainstream: A Critical Study of the Phenomenon of Drag Performance in the Northern British Fun Pubs, 1973–1993

Chris D' Bray

Introduction

This chapter briefly summarizes the rise of the British northern fun pub (NFP). It places in context how the NFP aided the establishment of drag visibility in mainstream entertainment in a specific time and place. Moreover, this discussion locates the NFP's importance between a recently post-Wolfenden climate and the rise of the gay-themed entertainment bars.[1] Finally, I briefly comment on the extent to which NFPs unintentionally mimicked some aspects of the turn of the century French cabarets of Montmartre, Victorian/Edwardian music halls and variety theatres and the Weimar cabaret of Berlin in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Writing this chapter has involved drawing on my industry practitioner experience as an observer-participant. Over the years I have gathered oral testimonies from the originators of the first NFPs; those who expanded the development of these bars to create commercial success, participants, customers and ex-staff. I have also gathered other evidence from newspaper editorials of the time. This kind of work follows Davies (1992: 6), who states that: 'Communal forms of leisure which left few written records can often only be studied in detail using a combination of written and oral sources, and interviews can alert the historian to activities that have been previously neglected'.

It is my belief that recording this drag practice will go some way to placing the NFP in its historical and performative context, thereby helping it not be lost and/or overshadowed by louder and currently more easily recognized forms of drag entertainment.

A camp night out!

As a platform for popular performance, the NFPs provided entertainment that was popular. Schechter (2007: 4) states that the popular is 'publicly supported, highly visual and physical portable, orally transmitted, readily understood, not flattering to wealth or tyranny'. Like popular performance, the NFPs possessed 'few of the artistic and intellectual pretensions common to the regular stage. Subtlety and conventional good taste are usually secondary to action, fantasy and physicality' (McNamara, 2007: 12). Indeed, Golby and Purdue (1984: 176) echo this point in their description of the music hall: 'Despite the attempts to make the music hall respectable both audience and performers at times overstepped the line which many managers would have thought acceptable'. According to this way of thinking, NFPs could be seen as vulgar in nature, never pretending to be highbrow theatre and aimed at the proletariat. They were popular, however, following the ideas of both Mayer (1977: 263), that 'popular in the widest sense, is something "of the people"' and Faulk (2004: 2), who posits the notion that 'popular entertainment stands in some honest, responsive and authentic relation to its patrons'.

The NFPs were a phenomenon that drew upon a set of performance codes designed for a northern-centric audience within a specific time-frame. These codes included northern comedic traditions and performance techniques (e.g. 'over the garden wall' gossipy style delivery, irreverence to authority, impertinence and audience participation). The NFPs served as a vital link allowing a predominantly heterosexual audience to access and experience the campness in these kinds of venues brought out by the kinds of performers present in the NFP.[2]

It is not clear what first brought the NFPs to the attention of the heterosexual populace. Indeed, the origin of the original NFP was a Yorkshire gay friendly bar of the early 1970s (the Amsterdam bar in Huddersfield), not a place automatically associated with the mainstream straight audience of the time. The Amsterdam bar provided a temporary detachment from the real world for gay people existing in a hostile legislative and socially heteronormative climate, while offering open-minded heterosexual patrons entertainment and a camp ambience.[3]

It may be that this ambience was part of what attracted straight, working-class audiences to what was to become the first NFP. The originators, staff and patrons of the Amsterdam bar all cite the camp atmosphere as a major factor in garnering a heterosexual audience; moreover, it could be that this camp atmosphere was largely expedited by gay people and specifically by the proliferation of drag performers. Interestingly, patrons of the embryonic NFPs knew that gay people were offering this type of entertainment, which

suggests that a contemporary heterosexual clientele were willing to suspend any anti-gay sentiment towards NFP staff and entertainers in order to experience this specific type of good night out.

In the early 1970s, the NFP reflected – or embodied – what Joan Littlewood in 1968 described in her proposal for *A Laboratory of Fun*, a place where 'nothing is obligatory and anything goes' (in Schechter, 2007: 177). Moreover, the NFPs were different from the live entertainment norms of the time, such as the local public houses, and this could be a reason why they attracted curiosity: they were something different.[4,5]

In the NFPs, audiences enjoyed being insulted by the DJ/compere, which was always tongue-in-cheek. The attitude to this performance (nothing is obligatory, and anything goes) can be read as a reflection of the 1920s cabarets of France and Berlin. Rodolphe Salis, the creator of the Chat Noir in Montmartre, discovered that the public found 'provocation and insults entertaining' (Houchin, 2007: 184). Houchin further notes that '[Aristide] Bruant decided to change his approach, reasoning that if an audience desired abuse, he would give it to them' (ibid.). In the Weimar cabaret of Berlin a similar atmosphere prevailed (see Senelick, 1993).[6] It is clear that there are further similarities between the NFP and its historical antecedents; I leave that for other studies.

Within the NFPs it soon became obvious that, in tandem with the camp ambience and drag performance, this light-hearted ridicule of the audience by the DJ/drag artist was one of its main attractions and it soon became *de rigueur* to patronize these venues in order to be picked on.

As stated, the first NFP (the Amsterdam bar) was created in Huddersfield in 1973 with the intention of it being a gay bar, at a time when gay friendly bars in that area were usually underground. The aim of the owners was to create a gay friendly bar in the same mould as the gay bars in Holland; low-key lighting and faux red velvet drapes and curtains, which created a dark, almost purposefully seedy, interior. Because of the rapid growth in its popularity following its opening, the owners, bar staff and patrons (in interviews with me) agreed that within six months the audience had metamorphosed from 80 per cent gay to 80 per cent straight.

The opening times for the Amsterdam bar were from 7.00 pm to 11.00 pm with last orders at 10.30 pm, though there was an extra thirty minutes on Friday and Saturday.[7] The music policy was largely of the 'gay taste' of the time, such as disco (later becoming hi-energy), show tunes, female diva singers and – not considered 'gay taste' of the time – Dutch continental oompah or Bier Keller music. This was indeed an odd selection of music; however, it was a staple of the emerging NFP and became one of its more unusual, yet sought after, qualities.

During the evening, the bar staff would bash tambourines along to the music. Tambourining became very important and was started by one of the owners who had observed it when he worked in Holland – audience participation was always encouraged. Since there was no specific stage or performance area, the only alternative was to use the top of the bar as a platform.[8] Once last orders had been called and glasses had been removed, one of the owners – resplendent in a dress, balloons for breasts, fishnet tights with obligatory hairy legs and a tacky wig and slap (makeup) – would climb onto the bar and perform a lip-synch routine to a record of a current favourite of the gay audience, usually in the vein of Shirley Bassey, Dorothy Squires or Sandie Shaw, etc.

This would now be considered cod drag. It presented an image of a stock character that appealed to this working-class audience, in part because it represented those below them in some way.[9] As Double (2012: 116) notes, when referring to Max Beerbohm (1898), 'the mass of people, when it seeks pleasure, does not want to be elevated: it wants to laugh at something beneath its own level', suggesting that this type of performance was not being offered as highbrow entertainment, likewise in the NFP. This style of drag is a descendant of the dame comedians from nineteenth-century music halls, comic singers who sometimes performed as a drag character, the only difference being that in the Amsterdam bar the drag performer was lip-syncing and not using his own voice.

The music for the lip-synch performance was played on a record player located behind the bar and manned by the bar staff, and there was an amateur quality to the performance. If the performer slipped on a wet patch or fell off the bar this would be utilized within the comedic delivery. If the record jumped, this too was exploited by the performer as a comedy riposte and played for laughs. It was not unknown for the bar staff to intentionally knock the record player! This type of bar show was initially only performed as a bit of ad hoc camp humour to entertain the gay people in the audience; however, because of its popularity with a straight audience, it became the highlight of the evening. Soon one lip-synch performance routine extended to two as the audience clamoured for an encore. Eventually, these end of evening bar shows ran over twenty minutes.

As the Amsterdam bar grew in popularity, it also increased in size by buying the buildings next door, creating a larger venue, which in turn allowed for the construction of a tailor-made stage area and DJ box. The shows then continued to be a staple regular feature throughout the night rather than just after last orders. Building a stage area also increased bar profit because it meant that performers did not get in the way of the serving areas – it is difficult to serve customers when a drag queen is dancing on top of the bar.

This transition saw the start of nascent professional shows with choreographed routines, matching costumes and more performers. Furthermore, the transition from bar to stage was like the shift from the music hall to variety theatre, whereby the halls were converted into larger venues to accommodate larger audiences and to increase profit, and where the acts, or turns, were forced to implement a more professional performance.

It was around 1975 when professional drag artists appeared at the Amsterdam. At this time various drag acts from all over the UK would tour the length and breadth of the country for bookings, like the tradition of the touring music hall artists who preceded them. After one of the Amsterdam's owners saw Alan Ward, a Welsh entertainer, performing at the Black Cap in Camden, London, a gay bar with a strong drag tradition, Alan became the first professional drag artist at the Amsterdam bar. Alan was invited to perform at the newly refurbished Amsterdam bar and was initially employed for a limited period (six weeks) but subsequently stayed for several years.

For over five years Alan was very successful at the Amsterdam. He complemented the bar and vice versa. However, he eventually left and the following ten years saw him perform at most of the other NFPs, which by then had appeared in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Alan later took the concept of the NFP to an international audience when he, in tandem with his long-term business partner Graham Leech, opened the internationally renowned Cafe la Belle on the island of Gran Canaria in June 1988.

One of the reasons for the success of the Amsterdam bar was Alan and his originality. His creativity was boundless and he pioneered some of the most recognizable drag characterizations ever seen on stage, such as the pregnant bride, the prostitute and the middle-aged drunk woman.[10] He also originated the well-known cottage routine, whereby he would stand behind the stage set of a gentlemen's public toilet and invite a male audience member to join him for a light-hearted lip-synch performance of various sound-bites cut together which created a routine that poked fun at the habits of some gay men who cruised public toilets.

Alan was tenacious and competitive in finding rare and obscure recordings to perform. He was also one of the original (and I argue best) exponents in the use of mash-ups, the quick cutting together of different sound sources to create new routines. This mixing together of disparate sound bites generates a new storyline that can be exploited to comedic effect. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this kind of work was being created and performed in the mid to late 1970s, where the construction of the soundtrack was much more difficult than it is in the current digital realm: it required planning, creativity, perseverance and skill.

To an outside eye, anyone can lip-synch to a pre-recorded track, but the idea of someone searching for (or discovering) snippets of recorded tracks from many disparate genres and sources such as records, tapes, television, video etc, and painstakingly re-recording and cutting them together in a certain order at the same sound recording level on a cassette tape showed great expertise. This kind of work is tedious, time consuming and only achieved after numerous failed attempts. However, Alan was an expert and these many-sourced mash-ups created a discernible meaning for the audience.

Over the years, other drag performers copied this idea of the mash-up routine, some more successfully than others, and it remains a staple performance medium for several lip-synching drag artists and other performance modes throughout the world.[11] The technique has even translated onto television in the form of the BBC utilizing it as a platform to advertise future programming and in *Lip Sync Battle* in the United States and the UK.

Interestingly, most of (what would become) the NFP ethos – the decor, drag entertainment, continental music policy and tambourining – came from the Amsterdam bar and could be classed as serendipity, or happy accidents. Most of these 'rules' were not achieved either knowingly or intentionally; this is an area that would also benefit from future research. However, these individual factors gelled together to create what would go on to become the quintessential fun pub. And, as with anything that is commercially successful, the concept was copied throughout the 1980s.

NFPs with their ubiquitous drag entertainers sprang up in numerous locations throughout the county of Yorkshire.[12] This form of entertainment proliferated and in the following years NFPs successfully appeared throughout the neighbouring counties of Lancashire and Staffordshire in the 1990s.

In Lancashire, the Hollywood Showbar opened in the town (now city) of Preston in 1982 and was the brainchild of one of the original patrons of the Amsterdam bar, Colin Durnan. He had witnessed the inception of the NFP and decided that the concept would travel well to a new location if it were similar to the original. Hence his venue appeared in another working-class mining town in Lancashire. The Hollywood Showbar required a few weeks to take off, one of the reasons for the initial wariness of the audience was the fact that the DJ was a camp man playing unfamiliar music, some in foreign languages. It is worth remembering that in the early 1980s gay liberation may have been prevalent, but camp gay men were still frowned upon. Perhaps this accounts for the slow acceptance of the bar.

After two weeks of indifference from the audience, the Hollywood Showbar became a success. Within twelve months the NFP concept had been successfully copied in the neighbouring town of Wigan with the opening of both The Rock, Rock Cafe and Clowns Showbar, in quick succession.[13] Clowns Showbar went

on to become very popular, along the lines of the Amsterdam, and set the stall as the template for future NFPs. The following year, in December 1984, the hugely successful (and influential) Henry Africas bar opened in Standish near Wigan.

Henry Africas attempted to offer a more professional show, yet still retain the NFP concept, all within a large, tailor-made venue (the capacity was 800). All the performance routines were performed on an elevated stage and both the interior and exterior decor was that of a jungle, with the character of Henry Africa as a big game hunter from the early twentieth century. The bars became very successful and soon a chain opened, with Henry Africas in Scunthorpe, Oldham, Stockton-on-Tees and Warrington.

There was always either a camp male character or a drag artist as the DJ/host complete with a resident cast of male and female exotic dancers, drag artists, strippers, fire eaters and various other specialty acts such as robot dancers.[14]

Henry Africas opened at 7.00 pm and the show always started with (what was by then) the ubiquitous tambourine routine from the resident entertainers. There would then be regular cabaret routines every fifteen to twenty minutes interspersed with the DJ music, microphone comedy and audience participation, especially with those who were celebrating birthdays or other special life events. The headline performer was a star cabaret artist – usually a specialty act or comedian, but occasionally a big name from the world of popular music, who would go on at around 10.00 pm for a thirty- to forty-five-minute set. At 11.30 pm the finale started – a remnant of the end-of-the-evening bar show at the original Amsterdam bar – except at Henry Africas it was a free-for-all party with all the in-house entertainers taking to the stage, performing a mixture of choreographed routines, audience participation, classic sing-a-long pop music and tailor-made routines which were *de rigueur* in the NFPs.[15]

This end-of-the-evening finale aimed to be like New Year's Eve. The audience was actively encouraged to join in; indeed, some regular patrons even purchased their own tambourines in order to participate. Streamers were thrown from the stage while cheap sparkling wine (laughingly referred to as *Chateaux du Shite*) was liberally poured from the bottle into any elevated glass. The finale always ended with what would go on to become classic end-of-the-night tracks, such as 'You'll Never Walk Alone' by Gerry and the Pacemakers, 'Que Sera, Mi Vida' by the Gibson brothers, 'New York, New York' by Frank Sinatra or 'Thank You for the Music' by Abba. The audience would then be dismissed with a witty line from the drag artist/DJ and the show would end.

It is worth remembering that even though gay liberation was fairly well established at this time, the NFPs helped present gay and queer cultural

visibility to a heterosexual audience in these towns in the north of England. Those audiences could access high camp and drag entertainment under the umbrella of gay culture.

Throughout Lancashire from the early 1980s to the very early 1990s, the NFPs proliferated. However, in mid-1991 they moved into decline. I will leave detailed reasons for their demise to further studies. However, I believe their passing could be traced to several factors, such as the rise of the house music scene (and its attendant recreational drug culture, which was not seen in the NFPs), the availability of more home-centric entertainment and the beginnings of the ubiquitous must-have electronic devices, such as mobile phones, gaming consoles and home PCs. People began to spend their money on these activities and consumer products instead of nights out dining, attending karaoke and video bars, or in the NFPs. Juxtaposed with this was a fluctuation in music and entertainment taste. A greater visibility of gay culture/camp entertainment in the mainstream meant that the NFPs were no longer unique. Also (possibly), the rise of the 'yuppies' and their attendant distance from distinctive working-class identities had an impact. Importantly, in some way the effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic created a wariness in the mainly heterosexual audience to visit bars perceived to be gay venues; the same was true of some theatrical shows which featured homosexuality.[16]

Whatever the combination of factors that heralded the death of the NFP in Yorkshire and then Lancashire, one last stab at resurrecting this entertainment form was successfully attempted in the guise of the chain of Fatty Arbuckle's (Fatty's) venues across the Potteries in Staffordshire, England, in the early 1990s. The first Fatty's was opened in Stafford in 1991, the second in Newcastle-under-Lyme, quickly followed by the third in Wolverhampton. The format was similar to the Henry Africas chain (the Fatty's chain was created by the original owner of the Henry's chain) in that there was a drag artist DJ/compere and four female dancers. And, as well as DJing, the drag artist regularly joined the female dancers in choreographed stage routines. Furthermore, alongside the solo/duo performances given by the resident entertainers, there was always a visiting star cabaret artist.

Fatty's was successful in producing a highly professional staged and choreographed show, taking some influences from the large spectacular shows in Paris, such as The Paris Lido, Crazy Horse and La Moulin Rouge – albeit in a pared-down way; and the routines appeared every fifteen to twenty minutes throughout the evening, once again interspersed with the DJ's choice of music, comedy patter and audience participation. At Fatty's, attempts were made to show the drag artist in a different light; licence was used to create the 'show-girl' drag artist as opposed to the cod drag artist.[17]

The Fatty's chain came to an end when the drag artists saw that the owners were becoming greedy for profit and the shows and performances were

suffering because of it. Consequently, the drag artists began to leave. Faulk (2004: 2) states that:

> entertainment becomes commercialised, co-opted, appropriated, and vitiated. Popular, working class, or otherwise marginal expressive forms gain momentum, marshal force, and become transformed utterly in the process. Sharp edges are sanded down; tart humour and songs are run through the propriety mill. Energy gets chanelled and the improper made acceptable by salaried task-makers.

Following this mass exodus, the bars tried to continue without drag performers while retaining dancers and a non-drag DJ. However, this failed in all three Fatty's venues and the bars reverted to music and dance venues, taking the name Zanzibar.

Drag performers from the NFPs continued to work in various venues throughout the next decade, but in the guise of one-off fun pub nights in established venues. Some proved successful, had longevity and provided the performers with continuity, income and exposure. However, most of these performers eventually sought work in gay venues, which is an irony as the very first NFP was intended to be a gay friendly bar. Fatty's could well be regarded as the (unintentional) forerunner of Funny Girls in Blackpool, Lancashire, which opened in 1994 and at the time of writing still provides employment for drag artists in a non-gay setting.

In conclusion, this chapter stands as a first step in the important recording of an entirely specific and undocumented area of the performing arts in the UK. It offers a foundation for further research into the phenomenon and praxis of the northern fun pubs. It is based on my personal recollections and my collections of oral and written testimonies from the time. My hope is that this chapter not only documents this embryonic area of research but will also inspire other artists to record their individual experiences of all aspects of their emerging performance practice.

Notes

1 'Post-Wolfenden' refers to the report that led to the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England: the report was published in 1957 and its recommendations took effect in 1967.

2 NFPs were important because they provided heterosexual and gay audiences access to camp licence and gay culture in popular performance modes (particularly present in drag) within a non-gay pub culture at the time. NFPs helped to expose a largely heterosexual population to the aspects of the gay

world – as gay people played a major part in the development of the NFPs. This is not dissimilar to the impact of the Berlin Cabaret insomuch as gay people found visibility in cabaret. Llewellyn et al. (2014: 1) note that: 'Some cabarets were patronised by gay men, lesbians and transvestites: once forced to conceal their sexuality, they seized upon the liberality of the cabaret scene to openly display and discuss it.'

3 Abuscio (1993: 20) describes camp as a social, cultural, and aesthetic style and sensibility, based on deliberate and self-acknowledged theatricality. Camp is commonly associated with and attributed to gay male subculture(s), but its basis and practice extend further.

4 According to Kift (1996) the public house – along with the singing saloons and the free-and-easy – could be seen as the forerunners of the music hall: notwithstanding, I suggest that the NFP equally could well be seen to have 'fanned the dying ember of music hall back into flame' (Kift, 1996: 31), albeit for a limited amount of time and within a limited geographical area.

5 Indeed, there is evidence of emerging northern gay nights that were similar to what was happening in the capital in the late 1950s; Kirk and Heath (1984: 38) explain that even though the pubs were straight, if they had drag queens on performing, then there would usually be a 'sprinkling of gays'. And landlords turned a blind eye because they had discovered the regularity of income from the pink pound. This chimes with a number of academic studies that suggest a paradigm shift in attitudes, such as the writings of Helen Smith (2015). Smith has researched numerous reports of same-sex desire from the late nineteenth century to 1957 and she conjectures that – contrary to popular belief – tolerance for the homosexual-as-type was more widespread in the industrial heartlands of northern England that it was in the capital.

6 Aristide Bruant was a French comedian and nightclub owner. He was also a cabaret singer. He is famous because he appears on well-known posters by Toulouse-Lautrec.

7 Last orders was the legal time when a bar had to stop trading.

8 Moreover, a documentary from 1969 titled *What's a Girl Like You*…(Dir: Charles Squires for LWT) shows footage from drag acts from the north and south of England. The southern acts are all working at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern – and they all perform on top of the bar; furthermore Kirk and Heath (1984: 45) state that: 'The old established pubs like the Union Tavern (then the palladium of pub drag, and home of the darling of the pubs, Lee Sutton) and the Vauxhall Tavern (an old lorry drivers' pub, where the drag acts started off by performing on the bar) were joined by places like the Adam and Eve.' I would posit that there is the possibility that the owners of the Amsterdam bar – Philip Collerby and his Dutch partner Kees van der Mewere - had been to London before the opened the Amsterdam bar, meaning that they had more than likely seen these artists in the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, performing on top of the bar; it was therefore quite natural for them to get on top of the bar to perform in their own venue.

9 Cod drag could well be defined as an obvious man-in-a-frock drag. No attempt is made to emulate a female with any degree of believability.
10 The pregnant bride drag routine can also be seen performed in 1969 by the drag performer Mr. Cleo Rose in the documentary *What's a girl like you…* and this evidences not only the use of commercialised cassette tape recorders, but also the concept of intertextuality in the form of the mash-up or compilation routine, where disparate sound bites are liked together in a certain order to produce a cohesive comedic through-line of dialogue which can be read by an audience.
11 Although, of course, Alan Ward was not the only queen using this kind of mash-up. For instance, Fleisher (1996: 77) notes in his performance and cultural research of the New York drag queen Lypsinka that 'Lypsinka has made a career out of editing together insanely complicated audio montages which include spoken as well as musical passages'.
12 For example, The White Hart in Castleford, Antonio's bar in Barnsley, Bar Selona in Leeds, The Continental bar in Halifax and Pussycats in Wakefield, etc.
13 The Rock, Rock Cafe was where I came into the picture in 1983.
14 Although there is not space here to make an analysis of the connections, parallels could be drawn from the performers at Henry Africas to the performers of the Blue Bird cabaret of the Weimar republic – who also performed as marionette-like dolls or robots. Indeed, one famous NFP robot routine is the 'Doll on A Music Box' from the musical *Chitty Chitty, Bang, Bang*, which provided a vehicle for numerous dancers to exhibit their robot dancing skills.
15 Another genre of music that was featured heavily throughout most of the NFPs was songs from the Eurovision song contest. A number of these songs were exploited for tambourine routines and were in the style of the oompah music from the Amsterdam bar. One Eurovision song that became very famous as a tambourine routine was 'Disco Tango' by Tommy Seebach, who entered it in the Eurovision song contest in 1979 for Demark (it placed sixth in a field of nineteen). Also popular at the Amsterdam bar was the playing of a recording of a tribute song for the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 called simply 'Elizabeth'. Furthermore, there was much publicity around a song recorded at – and especially for – the Amsterdam bar, called 'We're Having a Gang Bang'!
16 *March of the Falsettos*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *La Cage aux Folles*, etc. were shows that all felt the repercussions from the HIV pandemic, and business suffered.
17 The 'Show-girl' drag performer attempts to create the illusion of a cis-woman – in the United States this has become known, controversially, as 'fishy'.

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4

Soldiers in Skirts: Cross-Dressing Ex-Servicemen, Sexuality and Censorship in Post-War Britain

Jacob Bloomfield

Introduction

The phenomenon of female impersonation in concert parties staged by British servicemen during the First and Second World Wars has been well documented both by contemporary observers and the historiography. Historians such as David A. Boxwell (2002) and Lisa Z. Sigel (2016) have analysed the complex meanings imbued in the practice of servicemen performing in women's dress for their comrades within the homosocial martial environment.[1] While Boxwell has rightly argued that female impersonators in wartime concert parties were not merely 'surrogates for women', his claims that these performances subverted the 'heterosexual matrix', thus allowing 'gay subcultural forms to flourish', are tenuous (Boxwell, 2002: 11, 16). Sigel (2016: 99) has more convincingly observed instead that concert party female impersonation during the First World War 'allowed for a rich cultural lexicon based on ambiguity and mutability rather than referencing only gender identity or erotic object choice'. The cross-dressed servicemen performatively rendered a range of femininities and feminine traits such as alluring eroticism, glamour, maternity and quotidian domesticity (Sigel, 2016). This chapter will expand upon the current scholarship on drag performed by British servicemen by analysing post-Second World War veterans' cross-dressing revues: a series of popular theatrical drag shows starring casts of ex-servicemen produced between the early 1940s and mid-1950s. As such, this chapter expands the historiographical scope of analysis from the limited, homosocial sphere of the concert parties organized amidst the theatre of war to the urban and provincial theatres of the British variety circuit. It was in the latter environment that the cross-dressing ex-servicemen were exposed to a new range of spectators whom they did not tend to encounter in wartime concert parties: arts critics in the press, state censors,

and the theatregoing public. Analysing these agents' perceptions of the veterans' cross-dressing revues of the 1940s and 1950s, a topic which has been given scant attention by scholars of British cultural history, provides the historian with new insights into how sexual deviance and male gender variance was perceived in post-war Britain. Building upon Sigel's analysis of the varied and mutable renderings of and reception towards cross-dressed servicemen, I argue in this chapter that the critical, commercial and regulatory response to veterans' cross-dressing revues demonstrates that male gender variance could be interpreted with a multitude of different meanings in post-war Britain. However, spectators' reactions to the shows were largely positive despite contemporary cultural anxieties about the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours and categories of identity.

This chapter will problematize teleological views of post-war Britain which, as cultural historian Frank Mort (2010: 4) has observed, 'see the [1950s and 1960s] as a watershed break with earlier attitudes to sex and social morality'. The so-called 'permissive society' ethos of liberal social reform in the 1950s and 1960s was marked by events such as the formation of the Wolfenden Committee in 1954 and the disestablishment of the official system of theatre censorship as operated by the Lord Chamberlain's Office from 1737 to 1968. Employing the work of Mort and queer historian Chris Waters, I will argue that cultural interpretations of male gender variance did not proceed linearly from a state of vilification to acceptance in the post-war period as a result of the increasing prominence of public discussions relating to the liberation of social and cultural attitudes, usually associated with 'permissiveness'. Notably, a study of veterans' cross-dressing revues illuminates contemporary debates regarding the post-war category of 'the homosexual' and the extent to which gender variance was seen to be indicative of homosexuality. Different regimes of knowledge relating to this issue existed alongside one another in post-war Britain. For instance, journalist and homosexual law reform campaigner Peter Wildeblood claimed that, as a homosexual, he was more respectable than men whose identities were predicated on gender variance, while the Lord Chamberlain decided to tolerate the depiction of male effeminacy onstage even as his Office imposed a ban on theatrical representations of male homosexuality until 1958. This chapter posits that permissive discourses surrounding homosexual law reform did not lead to an increase in acceptance towards theatrical female impersonation, but nor did these public discussions seriously hinder the medium.

Furthermore, while the female impersonators' status as ex-servicemen certainly aided the popularity of the revues, this identity did not completely shield the artists from associations with sexual immorality, and their wartime service was not even the driving force behind the subgenre's success. Instead,

critical acclaim for the shows tended to focus more on the technical skill of the players rather than their position as veterans. Some of the negative discourse surrounding veterans' cross-dressing revues reflected anxieties over male gender variance, and detractors expressed little regard for the artists being ex-servicemen. The Lord Chamberlain's Office, for example, registered some discomfort regarding the revues due to male cross-dressing's perceived association with sexual immorality.[2] A few audience members also complained to the censor about the perceivably indecent nature of the shows. However, I will argue that negative attitudes from spectators were in the minority, as evidenced by the revues' continued success from the 1940s through the mid-1950s.

Veterans' cross-dressing revues of the 1940s and 1950s

The phenomenon of ex-servicemen's cross-dressing revues began shortly after the First World War. Most notably, the British troupe Les Rouges et Noirs, who were originally stationed with the First Army in France during the war, became staples of the inter-war British variety circuit from their public debut at YMCA's Beaver Hut Theatre in The Strand in December 1918. Les Rouges toured British theatres together into the 1930s and spawned a three-film motion picture series. Throughout the troupe's heyday, critics unapologetically described the ex-servicemen artists as alluring beauties and they were considered an established 'household word' by their second decade in show business (Bloomfield, 2019).

Inspired by the success of inter-war predecessors, the veterans' cross-dressing revue theatrical subgenre experienced a boom during and after the Second World War, with no less than twelve theatrical drag shows touting casts entirely made up of ex-servicemen produced between the early 1940s and mid-1950s.[3] Some of the most successful of these, such as *Soldiers in Skirts* (1945) and *Forces Showboat* (1947),[4] toured for several years continuously. Motivations for joining the revues varied among artists. Many of the artists in these shows were theatre professionals before they enlisted in the armed forces and continued to perform at concert parties for their fellow troops during the war, before touring with veterans' cross-dressing revues after being discharged. Some, like drag entertainer Danny La Rue, discovered their penchant for male cross-dressing performance through entertaining in wartime concert parties, while others used the performances as a forum to bring a previously private predilection for transvestism into the open (Hayward, 2009; Sigel, 2016).

Many of the shows were produced by the same two agencies: Mannie Jay and Sydney Myers (later JMZ Productions) and the Ralph Marshall Agency.[5]

As a result, much of the material was recycled and used by several revues of this type, sometimes at the same time as multiple veterans' cross-dressing revues ran concurrently. Recurring sketches included variations on the 'Mannequin Parade' (a fashion show of sorts featuring the cast in different dresses from various eras), the 'Mermaid Sketch' (a patter with two cross-dressed male comedians as mermaids featuring nautical-themed innuendo), the 'Cutting In' sketch (where two men competed for the affections of a cross-dressed performer, jockeying against each other at increasingly inappropriate moments, denoted by the line 'You don't mind me cutting in'), fan dance routines (a striptease using large fans as popularized by the Windmill theatre), 'Eastern Scene' (a comedy sketch set in a harem or romanticized orientalist setting), 'Dancing Through the Ages' (a showcase of dance styles from different time periods, sometimes involving a comically inept cross-dressed male dancer) and impersonations of celebrities such as Sophie Tucker and Carmen Miranda. Many revues also included the same recurring cast members such as Larry Melton, Louis Hayden, Terry Bartlett and Colin Ross, and Vic Ford and Chris Sheen.[6] The performers in these revues normally did two shows a day, six days a week, and toured constantly, with chorus members typically making a rather meagre £6–7 per week (Edwards, 1968).

La Rue, who would go on to become arguably the most popular drag artist in twentieth-century Britain, received some of his first professional gigs in veterans' cross-dressing revues such as *Forces Showboat* ('by far the classiest and best of them all') and *Soldiers in Skirts* ('the longest-running of the contemporary all-male shows') (1987: 71). La Rue (1987: 71) described the productions as lavish, well-produced affairs aimed at a general audience:

> Touring revues were staged all over the country, playing many of the top theatres as well as the smaller number twos and threes. They were invariably billed as ex-servicemen's shows, with men playing women. Really, it was only a glorified concert party, given a fancy name and a bit of glamour. They were big companies, well-dressed and staged with good scenery. … The shows were mostly family entertainment … [they] certainly captured the imagination of the public and played to very good houses almost everywhere. The shows were well-rehearsed and the entertainment value, in the main, was excellent.

La Rue's recollection that the shows were generally popular with theatregoers and were of a good quality was confirmed by contemporary reviews, as I will demonstrate in the next section. In particular, critics tended to hail the quality of the feminine allusion presented by the performers, while consistently highlighting the casts' wartime service.

Press reactions

The performers' skilful representation of glamorous and beguiling femininities was, as far as theatre criticism in the press was concerned, the most consistently praised feature of post-war veterans' cross-dressing revues. Even though the shows tended to be largely comic, the female impersonators deliberately sought to present earnestly alluring renderings of femininity. The *Daily Mail* (1950) commented: 'It is very hard to believe that that the company of "Forces Showboat" at the Tivoli this week is an all-male one. Even in the finale when the "girls" take off their wigs, the audience finds it difficult to accept the fact.' The *Yorkshire Post* and *Leeds Mercury* (1949) also singled out the cast's 'expert female impersonations' in *Forces Showboat*, while *This Was the Army* (1946) was praised by the *Press and Journal* (1947) for the cast's 'amazingly good female impersonations'.

Many of the reviews explicitly clarified that the revues' ensembles were composed of ex-servicemen, while also complimenting their beauty. The *Evening Telegraph* (1947) confirmed plainly that 'every member of the cast [of *This Was the Army*] is an ex-Serviceman', and reaffirmed this in the final sentence, declaring that the performers 'served with distinction in H.M. Forces'. Other critics used more colourful language to refer to the cross-dressers' service. 'So adequately do the artists [of *Soldiers in Skirts*] impersonate the glamorous women of the stage, that one feels their skirts become them

Figure 4.1 Female impersonators Colin Ross (left) and George Ellisia (right) in headshots which demonstrate the typically glamorous image of the performers in veterans' cross-dressing revues of the 1940s and 1950s. Courtesy Mander and Mitchenson/University of Bristol/ArenaPAL.

nearly as well as their battle dresses did,' mused the *Gloucestershire Echo* (1950). 'One would wonder whether the soldiers have not, after all, smuggled some members of the women's services into their show.' 'These ex-servicemen wear dresses, high heels and make-up in a deceiving manner,' noted the *Nottingham Evening Post* (1950) on *Forces Showboat*. The *Western Morning News* (1949) complimented *Forces Showboat* for 'the ex-Service men who make up the cast [who] masquerade most convincingly as women and dance gracefully'. Theatre critics apparently deemed the ex-serviceman component an important one to highlight. However, reviews tended to pay more attention to artists' dramaturgical skills, particularly the perceivably authentic femininity they represented, than their military service.

The post-war veterans' cross-dressing revues did not constitute the only theatrical productions which touted their casts' collective status as ex-servicemen. Many contemporary plays stressed in the programme or elsewhere that all male cast members either served or had legitimate reasons for not doing so. Despite this, anxieties over enlistment were not nearly as pronounced in this period as during the First World War; thus, post-Second World War veterans' cross-dressing revues, and contemporary British theatrical productions in general, felt less of a need to assert their casts' wartime credentials as their inter-war counterparts had done (D'Monté, 2015: 152–53). Furthermore, there is no direct evidence to indicate that the primary motive behind emphasizing the artists' wartime service was to protect them from any associations with sexual immorality. Instead, the references to the performers being ex-servicemen appear to have been driven more by a desire to highlight that aspect of the show as a marketable novelty. Servicemen in post-war Britain were not necessarily shielded from accusations of sexual immorality, as I will explain later in this chapter. If spectators wished to levy such accusations towards the revues' casts, the performers' status as ex-servicemen evidently did little to prevent these opinions from being voiced. Instead, I argue that the female impersonators in these revues were not, for the most part, associated with transgressive acts, behaviours or categories of identity because the regimes of knowledge which would make these connections were not ubiquitous, or even dominant, in post-war Britain.

The Lord Chamberlain, homosexuality and gender variance

As opposed to the press, the Lord Chamberlain's Office expressed some discomfort regarding veterans' cross-dressing revues' potentially transgressive connotations. According to the Lord Chamberlain's Reader's initial

impressions of *Soldiers in Skirts*, there was, 'very little to object to in this provincial Revue, but I think the title should be changed [from its original title *Boys Will Be Girls*]' (Reader's Report, 1945). A superior in the Office agreed, asserting that the 'title should be changed owing to its suggestion of perversion … we should not give way, as we try to eliminate everything referring to this "pansy" business' (Lord Chamberlain's Office internal memo, 1945). Two years later, when *Forces Showboat* applied for its licence, the Office had already identified a contemporary theatrical trend for such shows, though the censor apparently found no immediate cause for concern despite explicitly stating that the revue's script evoked 'pansy' business. 'Another all-male revue – they seem to be busy demobilising the pansy age groups now!' exclaimed a St James's Palace official, 'Whether they play tricks with the female impersonation I can't say but the script seems pretty harmless' (Reader's Report, 1947). One Office employee even added that the script was 'certainly above the usual standard' (Lord Chamberlain's Office internal memo, 1947). The censor's cautious, yet ultimately tolerant approach towards licensing these shows reflected a post-war environment where the association between male gender variance and same-sex desire was certainly extant, but not ubiquitously acknowledged or considered clear-cut.

Waters (1999) and Mort (2010) have observed that, after the Second World War, the category of 'the homosexual' was increasingly being promoted by some men who expressed same-sex desire, particularly those of the middle and upper classes. As Waters (1999: 136) has noted, taxonomy of the homosexual 'articulated a relatively new kind of selfhood' in the post-war era, rather than constituting 'some essential and timeless being'. The homosexual identity was discussed through a framework of respectability, if not total male normalcy, and was explicitly distanced from overt displays of gender variance or public expressions of sexuality. The more respectable homosexual was 'attracted exclusively to men, conventionally masculine, neither a pansy nor promiscuous, neither looking for or behaving any differently from other men', whereas men who expressed themselves in terms of gender variance were seen to consist of, in the words of Wolfenden Committee chair Lord John Wolfenden, 'severely damaged personalities … flauntingly exhibitionistic … grossly inadequate, passive weak-willed persons … deeply resentful anti-social types' (Houlbrook, 2005: 197).

As he advocated for homosexual law reform, Peter Wildeblood insistently distanced himself from an identity predicated on gender variance. During the Montagu trial of 1953–1954, in which Wildeblood, along with aristocrat Lord Montagu and landowner Michael Pitt-Rivers, were tried for committing homosexual offences with young RAF servicemen Edward McNally and John Reynolds, Wildeblood stressed his own respectability in contrast with other

taxonomies of men who expressed same-sex desire. Based upon definitions put forward by the prosecutor, Wildeblood clarified that he was an 'invert' ('a man who from accident of birth or parentage has unnatural desires') rather than a 'pervert' ('who, from lust or wickedness, will get desire from either the natural or from the unnatural function') (Waters, 1999: 148). 'Everyone has seen the pathetically flamboyant pansy with the flapping wrists,' he wrote in his memoir *Against the Law* (Wildeblood, 1955), '[But] most of us are not like that. We do our best to look like everyone else and we usually succeed' (Waters, 1999: 145). While giving evidence to the Wolfenden Committee in the mid-1950s, Wildeblood continued to distance his homosexual identity from gender variance by decrying the popularity of camp shows, which were enjoyed by straight and homosexual audiences alike; specifically mentioning *Soldiers in Skirts* by name. 'The popularity in Britain since the war of frankly homosexual entertainments such as the *Soldiers in Skirts* revues,' Wildeblood opined, 'suggests that such men (i.e. homosexuals) are now regarded by middle- and working-class audiences with tolerant amusement instead of with scorn' (Mort, 2010: 181). In this sense, socially liberal discourse regarding homosexuality and homosexual law reform did little to alter perceptions of male cross-dressing in post-war Britain as campaigners like Wildeblood explicitly sought to distance same-sex desire from gender variance and, thus, from transgressive connotations.

As far as the Lord Chamberlain was concerned specifically, the censor did not allow the representation of male homosexuality onstage when *Soldiers in Skirts* was first licensed in 1945, though what constituted a breach of this rule was not always clear. The policy was not altered until 1958, the year after the publication of the so-called 'Wolfenden Report' (Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957), which recommended the partial decriminalization of homosexual acts. So how did veterans' cross-dressing revues manage to receive a licence from the Lord Chamberlain despite his wariness regarding any suggestion of 'pansy business'? Veterans' cross-dressing revues were partially sheltered from extensive censorship owing to the performers' status as male ex-servicemen and talented artists. However, the Lord Chamberlain's partial tolerance towards these revues illuminates historical understandings of the censor's policy towards the representation of male gender variance onstage and post-war regimes of knowledge relating to male gender variance, which did not reliably link theatrical male gender variance to sexual immorality.

The Office's ban on the representation of male homosexuality in the public theatre prior to 1958 could be enforced somewhat inconsistently. Theatre critic Nicholas De Jongh (2001: 99) has argued: 'Effeminate and camp males generally appear to have been regarded as a virtual third gender that posed no threat to men.' Theatre historian Steve Nicholson (2011: 113) has cited the

Lord Chamberlain's attitudes towards the camp character Cecil in the 1956 play *Hot and Cold in All Rooms* as evidence that the censor was willing to turn a blind eye to displays of gender variance and even same-sex desire onstage as long as it was framed by middle-to-upper class *mise-en-scène* and represented a de-sexed, eccentric effeminacy. Approving of the play, the Lord Chamberlain's Assistant Comptroller Norman Gwatkin positively described Cecil as 'a "maiden aunt" type of man to whom homosexuality would be just as abhorrent as would be normal sex'. Another official explicitly praised the playwright, Max Reitemann, for having 'deftly performed the required trick of turning a roaring pansy into a maiden aunt' (Nicholson, 2011: 113). Nicholson has argued that the Lord Chamberlain's position on so-called 'Nancy business' was not entirely consistent. Some scripts featuring effete men coded as homosexual were not approved, while others in the same vein were. Consequently, Nicholson has suggested that the Lord Chamberlain did not perceive censorship solely as a means of regulating offensive material, but also as a means to anticipate and prevent potential public outcry if the play referenced perversion too explicitly.

If male homosexuality onstage was referenced in oblique terms and devoid of sex, then a script was more likely to be approved by the censor. Veterans' cross-dressing revues, as drag theatricals containing elements of camp, were able to bypass St James's Palace mostly unedited, but producers and performers still had to take care in order for them to be seen as respectable. Despite the relatively uncontroversial licensing of the revues, however, some observers openly expressed the opinion that the shows were indecent in nature. In the next section, I will investigate instances of public disapproval with veterans' cross-dressing revues.

Public responses

Despite general approval from the press and receiving licences from the Lord Chamberlain fairly readily, some spectators registered a strong displeasure with veterans' cross-dressing revues. For instance, a letter sent to the Lord Chamberlain in 1947 from a complainant identifying themselves as S. Oakes of Sheffield decried the perceived perversity of *Soldiers in Skirts* and disputed the cast's status as discharged servicemen. 'What an insult to our soldiers who died for this country,' Oakes wrote. 'We expect to see genuine discharged men, not a Bunch of Filthy Puffs . . . Can't you stop these menaces?' (Oakes, 1947).[7] Oakes' response to *Soldiers in Skirts* brings into question whether the audience linked the female impersonators' theatrical presentation to certain acts, patterns of behaviour or categories of identity offstage. Despite the revue clearly advertising that these men were ex-servicemen, Oakes discounted this

as a fraudulent label *because* the performers' onstage antics seemed anathema to the proper conduct for servicemen.

Oakes' overt concerns about the performers' status as 'genuine discharged men' indicates that servicemen were not completely shielded from accusations of sexual perversion in this period. This perception was also evident in the Montagu trial, where RAF serviceman Edward McNally was granted immunity in return for turning Queen's Evidence against defendants Montagu, Pitt-Rivers and Wildeblood. Though the accused remained the focus of media and judicial vilification, McNally and fellow serviceman John Reynolds were chided for engaging in sexual acts with other men and branded with a label as a result of their participation in such activities. The prosecutor in the case, G.D. Roberts, QC, implied a link between effeminacy and sexual difference by stating that McNally 'has a high voice naturally', and Roberts described both McNally and Reynolds as, 'perverts, men of the lowest possible moral character' (Waters, 1999: 145, 147).

During the trial, much was also made of the amorous letters exchanged between Wildeblood and McNally, which the prosecutor characterized as 'breathing almost unnatural love in almost every line' (Waters, 1999: 145). Despite McNally's and Reynolds' status as servicemen, the pair were not above being described as men who participated in immoral acts and being categorized based on this conduct. In this post-war climate, Oakes might have felt more emboldened to question the morality of the servicemen in *Soldiers in Skirts*, albeit under the premise of generally questioning the performers' status as genuine discharged men.

Three months after receiving Oakes' letter, the Lord Chamberlain received a complaint about *Forces Showboat* from George Richardson of 232 Upper Brook Street, Manchester. The main source of disapproval regarded a comic striptease performed by 'the principal comedian (with black hair) dressed as a female'. Of the act, Richardson opined that:

> it is not in the interests of clean variety that [the principal comedian] should be allowed to: 1) pull up clothes and exhibit red FLANNEL DRAWERS. 2) pull up clothes, exhibit painted on white DRAWERS. (THE ATOM BOMB) 3) pull up drawers EXHIBIT ON PINK DRAWERS (LOCKS AND CHAINS) . . . we are not prudes but these FEMALE SHOWS by men are not in the best taste anyhow and especially since the CORNOCK disclosures Educating the youth.
>
> Richardson, 1947[8]

The complaint was deemed important enough to warrant a visit to the show by an inspector from the Lord Chamberlain's Office, but the allegations were

mostly dismissed thereafter. 'Disappointment attended my official visit to the Wood Green Empire last evening,' stated the inspector wryly. 'No sign of the questionable business alleged by Mr Robinson [*sic*]' (Lord Chamberlain's Office internal memo, 1947). The Lord Chamberlain's observer went on to suspect that Richardson fabricated the complaints due to 'professional jealousy' – the letter was written on the back of a small advertisement for 'Richardson's World Famous Stringed Marionettes' – but also considered the possibility that the producers had quickly cleaned up the show after hearing of the charges levied. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the press considered any of the striptease burlesques in *Forces Showboat* to be indecent. In fact, these routines were sometimes singled out for praise. Of a 1950 performance of the show, the *Daily Mail* lauded 'a strip tease dancer (Loren Lorenz) in the best Gipsy [sic] Rose Lee style' (*Daily Mail*, 1950). Given this context, Richardson's complaint is best viewed as a minority opinion. Even if his letter was sent out of a sense of genuine moral outrage rather than 'professional jealousy', it constituted by far the most extreme still-preserved critical reaction to any veterans' cross-dressing revue, save for Oakes' letter regarding *Soldiers in Skirts*. The next most critical agent, the Lord Chamberlain, still treated the revues with begrudging tolerance for the most part. This, again, suggests that the censor did not or could not naturally make an explicit link between gender variance and sexual immorality as some observers did.

It is difficult to determine how many others explicitly linked the female impersonation in the revues to sexual immorality, as Oakes and Richardson apparently did. Evidence relating to audience reception of the shows is scant, aside from the general fact that many of the revues continued touring for several years, thus indicating their commercial success. The few contemporary reports which discussed audience reactions indicated that vociferous criticism of veterans' cross-dressing revues was not widespread. A police officer, P.C. William Marsden, who observed a 1946 performance of *Soldiers in Skirts* in Blackpool found it to be lowbrow but acknowledged that 'the audience are very appreciative and the show is generally well-received. On leaving the Theatre we mingled with the people and no adverse criticism of any description was heard' (Marsden, 1946). Even a negative review of *Soldiers in Skirts* which conceded that male cross-dressing was not to all theatregoers' tastes noted the respectable crowd of 'wives and girlfriends' in attendance, in addition to the show's 'ingenious stagecraft' (*The Star*, 1952). The female impersonators' status as ex-servicemen did not entirely shield them from accusations that their performances were indicative of sexual immorality. However, diverse regimes of knowledge regarding the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours and categories of identity in post-war British society ensured that most observers did not perceive these revues negatively.

It is difficult to ascertain why the subgenre came to an end in the mid-1950s, but there is no indication that this was due to pressure from public moralists or the Lord Chamberlain. La Rue (1987: 75) has stated that *Forces Showboat* 'petered out' following a slow week after running for several years, and it is likely that its sister shows met with the same end. The demise of the veterans' cross-dressing revue phenomenon came at a time when the variety theatre was in decline. As Mort (2010: 266) has noted, the growth of privatized leisure in the 1950s and 1960s led to what some contemporary critics saw as a 'funereal atmosphere' in the theatre as the public began to favour alternative leisure options such as clubs, cinema and television over the variety theatre. In 1958, critic Richard Findlater bemoaned an average nightly theatre audience of only 250,000 in London, 'compared to the two-and-a-half million at the cinema or the twelve million who are probably at home watching the telly' (Mort, 2010: 266). Rather than being the victims of cultural anxieties regarding gender variance, veterans' cross-dressing revues merely seemed to have suffered the same fate as variety theatre generally.

Conclusion

The veterans' cross-dressing revues of the 1940s and 1950s continued and expanded upon the success of their inter-war predecessors. The shows proved to have longevity over two decades and were met with notable critical and commercial popularity. Some dissenters, such as S. Oakes and George Richardson, associated the female impersonation in the revues with sexual immorality and thus considered the shows to be indecent, but such opinions did not impede the success of veterans' cross-dressing revues.

The popularity of the subgenre mainly lay in the reportedly enjoyable nature of the shows, which was largely a result of the performers' alluring representations of femininity. The casts' wartime service was utilized effectively to market the shows, but neither theatre critics nor the revues' producers appear to have primarily emphasized this novelty in an attempt to shield the cast members from any associations with perversion. Furthermore, the casts' status as ex-servicemen did not entirely protect them from accusations that their performances were indicative of sexual immorality. Instead, the primary factor which ensured that most observers did not perceive these revues negatively was the existence of diverse regimes of knowledge regarding the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours and categories of identity in post-war British society, many of which did not explicitly perceive theatrical male gender variance as a troubling practice.

Notes

1 See Lisa Z. Sigel (2016); David A. Boxwell (2002). For information on cross-dressing performances among Canadian servicemen, see Laurel Halladay (2004). For information on cross-dressing performance in prisoner of war camps, see Alon Rachamimov (2006).

2 As is done in other pieces of scholarship on the Lord Chamberlain, I will refer in this chapter to the Lord Chamberlain by the pronouns 'he', 'it' and 'they' interchangeably, as the Lord Chamberlain can refer to any of the men who carried that title or the institution itself, which consisted of the Lord Chamberlain and those under his employ. I will also use 'The Lord Chamberlain's Office', 'the Office', 'the censor' and 'St James's Palace' (where the Office was based) to refer to the institution as a whole, including the Lord Chamberlain and his employees.

3 This is speaking conservatively. Overall, I have identified sixteen individual revues staged between 1918 and 1953 as 'veterans' cross-dressing revues'. These shows all regularly advertised the fact that their cross-dressing cast was entirely made up of 'genuine' discharged servicemen and their titles often alluded to this (e.g. *We Were in the Forces*, *Soldiers in Skirts*). I have not been able to verify the military record of every cast member and it is entirely possible that some of the performers in these revues were not actually ex-servicemen, particularly in the latter years of the phenomenon's heyday. However, based on the primary source material I have reviewed, it appears that critics and audiences took the revues' promoters at their word. I will highlight instances where the performers' wartime service come into question later in this chapter.

4 *Forces Showboat* was also known popularly as *Get In* and *Get In For Laughter*.

5 Unfortunately, information is scant regarding these producers other than their legal names and addresses of their offices.

6 Unlike Les Rouges, the artists of the 1940s and 1950s veterans' cross-dressing revues rarely starred in feature films. The only exception is Ford & Sheen in the film *Skimpy in the Navy* (1949). The film was the first in a series of comedies which featured comedian Hal Monty as the titular character Skimpy Carter. See BFI National Archive, *Skimpy in the Navy* (dir. Stafford Dickens, Advance Films, 1949).

7 Punctuation reproduced from the original document.

8 Punctuation reproduced from the original document; 'CORNOCK disclosures' was probably a reference to the case of Ann Cornock of Henleaze who, in December 1946, was charged with the murder of her husband Cecil. During the trial it was disclosed that Cecil Cornock had a predilection for masochistic sex, often demanding that his wife beat him with a bamboo cane while he wore women's clothing. Ann was later found not guilty of murdering her husband. See Nicola Sly's (2008) *Bristol Murders* and Linda Stratmann's (2005) *Gloucestershire Murders*.

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5

Kinging the Stage: Male Impersonators and Drag Kings, Exploring Shared Historical Narratives

Stephen Farrier

It is compelling and tempting to connect contemporary drag king performance to male impersonators of the past and it seems like an easy leap to make, in part because the work often looks the same. This chapter explores the complexities of such a leap. It does this in order to see kinging as part of a lineage of a performance form, rather than assume that embodiment or representational strategies are transhistorical. Such a discussion contributes to the further development and articulation of the history of male impersonation. Of course, we live in a patriarchy, therefore much is written and said about drag queens and their history but less so about kings. It is important to deal with this imbalance and come to understand, in particular, how drag kings' relationship to audiences contributes to the history of the form overall.

The chapter moves to look at what happens when drag kings take to the theatre stage as a way of examining possible links with historical stage performance forms and to understand how the king disrupts some of the dominant norms of theatre behaviour. By focusing on one exemplar play, *Joan* by Lucy J. Skilbeck (2017), which toured internationally and extensively throughout the UK, this chapter concentrates on the impact drag kings have on theatre space and audience when they bring their work to the theatre stage rather than perform in the more familiar surroundings of bars, clubs and cabarets. By examining the impact of this kind of work it is possible to begin to draw links between contemporary drag kings and male impersonators working in the theatre in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Vesta Tilley (1864–1952), Hetty King (1883–1972), Ella Shields (1879–1952) and Annie Hindle (1840s–1897). To the casual observer, the link between contemporary kings and music hall stages seems an easy connection to make; after all, the work appears to be doing the same thing, impersonating men, and there is an historical tradition of boys playing women and women

playing boys. Popular discourse abounds with easy elisions of male impersonation with drag kings; likewise, non-gender conforming butches alongside drag at the Stonewall riot also cement these lines. However, to connect these histories is more complex than it first appears, and we need to be cautious when drawing such lines because although we can see connections across historical events, those cross-history commonalities might also questionably assign motivations or assume subjectivity about the players.

Talking about kinging and drag

Drag can be seen as a performance through which many enactments take place: those that transmit histories, generate communality, stimulate desire and act as a site for the contestation of politics in the community. Drag performance comprises a diverse set of embodied and enacted performance practices born from different traditions and training that have effects and affects on subjectivity. It is also seen in academic work as a performance mode or carrier through which messages are transmitted or represented (Farrier, 2015). However, in this discussion it is the performance form that renders connections across temporalities and locations.[1] Focusing on drag kings often means examining their appearance in bars, clubs, cabaret and festivals (their 'natural habitat', so to speak) rather than seeing what happens when kings appear in theatre. The discussion here opens up a question about the role of performance form and audience when thinking about kings' performances in theatre – particularly relating that debate to a lineage of male impersonation. The appearance of drag in theatre spaces, certainly in the UK context, like discussing the connection of male impersonators and drag kings, is not a simple translation of an act from one place to another location; this movement has some resonances that deserve thinking through in relation to the pressure of the social contexts in which these works happen.

Drag performance is a diverse practice grounded in and differentiated by its location across countries because different locations root different traditions (see Senelick, 2000). Indeed, even in the same city drag can be zoned; different kinds of practices happen in different venues. When an international perspective is taken, things become even more mixed, complex and debatable. And in those diverse contexts what might count as drag performance pluralizes. Yet, there is a sense that when an audience sees drag it knows what it is even if it cannot be fully and enduringly defined. This is perhaps why it is easy to leap from male impersonation to kinging. There may be trans-cultural or trans-historical elements of the form that

might function as an index that stimulates an observer to define a specific practice as drag, but this is not the task of my discussion here, and admittedly its slipperiness as a term, particularly when it comes to kinging, is part of its queer power. Having said that, it is clear for some this is unsatisfactory as such nebulousness can be frustrating and a lack of definition in some way can take away from the material realities of performance and the tasks/sacrifices performers make. So, I venture here a tacit definition that helps zone the discussion with the understanding that it is not fixed and enduring.

In 1998 Judith/Jack Halberstam defined drag kings as 'a female (usually) who dressed up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume' (1998: 232). This definition is of its time, but it still represents a popular understanding of drag kings – and I would extend this kind of formulation, with obvious changes, to popular understanding of queens. Certainly, a key aspect that cannot account any longer for defining kinging or drag more generally is simply one type of body costuming theirself in a way commonly associated with another type of body. I have noted too elsewhere when defining kings and queens together that

> a male-identified person presenting a performance in attire associated with females is not the inverse of a female-identified person performing in attire associated with males because of structural inequalities present in patriarchy. In short, to king is not the same as to queen.
>
> Farrier, 2017: 175

This is a way to articulate that kings need not be spoken about or measured by a yardstick developed by discourse and performances of queening; that is, aspects of kings and queens' forms are qualitatively different. Although kings and queens do share some obvious similarities there still remain significant differences between kinging and queening, yet they share something in the performance. For most of the drag I have seen in the Anglo-American context, what clusters king and queening such that it can be spoken of together without conflating its differences in performance and embodiment is its shared relationship to performance form – it is popular, utilizes dramaturgical structures of short form performance and is deeply connected to the communities and locations in which it plays.

Another aspect that might help a working definition of kinging for this discussion is something else that it shares with queening, in that both forms are allied to the ways in which subjectivity is generated and embodied in and through performance. In a sense, drag can be read as identity-generative, as Katie Horowitz (2013: 311) noted: 'Suggesting that the queens [and the same

can be said for kings in the context of this discussion] intentionally present their performance work as a form of play . . . precludes reading drag as in fact more productive of the identity that authors . . . claim it merely expresses.' Although, of course, there are instances when drag is uncomplicated play on stage, there are other times when performance work in drag is not only a presentation of character or persona but is also an enactment of queerness. Indeed, drag work can be seen to be a site of channelling queer culture, playing with subjectivity, and a place where people can experiment with new forms of existence. For instance, Eve Shapiro's (2007) study of Disposable Boy Toys, a performance collective/troupe based in Santa Barbara, notes that for members of the group kinging was a gateway to rethinking/re-experiencing their gender identity through what she calls 'collective mechanisms', which are 'imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support' that 'fostered diverse gender identity shifts for members' of the troupe (253). Shapiro's work is focused less on what the performance is, or what the performers perform, and more on the individuals in the troupe. Thus kinging is a place where performers might explore subjectivity, but as a performance form there is a long tradition in popular performance of male impersonation that we can connect to kinging (Shapiro only traces it to the 1990s in the United States).

As already noted, despite the fact that male impersonators of the nineteenth-century stage have a long history, much of the intellectual and noted writing on drag focuses on drag queens, perhaps in part because they are more present in our current popular performance culture, and of course such analyses are not immune to the powers of patriarchy so the activity of men figures more fully than that of women. This chimes with how other researchers have found non-appearances of kings in popular discussion (Williams, 2019). Halberstam (1998), in their work on female masculinity for instance, laments the 'stunning absences' (231) that typify the area.

I have said above that drag and its study are not immune to the power of patriarchy but add here that, despite presenting some resistance to patriarchy, the overarching powerfulness of it as a social system also asserts commanding energies such that drag too succumbs despite its sensitivities to patriarchy's operation. Although the trend is changing, drag kings are not as present in current UK popular performance though they have a long history there – and of course it depends on the direction of the researcher's gaze – both geographically and historically. Within that history there is meaningful substance in questioning the easy alignment of male impersonators in the nineteenth century with the kings that perform in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In the foundational full-length study of female masculinity in the late 1990s, Halberstam comes to say:

> Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatrically of masculinity into the mainstays of her act.
>
> 1998: 232

Although it is questionable that performers like Hetty King did not perform maleness parodically (as I will come to discuss), what still holds in Halberstam's position is that the drag king and the male impersonator have distinctions. That is, they are not copies of each other nor is it easy to say that a drag king performer is producing the same meanings as a male impersonator a century ago. However, claiming a distinction between these kinds of performance does not preclude connections between the king and the male impersonator in Halberstam's formulation. There is a deep connection, which appears less in terms of what the performer represents or signs in performance – this is historically and geographically specific – than it does in terms of the form of the performance, which too is historically and geographically specific, but it is possible to see the trace of histories in performance. Though the way that the performers enact masculinity in places looks the same, what has apparently changed from male impersonation to kinging is the location of the work in relation to the community who see it and the audience's behaviour when in the presence of a king performing.

This historical and geographical rootedness is important when considering drag performance because the ever-pervasive dynamic energy of patriarchy and its demands on gender normativity mean that considerations drawn from a performance are context dependent and not transhistorical. Continuing, Halberstam makes the point that:

> Because boys played women on the Shakespearean stage and women played boys on the nineteenth-century stage, some kind of role reversal symmetry seems to be in effect. But this role reversal actually masks the asymmetry of male and female impersonation. If boys can play girls and women, but women can only play boys, mature masculinity once again remains an authentic property of adult male bodies while all other gender roles are available for interpretation.
>
> 1998: 233

In the context of an argument that describes masculinity perceived culturally as naturalized – and therefore not available to be as easily seen as constructed in the same way that other gender positions are, Halberstam notes perceptively that, as is often the case, what is true in one time and place is not the mirror of another. There is an implication in Halberstam's argument that this naturalization of masculinity has endured historically (at least since the nineteenth century, as they note). Because of the operations of patriarchy to guard a particular form of masculinity, Halberstam comes to the conclusion that there remains a protected element where mature masculinity is ring-fenced as not available for parodic exploitation through male impersonation, certainly in the nineteenth century, that has become available and is present in kinging.

However, when we look to the kind of work some historical male impersonators performed, we can see that there is plenty of parodic representations of older masculinities. For instance, the film *Clothes and the Woman* from 1926 shows through trick photography a range of Hetty's impersonations of men, including a smoking workman, a pith-helmeted explorer (colonizer?), a cowboy and a well-to-do top hat-wearing gent who also smokes, but this time a cigar.[2] Apart from the particular resonance of women smoking in the 1920s as a sign of independence and progressive attitudes, other skills marked Hetty's ability to mimic and parody men. The cowboy impersonation in *Clothes and the Woman* is of particular note as Hetty rolls a cigarette with one hand, a signature trick of her repertoire and a tongue in cheek index of masculine skill. Hetty continued to perform throughout her life and can be seen in a film from 1970 performing in her late seventies/early eighties as a sailor and as a drunk toff on the eve of his wedding, singing 'Bye Bye Bachelor Days' – a song which involves Hetty waving a handkerchief at members of the audience, as if saying goodbye to past loves, singing: 'Bye bye Molly, Bye bye Jane'.[3]

Although there is less a pointedly critical tone aimed at toxic masculinity that forms some kinging acts (see Case, 2009), Hetty's impersonations, however, do rib masculinity in ways that connect them to the tone kinging brings about. Hetty's work, at least as it is accessible currently, seems in performance to show the failure of masculinity to live up to its billing, presenting it as archetypal – often womanizing and drunk. Although there are reports of Hetty King's performance being about an illusion of maleness (Dixon, 2013), it can also be read as parodic, highlighting hypocrisy – the drunk toff on the eve of his wedding is singing about the failure of his ability to keep his freedom. This in its historical context reflects or embodies an energy that is also present, albeit with a more direct tone, in king acts. Perhaps what has shifted is the audience for the work and as a result the way that it

responds to the work – the audience recorded in the short film about Hetty's life in the 1970s appear as a well-behaved normative audience, restrained recognition present in the generous applause at the end of the act (though historically audiences may well have been more raucous).[4] My experience of being present at drag shows with kings included in the bill or shows only containing kings is that the audience is much more vocal and involved with the act – and where there is a present-day equivalent of a performer lamenting lost loves ('Bye bye Molly, Bye bye Jane'), audiences are not silent in their appreciation until the end of the act. Though it is an oversimplification to think of the audience for a nineteenth-century male impersonator as somehow more refined because it waits until the end of the act to show appreciation – evidence suggests otherwise – there are connections with how audiences watch contemporary kinging and historical male impersonation.

At kinging nights there is often a frisson in the room, sexuality or sexiness present. In music hall presentations it is likely that this kind of expression was kept under wraps because of the social context. However, there is evidence that watching Hetty King's or Vesta Tilley's acts awakened, reinforced or simply turned on desires for some women. Women wrote desirous love/fan letters (Dixon, 2013). The performers kept their distance from this discourse, presumably to show that they did not want it to impact their reputation. Both Hetty and Vesta made very clear in their publicity that they were happily married to men – indeed Hetty's *Clothes and the Woman* features her coming home to her husband. Yet, it is clear that even when there is less open expression of desire or approval, the content of the performance stimulated still-recognizable energies.

It is not only the content of the work and the way that the audience responds to it that make links between male impersonators and kings. The form of the acts too helps a sense of historical connectedness. As it has been noted, the majority of king work I have seen is short form, variety in feel, and formed of vignettes or turns, each of which presents a coherent idea or narrative. This form of performance too is popular in that it appeals to a mainstream audience and is not considered to be part high art. The kinds of performance audiences might see at a local cabaret venue or bar and the music hall act share these formal qualities.

Although the forms mirror each other, this does not, of course, automatically mean that they are connected – this is a symmetry that Halberstam critiques when it comes to cross-casting on the nineteenth-century stage. Key though is that form is related to content and the work of kings and male impersonators resonates similarly in places – especially when looking at the work of Hetty King, whose drunken fools parodically represent

masculinity's power. If we can accept that the work of male impersonators and kings is related through form and elements in content, and therefore similar in some way, perhaps only being historically different rather than categorically different, as Halberstam notes (though of course Halberstam could mean a category difference related to history), then feasibly it is the site of the work that makes the performance appear different such that the forms might be considered as dissimilar categories of performance. Hetty King's performances did not happen in queer bars; this was not an avenue open to her work – even if she were interested in playing there.[5]

Kinging in the theatre: *JOAN*

The presence of drag kings in performance over the last twenty-five years or so has ebbed and flowed in the UK. By no means are they as large a community as drag queens (if it is possible to think of drag queens as a community). In other parts of the world (particularly in some places in the United States) there are groups that have been stable and performing for years, and venues that support their work. In the last five years or so in the UK, kings have made a resurgence as part of a boom in drag performance; there will be many reasons for this (and that would make an interesting discussion). As part of this boom kings have, like queens, appeared across a number of media and have, importantly for this chapter, appeared in stage productions.

In 2016, Milk Presents, a queer theatre company, presented a show, *JOAN*, a queer take on the Joan of Arc story.[6] This is a production that uses many different performance modes; in part storytelling, song, drag king act, and at some level it feels like the audience hears not only historical imaginings, but also a twenty-first century story. It is a work that plays queerly across historical, gender and genre boundaries. It is a one hander, that is, the play requires a single performer: the script says of the casting, 'ideally it should be performed by a gender non-conforming performer, someone who moves easily between genders, someone fun' (Skillbeck, 2017: np). The performer embodies Joan, 'her father, the Dauphin Charles VII of France and the judge at her trial. She drags up for each' (ibid.). The show begins with Joan waiting for Catherine (Saint Catherine of Alexandria who appeared to Joan of Arc in a vision) and makes sense of the narrative through gender non-normativity, playfully and critically. It is a show that fits well (and somewhat updates) what David Román and Holly Hughes see in their 1998 volume *O Solo Homo* as a strong current in queer performance work. They say:

> Queer people know well that identities are dynamic and contingent – and queer solo artists perform this fact and do so generously. Queer solo performance comes out of a sense of community and thus helps inform and shape our understating of identity and community. Queer solo performers trouble the comfort of community even as they invest in it . . . One could even argue that queer solo performers are often at the frontiers of new social identities and more inclusive community formations.
>
> Román and Hughes, 1998: 5–6

Seeing Joan as gender non-conforming connects the historical figure to contemporary preoccupations of queerness and gender play (and 'play' here is profound). The performance is set in the round, with a smattering of small tables implying a relationship with forms of cabaret. The work involves direct address, audience participation (in the way that it might be experienced in a nightclub) and moments when the diegesis is apparently put on hold so that the performer, LoUIS CyFer (aka Lucy Jane Parkinson), can perform segments of work from drag king acts – or at least if not directly from kinging performance, from popular forms of music hall-like work. The work of LoUIS CyFer is built on patter, quick-witted interaction with audience members and the joint understanding that he is presenting a particular type of masculinity, and in so doing 'ribbing' masculinity. This ribbing of masculinity is delivered as if it is off the cuff, when a good deal of it is scripted.

This connection through history is not claiming that Joan of Arc was queer (the contemporary concept of that did not exist then, of course) but through Joan's story (in particular her fictional discussions with her father, the king and the judge – all of whom LoUIS CyFer embodies in ways that read as contemporary) there is a resonance with present-day expression of gender non-conforming identities. And, rather in the same way that indecipherability is an on-stage queer performance strategy, the audience experience is one of slipping about in the show – it is not clear if it is looking at Joan, LoUIS, or the performer's story, especially when it comes to representations of the pressure to conform to gender normativity. For instance, we see LoUIS's character transformations, we watch costume changes and the application of facial hair. In one part he asks a male from the audience to walk around so he can observe and comedically acquire a masculine way of walking. Inevitably, chiming with Halberstam's description of kinging, the male from the audience fails to 'do' his masculinity/masculine walk correctly (under the pressure of the gaze of the whole audience and the performer's wit) and this failure becomes the source of gentle humour in the moment.

The time that I saw the show (at Oval House in London, a theatre venue connected to queer performance) there were moments that reflected cabaret

or club style performance: for instance, physical slaps by the performer (playfully done as the audience enters – LoUIS greets people, there is patter and quick wit) – a kind of cabaret interaction in a theatre studio space. It took the audience a while to warm up in the theatre conditions (whereas a cabaret audience would be warmed up by the MC – but the availability of alcohol helps in both instances), in part because the popping in and out of a kind of fifteenth-century France while maintaining what appears as a drag king routine jars in all the right, productive ways. The messiness of the work, the sliding between forms, characters, genders, personas, is an index of the show's queerness and this sliding allows glimpses of historical connectedness.

Messiness is often present in the work of Milk Presents and appears in their other work too. The director of the show, Leo Skilbeck, also directed Chekov's *The Proposal* and *The Bear* at the Young Vic Theatre, London in 2017 with two trans actors, Kamari Romeo and Rebecca Root, and a well-known gender queer performer, George Ikediashi, aka La Gateaux Chocolate. This too was a messy production. The casting and placing of the work in a theatre space in two plays that deal with the social values of gender, alongside seeing, for instance, a trans man dressed as a young girl in one of the plays and then as a male sex symbol in the other meant that the slippage between the normative genders of the characters (and their motivation!) skidded about a lot; similarly the set, which was made of sheets of raw wood, attached to which were the skulls of hunting trophies alongside a giant stuffed life-sized bear, that becomes transformed by the end of the plays by glitter slash curtains, disco balls, pink lighting and the inclusion of an S&M harness and a ball gag in the mouth of the bear. So, as in *JOAN*, the presence of a drag performer doing chops from their act in some way brings into the space a form that is not simply transplanted there – the energy that comes with it transforms the space in some way that allows audiences to speak and interact in ways mainly frowned upon in normative theatre.[7] The form of the work has some influence on the energy in the performance, an energy born of cabaret and short form performance, that can be felt as a trace. When it comes to kinging in *JOAN*, it may not only be this transition from the nightclub to the theatre that causes this trace to occur. In some sense a link from the present to the past hooks gender non-normativity expressed in kinging to contemporary notions of queerness without claiming a specific linage of subjectivity; it does this through a resonance in form.

Connectedness

To look at kinging and queening in the same glance and see them at least as linked, is a political inclination to see the performance community as

connected and supportive (though, of course not without its challenges and moments of disharmony). To see the drag performance community as functional in the first instance (without denying any issues abound in it) is not the writing or ruling out of critique, but a gesture of connectedness at a cultural, social and historical moment when allyship seems more vital than ever. It is connectedness that I have argued for in this chapter and other places. The relationship to historical forms of performance work for drag kings too is important in this endeavour because the connection in some way strengthens the legitimacy of the work in some people's eyes, which is less about its critical profile than it is about the opening up of funding streams and it is seen as benefitting from some kind of reflected power that arrives when a thing is 'historical'. A connection with historical performers can also be experienced as fuelling to those who make work. In some way, at some level, to take to the stage and present a drag king act is doing something that has been done for at least a century in a connected (but evolving) way. A contemporary performer is less likely to be singing 'Bye bye Molly, Bye bye Jane', but may draw allyship from historical performers and at some level when drag kings hit the stage they are saying 'Hello Hetty, Hello Vesta', even if they do not make that part of the act – at least when I watch kings, I hear that greeting warmly and often.

Notes

1 Drag training in informal setting is, for instance, one way that performers come to understand historical forms of performance – see Stephen Farrier (2017).
2 At the time of writing, the film is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxHKEdaXhzo
3 At the time of writing, this part of the film is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxHKEdaXhzo (accessed 15 September 2020).
4 Although I am making the point about the differences between the audience of the work across time – the more contemporary being a bit more vocal – there is evidence that kings did stimulate sensations in audience members that present still – that of being turned on by the work (see Stephen Dixon (2013), who gestures at this).
5 The task in this chapter is to connect the work of male impersonators to contemporary kinging in terms of the form of the acts. Yet not all male impersonations of the early twentieth century happened on theatre stages. Particularly of note here is the Harlem Renaissance performer Gladys Bentley (1907–1960) who offers the possibility of another lineage that also connects to kinging that we see nearly a hundred years later. The kind of

male impersonation that Gladys Bentley appears to have done does not conform to the categorization discussion of performance practice that Halberstam makes. It is an interesting task to trace lines of the queerer performance practices during the Harlem Renaissance (and other club-based performance practice) to kinging and drag generally. Gladys Bentley's work is different from that of the male impersonators that form this chapter (indeed there is an argument to be made that Bentley was not a male impersonator at all, but may fit the kinging category as Halberstam describes it outside of performance practice). However, this is outside the scope of the discussion in hand, but the form of popular club and cabaret performance is still strongly present in kinging and wider drag performance.

6 For transparency, I currently sit on the advisory board of Milk Presents.

7 By normative theatre I mean work that does not bring into question the appearance of characters as socially gendered beings, in particular in relation to the performer's gender.

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6

A Kiss that Breaks the Spell: Japanese 'Drag Kings' and the Homosocial Culture of the Takarazuka Revue

Isabelle Coy-Dibley

In 1913, the Takarazuka Revue was founded by Kobayashi Ichizō in Takarazuka, Japan. As an all-female theatre group, it was innovative and subversive for two reasons: at the time Japanese theatre was perceived as a male vocation (it had only been legal for women to be on stage since 1872), and more so than this, the women played both male and female roles in which 'gender is constructed in two categories; one is the *otokoyaku* (an actress playing the male role) and the other is the *musumeyaku* (an actress playing the female role)' (Chen, 2010: 55). Although the *otokoyaku* have not been labelled 'drag kings', Jennifer Robertson and Laurence Senelick make connections between the *otokoyaku*'s stage performances and that of male impersonators, synonymously referring to the Takarasiennes as male impersonators and male actresses. Senelick introduces Robertson's work as observing 'a new type of male impersonation' (Senelick, 1992: xvi), 'which has supplemented the accepted modes of female impersonation and has created a troubling duality. [. . . the] young women of the popular Takarazuka revue who play men are expected to adopt actual markers of socially defined masculinity' (Senelick, 1992: xvi), which in turn means that 'their art, while admired, is seen to provide a subversive subtext, encouraging an "abnormal life-style"' (Senelick, 1992: xvi). The *otokoyaku*'s use of makeup, outfits and training in order to perform as male characters arguably situates this stage performance within the context of 'drag', since it plays with gender stereotypes while complicating notions of gender, identity and the power dynamics of performing such roles on stage.

This chapter, therefore, first explores the gendered power dynamics of this drag performance in both shows and training, questioning how this performance impacts the social positioning of the actresses both on and off stage. The Takarazuka Revue is an extensive industry, complete with merchandise, a 'celebrity' culture and a vast female fanbase of mostly schoolgirls or adult

married women in their thirties to sixties. Perhaps because the Revue was founded within a patriarchal society, despite this almost exclusively female demographic, men have continually been in charge of the theatre as managers, directors or social critics, in sharp contrast to the female actresses and patrons of the theatre. The resulting discourses of power have therefore been strained; men control how masculinity is performed and represented by the actresses, as well as what the actresses can and cannot do, placing limitations upon the agency of such performers. Yilin Chen notes that: 'The slogan 'Good Wife, Wise Mother' [. . .] was enshrined in the Meiji Civil Code [. . .and] Kobayashi Ichizō, the founder of the Takarazuka theatre, insisted that women belonged at home and urged his actresses to retire at the height of their careers so that they might become "good wives and wise mothers"' (Chen, 2010: 54–55). Subsequently, this first section considers the way in which the drag performance creates tension between the fantasy and reality of gendered power dynamics, exploring the relationship this drag has to women's social roles in Japan, particularly when '[t]he experience of performing male roles, it was believed, became the medium for helping women understand what their husbands expected of them as wives and mothers' (Chen, 2010: 54–55). However, by examining the problematic act of a kiss on stage, I consider how these stage performances create a Sapphic space in which women may explore their sexualities, which arguably allows a homosocial, yet not overtly lesbian, subculture to flourish, as well as ultimately question the forms of desire this stimulates and the tensions this materializes in notions of compulsory heterosexuality. The drag performance creates a space that is both subversive and liberating for women, yet still controlled within male terms; as a result, the second section explores how the actresses and fans generate their own interpretations of the Takarazuka Revue that contradict, resist and subtly subvert these gendered ideologies and the power they enact.

Playing the male role: The power dynamics of performing gender

The Takarazuka Revue produced its debut performance of *Donburako* two years after the end of the Meiji period (1868–1912). The death of Emperor Meiji signified a shift in Japanese society, transitioning from a feudal society into the era of modern Japan during the Taishō period, following the succession of Emperor Taishō. The eras during which the Revue performed have certainly impacted upon the approach it has taken to performing gender and the meanings this generates for the performers, trainers/managers, reviewers and spectators. During the period in which the Revue began, actresses 'were still publicly denounced as "defiled women" who led profligate

lives' (Robertson, 1998: 7) and defied the Meiji Civil Code, since '[i]t was in the context of state formation and nationalism that Good Wife, Wise Mother (*ryōsai kenbo*) was codified as the model of "female" gender' (Robertson, 1998: 61–62). This model has arguably continued to indoctrinate the practices of the Takarasiennes both on and off stage to this present day. Their stage performance of female sexualities, as well as their own off-stage sexuality and gender, are still informed by this perception of women's roles in society whereby '[b]efore and even after the Meiji period, published writers and critics – the vast majority of whom were male – relegated sexual desire in females to courtesans and prostitutes [… and] "Ordinary" women were defined by the gender roles of daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law' (Robertson, 1998: 62). This perspective on female roles and sexuality was perpetuated by Japanese women's journals with the exception of the feminist journal, *Seitō* (Bluestocking), founded in 1911, which was 'put under surveillance by the government shortly afterward for publishing articles critical of the patriarchal household and family system' (Robertson, 1998: 62). As a result, throughout the history of the Takarazuka Revue, the expression of female sexuality has remained regulated, constrained and to some degree censored through government and national perspectives on women's roles in society, which has impacted upon the Takarazuka subculture.

It is within this context that Kobayashi asserted a code of conduct in the early 1930s to enforce and reinforce the Revue's motto – 'Kiyoku Tadashiku Utsukushiku' (Pure Righteous Beautiful) – and the idea of 'wholesome family entertainment' into the training, performances and culture of the Revue. This strategy in many ways de-sexualizes and de-eroticizes the potential subversion of the drag performance and romance on stage. Kobayashi's dominance of the Revue propagated complex patriarchal dynamics within an almost exclusively female theatre space of not only actresses but an audience demographic largely made up of women, and he 'was among the many influential persons who published articles in women's journals reminding their female readers that working outside the home for wages should not be construed as a career in itself, but rather as preparation for marriage' (Robertson, 1998: 65). Additionally, the students' cleaning duties during their time at the Takarazuka Academy, enforced from the 1970s onwards according to Leonie R. Stickland (2008), assisted in preparing the students for their domestic roles after leaving the Revue, reinforcing this ultimate reintegration into society's eventual expectations of them. Jennifer Robertson articulates that:

> Most of the students live with one or two roommates in the Violet (*sumire*) Dormitories, where the administration seeks to socialize the

> young women into a life of discipline and hierarchical relationships. All of the residents are required to clean the dorms, but the first-year or junior (*kōhai*) students are also responsible for cleaning the classrooms and rehearsal studios under the watchful eyes of the second-year or senior (*senpai*) students. The cleaning is done by hand without the benefit of vacuum cleaners, for Academy officials are convinced that a labor-intensive cleaning regimen builds character, ensures humility, and boosts stamina in their young charges.
>
> Robertson, 1998: 11

Through this narrative, the regulation of gender in the training, alongside the control of the representation of gender on stage, can be seen as coded by the Revue's patriarchal and hierarchical male-dominated Administration, as a method for training women in the art of understanding what society expects of them, asserting this perspective in every aspect of the women's on- and off-stage lives. Subsequently, the drag performance, in this respect, can be read as training for heterosexual marriage, rather than as a transgression that critiques the status quo, as by playing the male role the students are better informed about how to undertake their duties as wives through their extensive knowledge of how men 'work'. However, it can equally be said that by entering the Revue, young girls and women enter a liminal space in which they can legitimately prolong their entrance into marriage and the roles and duties traditionally occupied and carried out by women in Japanese society. Rather than transitioning directly from the patriarchal family domain into marriage, the Revue offers an alternative aspiration to these women, where they enter a temporal and spatial extension of 'girlhood'. Robertson expresses how '[i]n Japan, the key indicators for females of social adulthood are marriage and motherhood. *Shōjo* is the term coined in the Meiji period for unmarried girls and women and means, literally, a "not-quite-female" female. Its usages and modifications reveal much about the vicissitudes of the discourse of gender and sexuality since the Meiji period' (Robertson, 1998: 63–65). In other words, the drag performance provides the opportunity to remain in *shōjo* culture for a longer period of time, enabling Takarasiennes a certain form of freedom to explore alternative aspirations, to maintain independence and a mode of living external to the roles delegated to them by society. Therefore, while the training and drag performance may be controlled and contextualized by the managers, directors and critics as training for marriage and women's duties as good wives and wise mothers, the actresses themselves may subvert this regulating of gender by employing their own interpretations and perceptions of being Takarasiennes.

Deborah Shamoon reiterates that 'the Takarasiennes are ideal shōjo' (Shamoon, 2012: 46) and '[s]ince their inception, although they were controlled by patriarchal interests, because girls' magazines and Takarazuka were perceived as an all-girl space, both provided girl readers/audiences with the sense that they were inhabiting a private world, apart from adults' (Shamoon, 2012: 46). Within this 'private world' the Takarasiennes and their fans occupy an in-between space where they can assert limited forms of agency, power and authority over the narrative of the drag performance and its relation to girls' culture and the aspirations of young girls/women.

The portrayal of *otokoyaku* roles additionally points to a form of female agency through the female appropriation of male privilege, behaviours and freedoms. While it is possible to view this performance of gender on stage as a chance to form a socially accepted lesbian subtext, I argue that this performance predominantly subverts the enforced notions of femininity and masculinity by enabling women to experience the embodiment of masculinity and challenge the heterosexual matrix that constructs Japanese gender norms. Robertson claims that, 'Kobayashi himself recognised the potential of theater in orchestrating the construction and regulation of gender and in literally staging the enactment of gender roles in society' (Robertson, 1992: 425). The masculinity performed by the Revue actively assists in deconstructing the notion of gender norms, highlighting the performativity of such gender when it is embodied by another sex, and celebrated as such by a large fan base. Robertson articulates this effectively as:

> Since gender is an effect of culturally coded markers of behaviour and style that are only presumed to be the natural attributes of one sex rather than the other, then passing as feminine pertains to males and females equally, as does passing as masculine. To put this differently, a cross-dressed male is to a feminine female *not* as copy is to original, but rather as copy is to copy. And, ultimately, the original is revealed to be 'nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original' (Butler, 1990: 31).
>
> Robertson, 1998: 39–40

By mapping these gendered performances onto the female body, the Takarasiennes' performances dismantle and undermine notions of masculinity as a gendered position occupied exclusively by cis males. Enabling women to occupy a position of masculinity not only deconstructs the 'naturalness' of gender, but equally permits women to experience a form of agency in the way in which masculinity is constructed and performed, as well as providing women with the opportunity to realize alternative modes of

behaviour, aesthetics and gendered utterances that can assist in reshaping how women perceive themselves in Japanese society. Equally, later in this chapter I suggest that their presentation of an 'ideal' masculinity generates an additional challenge to perceived norms, as the on-stage performance of masculinity is embodied exclusively by male impersonators who are desired by female fans, complicating heterosexual desire within this space.

A kiss that breaks the spell: The homo-erotic safe-space of the 'drag' performance

When attending a performance of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* on 6 April 2017, it was interesting to observe how romance and desire were managed on stage. The lead male character, Percy Blakeney, played by Kurenai Yuzuru, turned away from the audience in order to kiss the lead female character, Marguerite St. Just, played by Kisaki Airi, which obscured the kiss from the audience's gaze. To give a brief synopsis of the performance, the story is based on Baroness Orczy's novel that revolves around an eighteenth-century English aristocrat leading a double life; he appears as an effete aristocrat, yet he is also engaged in the underground effort to rescue French nobles from Robespierre's Reign of Terror.

During the romantic scenes, the practice of turning away for the *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* to 'kiss' repeatedly took place, and by doing so, the kiss was not only obscured by the *otokayuku*'s head and hands, but was equally avoided entirely. The audience experienced only the pretence of a kiss or 'promise' of a kiss, implying an intentional directorial restraint in the act of representing sexual expressions within the performance. Yet, by intentionally avoiding the kiss, but maintaining the 'promise' of one, desire remains 'unfulfilled' and therefore arguably remains suspended in the performance space. Kissing in public in Japan is still seen as taboo, which would account for some of this discretion; however, this decision may have also been implemented as an attempt to assuage any concerns regarding the notion of lesbian sexuality within the Revue. By doing so, the lack of a kiss may in fact allow a form of sexuality to manifest that would be controlled more fully if the kiss had in fact been allowed, as arguably the lack of a kiss may prove more stimulating of desire and suggestive than the act itself, since the potential of an action on stage can often be more emotionally invested than the act itself. According to Stickland:

> Suspicions about 'deviant' sexuality, too, might give some parents cause for opposing a daughter's Takarazuka aspirations. Although only one of

> my informants made direct reference to the issue of homosexuality, archival evidence from 1930 cited by Robertson [. . .], for example, shows that male impersonation by Takarazuka performers was blamed in the print media for changing (supposedly) platonic, same-sex crushes between feminine girls into overtly 'butch-femme (*ome*)'-type relationships.
>
> Stickland, 2008: 81

This blame was a prominent cause for parental concern, due to the 'possibility of their daughters being subject to lesbian influences in that all-female environment, which might have jeopardised their marriageability' (Stickland, 2008: 81). Yet, perhaps, '[o]n the other hand, even same-sex love might still have been seen as preferable to premarital heterosexual experience, as long as it was regarded as a 'phase' that would pass with maturity' (Stickland, 2008: 81–82). Because of the perceived lesbian subtext of the Revue, the Revue Administration has, on numerous occasions, attempted to 'quash any rumours of same-sex relationships' (Stickland, 2008: 82) by reiterating 'that Takarasiennes would make excellent wives' (Stickland, 2008: 82), with statistics apparently suggesting that 'being a Takarasienne improves a young woman's chances of marriage, no matter what her stage role' when '[t]hey usually 'retire' before they reach 'Christmas Cupcake' age (25)' (Deutsch, 2016). Since female sexuality is tied to marriage in Japan, women remain associated to the roles of wives and mothers, whereby lesbianism may only be considered safe in the context of pre-marriage and pre-heterosexual experience. Stickland highlights that: 'Sexuality is in fact one area about which the Revue Administration, performers and fans are loath to speak or publish, as to do so would encroach upon the so-called "Violet Code (*Sumire kōdo*)," a set of largely unwritten but longstanding guidelines said to govern the acceptability of anything connected with Takarazuka, both in performance and off-stage' (Stickland, 2008: 7).

There are roughly 400 Takarasiennes under the protection and guidance of the Revue, with 50 teenage girls being selected each year to join the Academy through a 'beauty-contest-like application process by a primarily all-male committee to train before being allocated to serve in one of the five troupes' (Deutsch, 2016). This emphasizes the continual importance placed upon the physical attributes and potential desirability of a girl to perform either male or female roles. Yet, while this initial objectification appears part of the admissions process, 'Takarazuka assures nervous mothers and fathers that their daughters' virginity (or at least wholesomeness) will be protected by the "Violet Code," a type of *loco parentis* that guarantees for the length of her affiliation' (Deutsch, 2016). Subsequently, the Violet Code, although

unwritten, 'calls for a voluntary code of silence on sexual matters, and all other sensitive or controversial content concerning the troupe and its members' (Buckley, 2002: 496) and with this 'also leads to careful and strict censorship on the content of performances' (Buckley, 2002: 496). As a result, there are numerous restrictions placed upon the performers and their ability to express sexual desires or non-heterosexual lifestyle choices. The subject remains taboo and is taken very seriously by performers, staff and fans alike, which impedes the analysis of the complex relationship between the drag performance and notions of female sexuality, and explains the act of restricting an actual kiss taking place on stage.

Nonetheless, although the patriarchal shaping of the Revue has asserted the Violet Code to encourage a perception of the performers and performance material as de-eroticized, de-sexualized and shrouded in an air of chastity, innocence and purity, the Revue has, in many ways, assisted in influencing and shaping a homosocial environment and a type of same-sex relationship that tests the boundaries of female friendships as platonic, romantic or sexual. Jennifer Robertson's in-depth analysis of the Revue often incorporates a Westernized reading of lesbian identities and relationships between performers and fans, sexualizing the discourses in a way that has often been criticized by other scholars, particularly for its act of breaking the Violet Code. Although it is difficult, from a Western perspective, not to read the subtext as lesbian, it is important to recognize the cultural context of female sexuality and, in my view, to attempt to read the drag performance in relation to how female sexuality in Japan has been articulated, through both patriarchal and feminist dichotomy. Shamoon highlights that 'Stickland is quick to acknowledge that, while homosexual relationships do occur between performers or with fans, for the most part the women involved do not think of themselves as lesbians [. . .], implying a disconnect between different types of same-sex relationships' (Shamoon, 2012: 47). Since the performers themselves do not identify as lesbian, I would argue that these drag performances and the performers themselves situate such relationships within their own concepts and framework of the cultural phenomenon of 'Class S' or 'S' relationships between girls and young women, which flourished in Japan in the 1970s but have historically been present in Japanese society even during the Revue's debut performance.

It has been noted by many scholars that, during the early years of the Revue, the stage performance of gender differed considerably from the modernized aesthetics of present-day performances:

> It is important to remember that the *otokoyaku* in the prewar period was different from the stylised, James Dean-in-drag look of today. Before 1930, performers played both roles interchangeably, and there was much

> less distinction in their style of makeup [. . .]. Until 1932, *otokoyaku* did not cut their hair short or wear wigs, but pulled their long hair back or hid it under hats [. . .]. The ideal was not the frisson of female bodies sharply differentiated by gender surfaces, but a safe, neutral midpoint where gender differences elided. The ideals of sameness, neutrality, purity, and chastity that are the central aesthetics of girls' culture allowed Takarazuka to embody spiritual love in its purest form.
>
> Shamoon, 2012: 47

This ideal based on 'sameness, neutrality, purity, and chastity' arguably depicts a similar understanding of 'S' relationships and the persistent indoctrination of innocence in girls' culture. Although 'S' relationships are no longer prevalent, to lend some historical background to their shaping and demise it is pertinent to consider their context in European ideas of sexology that, during the Westernization of Japan from 1868 onwards, irreparably altered Japanese concepts of sexuality and perceptions of 'S' relationships. Originally, these relationships were seen as pure and spiritual, ironically as a way of protecting young girls from the dangers of heterosexual couplings. In fact, according to Sarah Frederick in 'Not that Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko's Good Girls', the relationships 'implied heterosexual inexperience and homosexual experience' (Frederick, 2005: 68), maintaining an image of heterosexual innocence and virgin-like purity. While women were not allowed to act as pursuers or be emotionally forward in heterosexual relationships, within same-sex education 'S' relationships enabled women to experience subjectivity and autonomy by being aggressors or pursuers and freely expressing their feelings with other girls. Nonetheless, there were still enforced codes of conduct within 'S' relationships that in some ways mirrored heterosexual hierarchy since the elder sister exerted dominance over the younger sister and the relationship followed the patterns of heterosexual courtship, particularly since it was an exclusive relationship between two girls. However, in reality, 'S' relationships were based on the feminine 'sameness' of the pairing. Within *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan*, Shamoon clarifies how:

> Class S was condoned only within the context of a larger homosocial group, usually an all-girls' school, and only as long as both girls maintained feminine characteristics. Sexologists condemned and pathologized what Robertson calls a 'heterogender' relationship, meaning that one of the female partners adopted masculine clothing, speech, or behavior [. . .]. While cross-dressing posed a threat, loving relationships among girls who retained a feminine appearance were encouraged. S

> relationships, therefore, were premised on sameness [. . .] or what Robertson calls a homogender relationship, in that both girls displayed feminine traits.
>
> Shamoon, 2012: 37

Non-threatening homogendered relationships therefore qualified age, rather than gender, as the significant differing factor between girls, providing a hierarchy in which girls had the ability to play with power dynamics. Yet, while the eldest had authority, she was equally expected to fulfil a supportive, guiding and nurturing role for her 'soeur' ('sister'). It was perceived as a mentoring relationship that assisted younger students in becoming 'women', allowing patriarchal society to see these relationships as a tool for creating their Good Wives and Wise Mothers. The 'drag' performed by the Revue before the 1930s suggests a similar perspective of emphasizing gender neutrality, or *Chūsei*, which 'indicates someone sexless and genderless, which is different from the concept of androgyny or possessing qualities of both genders' (Shamoon, 2012: 46). *Chūsei* came before Takarasiennes began to cut their hair short and adopt a more Westernized aesthetic of masculinity within their performances, and so the performances were in the context of gender neutrality and asexuality, enabling the drag performance and on-stage romance to be perceived similarly to 'S' relationships with 'the assumption of sexual innocence in girls' culture' (Shamoon, 2012: 47), allowing 'same-sex desires to be coded as chaste and safe' (Shamoon, 2012: 47).

Yet, with the 1930s' change in the *otokoyaku*'s aesthetics and the growing popularity of European sexologists who presented new forms of classifying sexuality, the social perception of these relationships was distorted by some critics into something perverse. In '"S" Is for Sister: Schoolgirl Intimacy and "Same-Sex Love" in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', Gregory M. Pflugfelder argues that

> intimate relationships between females – epitomized by 'S' ties among schoolgirls – manifested a form of 'sexual perversion' [. . .] known as 'same-sex love' [. . .] the new sexological model played a key role in elevating the visibility of female-female erotic relations within the social imaginary, and accorded them for the first time in the history of Japanese erotic discourses an integral place within authoritative cultural mappings of sexuality.
>
> Pflugfelder, 2005: 140–41

This dual image of girlhood creates the tensions between notions of lesbianism, female-connectivity and heterosexuality that is also embedded

within the Revue's gender performances, particularly when the initial 'appeal of the *otokoyaku* for female fans is neutrality: the creation of an imaginary fantasy world in which the tensions and anxiety of heterosexual relations have been erased' (Shamoon, 2012: 47).

However, as the shift in aesthetics moved away from the notion of sameness or *Chūsei* into a performance that emphasized gender difference, the drag performance altered in its presentation, generating a critique of masculinity through its presentation of an 'ideal'. Robertson quotes Kobayashi, proclaiming that 'the *otokoyaku* is not male but is more suave, more affectionate, more courageous, more charming, more handsome, and more fascinating than a real male' (Robertson, 1992: 424). Sarah E. Murray additionally argues that 'it seems that this genre and its styles would not exist were it not for what Robertson calls the masculinist imagination of its founder and his assistants. Once created, it became available for appropriation by women, and women indeed have taken advantage of this' (Murray, 1994: 347).

Ironically, by creating an ideal performance of masculinity based on female desires, the Takarasiennes embody a form of masculinity that is perhaps only made possible through its performance by women. This performance, rather than generating an overt lesbian desire or subculture, arguably critiques heterosexuality within a homosocial environment that enables performers to reconsider the dynamics between men and women, as well as the stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity that have both been appropriated and altered by the performers to accommodate spectators' desires, expectations and fantasies, both complicating and stimulating heterosexual desire simultaneously.

Rather than only suggesting this drag performance generates a subtext of lesbianism, perhaps this performance is also subversive through its creation of tension in the compulsory heterosexuality of Japanese culture, by giving agency to women through allowing them to appropriate and experience the privileges of masculinity, yet equally to mould and create their own forms of masculinity that challenge dominant forms of male masculinity and suggest alternatives that appeal to their mostly female audience. Stickland asserts that 'girls and women are given both implicit permission and active encouragement to love other women – specifically, the male-role players – under the pretext that this affection is non (homo)sexual in nature, because the object of their love is 'male,' and therefore does not compromise the subjects' 'normal' sexuality' (Stickland, 2008: 7). Yet, by giving permission and actively encouraging this 'love' of the drag performance, this equally generates a subversive undercurrent to the perceived heterosexual desire, when the masculinity is embodied by a biological female. This complicates the notion of sexual desire between men and women when the desired masculinity is being embodied by a woman;

therefore, the sexual desire for that masculinity is not succinctly accommodating the male–female relation of heterosexuality, but destabilizing these normative and regulative constructions of compulsory heterosexuality. By desiring the masculine performance of the female performers, this suggests that it is not a proscribed masculinity exclusively associated with men that women desire, but a form of masculinity embodied by any body, which problematizes and challenges heterosexual desire as a naturalized state; rather it demonstrates its construction by not only stimulating the desire of heterosexual women, but potentially stimulating the desire of heterosexual men because of the female embodiment. However, by obscuring the act of a kiss between the *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* from the audience's gaze, while the sexual desire exists, it is 'protected' by the fantasy versus reality aspect of the performance. By refusing to kiss, the performance denies a break in the fantasy of heterosexual desire on stage, where the audience can sustain disbelief of the drag performance as a male character, and not a female body, allowing the performance to continue to occupy a space in the context of heterosexuality, rather than within the scope of female–female desire. The actual observance of a kiss on stage could potentially 'break the spell', as audience members would be forced to remember that the performers are two women; therefore, this obscuring arguably allows the Revue to retain a form of chastity, innocence and purity that does not entirely threaten the status quo while simultaneously stimulating a form of non-normative desire.

In Japan, the dichotomy of female sexuality as either courtesan or wife/mother continues to regulate, constrain and censor expression of female sexualities. Yet, the Takarazuka Revue offers a liminal space in which young girls can retain their *shōjo* status, prolonging their girlhood before entering marriage and motherhood. The ability to perform in 'drag' and be viewed by a large fan base as 'male' on stage arguably provides Takarasiennes with greater understanding and experience of male privilege, independence and freedom – a sense of power otherwise limited by their social positions. Therefore, the Revue provides young girls/women with alternative aspirations to the Good Wife and Wise Mother proclamation so heavily embedded in Japanese society, allowing young girls/women to enjoy and seek alternative, more liberating lifestyles, albeit momentarily.

The 'drag' performances of the Takarazuka Revue highlight the tensions between upholding and subverting notions of gender and sexuality, simultaneously depicting a romanticized and idealized version of heterosexual relations whilst transgressing these portrayals through the embodiment of these representations by female actors. By mapping these gendered performances onto the female body, the drag both highlights the artifice of gender and complicates heterosexual desire, since the audience is predominantly women, which creates a

homosocial space at the heart of heterosexual cultural dynamics. The act of a kiss on stage marks the point at which fantasy meets reality, a moment in which heteronormativity is too explicitly threatened and must be controlled in some way. Subsequently, the act of turning away from the audience implies a restriction placed on this threat of eliciting same-sex desire. By positioning the Revue in the context of 'S' relationships, built on sameness and innocence, these 'drag' performances are coded as 'chaste and safe' (Shamoon, 2012: 47), shrouding any same-sex desire or lesbian subtext under the guise of sexual innocence and purity, whilst also, in many ways, providing security and protection for these narratives to find expression under the limitations enforced by the Violet Code.

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7

Camp Can Be Such a Drag: Approaches to Understanding Camp and Drag

Simon Dodi

Drag and camp are intimately related terms often used alongside one other. Both drag and camp describe a mode of performance, the performers themselves and the drag queen or camp comedian. At times, drag performers are camp, and some camp comics utilize drag aesthetics in their work. Drag and camp also have colloquial connotations within the language of Polari:[1] 'drag' identifies when clothing is worn of the 'opposite' sex and 'camp' describes an effeminate way of being (Baker, 2002).[2] The lineage of drag and camp as descriptors or modes of performance have tight-knit histories, and their uses or motivations ultimately depend on the author's vantage point.[3] I write from within the UK, where uses of camp have strong ties with a sense of Britishness and the subject of class, as opposed to its history in the United States, where the term is used to describe a style, taste or aesthetic. Both histories will be touched upon below, but this chapter starts with the question: why would we call a drag queen camp – or what is explicitly camp about the performance of drag? Trying to unpick how drag and camp are related or used is a complicated and convoluted issue.

In an attempt to answer the question, I offer four viewpoints on drag and camp. In each instance, what connects camp to drag is its position as a strategy: as a strategy employed for political activism (Meyer, 1994); a performance strategy of incongruity (Newton, 1972); a strategy to negotiate hostility or enact camaraderie (Houlbrook, 2005); or a theoretical lens to read performance (Freeman, 2010). Rather than offer one lengthy case study on the subject, this chapter proposes four vignettes that merge the fields of performance studies, queer history and queer theory – looking over the breadth of scholarship on camp to locate certain strategical impulses that connect it to the subject of drag. Overall, by dealing with various histories and historical sources on camp and drag, this chapter both brings together long-standing approaches and proposes new ones in locating the camp in drag performance.

Pop camp to queer parody

The subject of camp is complicated to engage in because of the complexities of its cultural situatedness and because it is a nationally determined concept. Broadly, the term camp is descriptive and used to describe low-ranking styles and tastes of popular culture when they are positioned against what have been determined as higher standards of style and taste in excessive juxtaposition. As opposed to the term kitsch, the use of camp relates to ironic placement or recognition used to parody hierarchical structure and it denotes an air of nonchalant pretentiousness towards such juxtaposition: the 'it's so bad it's good' mentality. Definitions of the term are ever changing, and Fabio Cleto notes, in the only reader on the subject, that camp 'draws its significance when, and as, culturally constructed [. . .] inscribed in the domain of the "aesthetic", the "ephemeral", and the "superfluous". As an indication of privilege, though, it presupposes the materiality of labour, social hierarchy and technology' (1999: 1–2).

Although camp has an alternative history and lineage aside from a theory of style and taste, this was its rise as a discourse of academic study and entry into the mainstream consciousness. Following this, understandings of camp are dependent upon social or cultural positioning: what attains the label camp in the United States might not be in the UK and, by extension, artefacts can become camp over time, and what was called camp in the past might not be so today. Nowhere is this cultural and historical friction identified more than in one of the first essays on the subject.

'Notes on "Camp"' by Susan Sontag (1964) is the first essay to discuss the subject of camp at length. It takes the form of bullet-point notes that are Sontag's personal and generalized remarks on camp. Initially, Sontag approaches camp as a sensibility that gives rise to a certain taste. She sees this as two-fold: first, identifying that one who exhibits the camp sensibility does so through a 'love of the unnatural; of artifice and exaggeration' (Sontag, 2009 [1966]: 275). Second, these exhibitionists see it as 'a private code, a badge of identity' (Sontag, 2009 [1966]: 275). For Sontag, the general outcome of camp sensibility 'converts the serious into the frivolous' (2009 [1966]: 276). Overall, objects of camp are low-brow, non-serious and out-dated forms and artefacts of popular culture. Most importantly, '[c]amp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical' (Sontag, 2009 [1966]: 277). Sontag offers insight about the historicity of the cultural object, text or person, and how they get subsumed into camp sensibility. However, 'Notes on "Camp"' lacks focus, and what follows after this insight is a series of comprehensive texts that provide wide-ranging examples of camp in popular culture that are tied to their historical specificity and thus demonstrate how camp is defined (and by whom) at that particular historical moment.

Andrew Ross's (1989) essay, 'Uses of Camp', unpicks Sontag's early musing and offers a potential methodology to locate the function of the camp sign. Ross studies film, art, music and celebrity culture from the 1960s onwards, when camp become a catch-all phrase. Fuelled by socio-economic changes, perceptions of value around art and culture shifted related to 'growing surplus value' (Ross, 1989: 137). As a result, style and taste became accessible to the common market, and this challenged previously rigid hierarchies of the consumer and art market. In an emerging commodity culture, 'camp can be seen as a *cultural economy* which challenged, and, in some cases, helped to overturn legitimate definitions of taste and sexuality' (Ross, 1989: 169).

In *Against Interpretation*, Sontag writes that 'Notes on "Camp"' became a 'quintessential text of that now mythic era known as the Sixties' (2009 [1966]: 308), alongside many other influential essays such as the 1965 'On Style' (Sontag, 2009 [1966]). Cleto notes that in the 1960s, camp 'literally exploded as a mass keyword, precisely because of its relevance to the contemporary cultural order' (1999: 46). As seen with Ross, the 1960s-consumer society is a period when economies of taste were challenged, and camp becomes the most useful term to describe this shift in perception. He defines 'the transitional function of camp as an *operation of taste*' (Ross, 1989: 136, emphasis in original). Understandings of camp continually shift and change as 'the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*' (Ross, 1989: 151, emphasis in original). However, what is missing from both Sontag and Ross are the specifically queer origins of the term, the person most often positioned in the middle of camp associations, and any political potential it may have.

Rather than queer, Sontag notes that 'homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – and most articulate audience – of Camp [. . .] hav[ing] pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense' (2009 [1966]: 290). Using 'homosexuals' is generalized, but it derives from the stereotype that only an elite few can identify cultural artefacts as camp.[4] However, she develops this position and says that '[c]amp taste is much more than homosexual taste', it is 'its metaphor of life as theatre [that] is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals' (Sontag, 2009 [1966]: 290–91). For Sontag, as a sensibility, camp critiques mainstream seriousness through comical and frivolous appraisals. Thus, 'being camp' subverts marginality by making light of such a position. 'Notes on "Camp"' is still a key article to ascertain ideas around the concept. At the time of writing this chapter, 'Notes on "Camp"' is the subject matter of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2019 spring exhibition 'Camp: Notes on Fashion', and as a result the theme for their infamous summer Gala. This exhibition uses Sontag's essay as a framework to examine how fashion

designers have engaged with irony, humour and incongruity. 'Notes on "Camp"' is ultimately a piece of criticism situated in a highly fragile time of shifting cultural value. Sontag does not speak about camp as a subject of performance or identify its proximity to the practice of drag. The Met's exhibition and their gala, like Sontag's essay, fail to highlight the specifically queer origins of the term or its political potential.

Reclaiming the discourse

Moe Meyer is the first performance studies scholar to address camp in 'Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp' (1994). Meyer theoretically and practically reclaims the term from the pop culture emphasis of style over content (Sontag, 1964) and argues that the theatrically camp 'activist strategy for organizations such as ACT UP and Queer Nation [. . .] is both political and critical' (Meyer, 1994: 1). He writes post-Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* and uses her early theory of gender performativity to describe a person who is being or doing camp. Meyer uses a drag queen as his case study. Meyer identifies camp's political potential; whether this be the body of a drag queen standing for a position of political power or the queer politics and use of camp publicity they use during campaigning.

In his essay, Meyer's claim is that any works previously identified as camp, which emerged from within the context of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality are noted to be pop cultural expressions of camp: pop camp (with a small 'c'). However, the work of ACT UP, Queer Nation and Joan Jett Blakk, a drag queen who ran for the mayor of Chicago in 1991 and used theatricality as a strategy for political activism, is Camp (with a large 'C'): 'a specifically queer cultural critique' (Meyer, 1994: 1). Blakk used the slogan 'putting the Camp into campaign' and performed 'highly theatrical shopping sprees' (Meyer, 1994: 7): theatricality usually associated with a depoliticized camp was the strategy of her campaign. In analysing this instance, and reviewing early literature on camp, Meyer unpicks the relationship between lived-experience, performance and queer politics to propose a reconceptualization of camp-as-strategy.

In the previous model, pioneered by Sontag and Ross, the use of camp is a sensibility, style and taste, viewed as an ironic destabilizing repetition of popular culture through intertextual manipulation of cultural texts and ideological conventions. In this respect, it is not a serious subject, it is apolitical. However, Meyer looks at the serious activism employed by a drag queen, who is an example of a camp/queer body, and the camp strategy employed to talk about something highly politicized. The body and

performance of the drag queen are used as a figurehead to draw attention to a queer political issue. Through using camp as a drag queen, Blakk not only calls into question the politics of gender identity, but also the hierarchies of legitimate speech acts. Most important to note here is that 'a drag queen for the office of mayor did not sit well with the powers that be' and Blakk was

> ignored by the gay press even though she attracted enough attention to elevate her to international Superqueer status. Assimilationist gays – many in editorial positions – were dismayed by Blakk's campaign strategy, one based on the practice of Camp. [. . .] Camp strategy was not serious work, and that the Queer Nation candidate would do damage to the gains made by so-called legitimate caucuses.
>
> Meyer, 1994: 6

Meyer's framework for reading camp as the strategy of queer parody aids in understanding what a drag performer might enact in their actions to be camp. It is also useful when considering the broader ideological complexities of camp, which go beyond identity politics and contain 'a critique of a more vast and comprehensive system of class-based practices of which sex/gender identity is only a part' (Meyer, 1994: 3). However, there is an issue with intentionality when parody is seen as a 'process, not as form' (Meyer, 1994: 10). If Camp, understood as queer parody, emerges through theatricality, this is an analysis that views people as actors in social situations and only works when reviewing staged events, such as political activism. As Medhurst critiques: 'Meyer is far more concerned with advancing a rigorous (i.e. inflexible) theoretical model of camp than with recognizing its contentious day-today ambivalences' (1997: 281). Meyer's essay is complex and there are blurry lines between the role of performance and identity politics; what it might mean to be camp from a first-person perspective. However, the use of a drag queen to reclaim camp (or Camp) to address queer politics is worthy to note. Camp performance should not be devalued and swamped in the category of cultural detritus. It is, at a deep level, something to be taken seriously.

'The Camp'

The second instance of drag and camp this chapter reviews is its position as a strategy in performance. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* is Esther Newton's (1972) ethnographic study of drag performers in the United States during the 1960s. Newton interweaves observations and interviews to

understand and document this world of performance and pageantry. Most interesting is a whole section dedicated to the role of 'The Camp' and its relationship and difference from that of the drag performer. There is a hazy distinction between when the drag performer (Newton also uses the term female impersonator) is separate from 'The Camp' and when the performer is employing camp as part of their act, or sociality. Newton writes that 'the drag queen and the camp are expressive performing roles, and both specialize in transformation. But the drag queen is concerned with masculine-feminine transformation, while the camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformation and incongruity' (1972: 104–105).

Newton's text is written in the same historical moment as Sontag's (1964) essay. Defined alongside the cultural phenomenon outlined above, 'The Camp' role in Newton's text builds on some of the problematic justifications around camp and its relationship with homosexuality. Part of this is due to the historical situation of Newton's research, where she conflates drag and homosexuality. However, Newton identifies that drag performers are a further subculture of homosexual circles, and 'The Camp' as a further division within this field.[5] For example, Newton says that 'the drag queen simply expresses [gender] incongruity whilst the camp actually uses it to achieve a higher synthesis' (1972: 105). Also, Newton notes the recurrent characteristics of 'The Camp' to be '*incongruity, theatricality*, and *humor*. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality, its style, and humor its strategy' (1972: 106, emphasis in original).

The drag performers interviewed by Newton are quick to note Sontag's misreading of the queer sensibility at the heart of camp as a sensibility and, in doing so, how Sontag erased a rich history of the term. For the drag performers of Newton's study, camp is more than a sensibility, it is a facet of their identity and a mode of being both in and out of performance. As a role in performance that mirrors the lived-experience of being an effeminate homosexual: 'The camp is a homosexual wit and clown; his campy productions and performances are a continuous creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and, in the process, defining a positive homosexual identity' (Newton, 1972: 110). *Being* camp is a way to react to the situation where the connotations of sexuality are immutably tied to public perception. Newton writes: 'The camp accepts his role as a homosexual and flaunts his homosexuality. He makes the other homosexuals laugh; he makes life a little brighter for them. And he builds a bridge to the straight people by getting them to laugh with him' (1972: 110).

However, one performer develops a more realistic understanding of the term:

> 'to camp' actually means 'to sit in front of a group of people' . . . not on-stage, but you *can* camp on-stage . . . I think that I do that when I talk to the audience. I think I'm camping with 'em. But a 'camp' herself is a queen who sits and starts entertaining a group of people at a bar around her. They all start listening to what she's got to say. And she says campy things. Oh, somebody smarts off at her and she give 'em a very flip answer. A camp is a flip person who has declared emotional freedom. She is going to say to the world, 'I'm queer.' Although she may not do this all the time, but most of the time a camp queen will. She'll walk down the street and she'll see you and say, 'Hi, Mary, how are you?' right in the busiest part of town . . . she'll actually camp, right there.
>
> Interview in Newton, 1972: 110

As well as being a role in performance for the drag queen, Newton's research identifies that being camp is a way to enact camaraderie with other 'queens' through positive or negative mutual effeminate identifications. As the performer interviewed explains: 'A camp queen's got to think faster than other queens. *This* makes her camp. She's got to have an answer to anything that's put it her' (interview in Newton, 1972: 110). There is an interesting parallel found in Newton's research of the 1970s with the next historical example of drag and camp. For the performers interviewed by Newton, camp functions as a strategy to negotiate the audience/performer relationship as well as the self-proclamation of queer identity. However, in the next instance, being camp is a strategy to negotiate certain hostilities quotidian forms of effeminacy might bring.

London quean

This chapter shifts further back in time for the next example, but this time uncovers another historical illustration of how drag and camp have a closely related history in London, between 1918 and 1957, the inter-war period. Through extensive archival research, Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London* (2005) locates the recognition of camp as a strategy employed by those who identified as a London drag *quean*: an effeminate working-class man. Archival evidence indicates a tactical function to understanding camp, like the paradigmatic examples offered by Newton. Houlbrook's use of the term 'queer' is different from Meyer's post-Butlerlian use of queer. In inter-war London,

> queer signified men's difference from what was considered 'normal.' This difference was, in part, located in their sexual or emotional attraction

> to – and encounters with – other men. Yet it could also encompass differences in behaviour and appearance. Queer, in this sense, could be a mode of self-understanding, a set of cultural practices, and a way of being. Its meanings were, moreover, never self-evident, stable, or singular. Within broader categories of class, race, gender, age, and place [. . .] understandings of sexual difference were multiple and contested.
>
> Houlbrook, 2005: 6–7

Most important to note for the case study of the drag *quean* is class and gender. The London quean was identified as 'queer' against inter-war perceptions of working-class masculinity. The quean was 'a flamboyant and striking figure [. . .] the very embodiment of sexual difference' (Houlbrook, 2005: 7). Like the drag queen performer, the London quean used cosmetics, makeup, perfume, and feminine articles of clothing to mark 'the gendered opposition between quean and man, feminine and masculine' visually disrupting the 'distinction between men and women' (Houlbrook, 2005: 141). However, unlike the performing queen, the practices of the London quean were 'emblematic of hegemonic notions of sexual difference [. . .] drag in public was simply too dangerous' and so its everyday appeal was limited. Also, 'queans saw themselves as womanlike, not as women' (Houlbrook, 2005: 145).[6]

There is a distinction Houlbrook makes here, which is one that Newton missed. Newton recognizes a complex difference between the 'street queens' and 'professional queens' – those who utilize their 'deviance' for an established profession. 'For if drag is work or a profession, a man might take some pride in doing it well; if it is work, it is not home, it is not where a man "lives" in the deepest sense; if it is work, a man could always quit' (Newton, 1972: 18), as opposed to the 'Street fairies [who] have nothing to lose' (Newton, 1972: 19). There are parallels between the labour/leisure dynamic of the professional/street queen found in Houlbrook's account of the working-class London quean. He notes that,

> labelling someone a quean – or identifying as such – was thus not who a man had sex with but his gendered character. [. . .] Rather than sexual practice, terms like 'pansy,' 'Nancy-boy,' 'cissy' and 'Poof' denoted particular gendered patterns of appearance and behaviour. They were, in the first instance, used to describe those who failed to do what was expected of a man at work, on the streets, or at play.
>
> Houlbrook, 2005: 143

The London quean 'fail[ed] to meet tacit standards of toughness' required for working-class masculinity (Houlbrook, 2005: 143) and thus, became 'an easy

target for the jokes, catcalls, and rough treatment through which "normal" workingmen enacted their masculinity' (Houlbrook, 2005: 160).

Ultimately, being camp was a way to negotiate the lived experience and hostility of being a working-class effeminate male. There was a tactical depth to understanding the historical function of camp, as it 'mediated across [. . .] the resources *both* to assert a visible queer presence *and* negotiate the dangers' (Houlbrook, 2005: 151–52 [italics in original]). One of Houlbrook's case studies, Alex Purdie, described camp as his safeguard and a way to react against negative attention his effeminacy might receive.

> I don't wait for other people to lift me because I know they're going to sooner or later . . . In a pub you get the [kiss sound] and all this lark . . . So I lift myself first. They stand no chance cos I'm a star. And I won't have it any other way . . . You've got to be the first in . . . be aggressive . . . get up the front. Give them a mouthful.
>
> Purdie in Houlbrook, 2005: 150

Camp employed like this was a way of identifying oneself to other queers, many queans described camp as a way to enact camaraderie, or 'Camp love' (Houlbrook, 2005: 149), and described the use of ironic female pronouns, general bitchiness and coded ways of being evidenced in the language of Polari.

> We always said Girl at the end of a sentence . . . You'd say something like 'you all right girl' or 'fancy a drink girl' . . .'ooh will you just vada the bona filiomi ajax' . . . It was all camp and rather silly. [Trans. Ooh will you just look at the good looking young man nearby/over there.]
>
> May in Houlbrook, 2005: 152

This chapter does not attempt to claim that what Newton's drag performers were doing in 1960s America was wholly like the London queans of the inter-war period. It merely brings together two examples from history to acknowledge the transnational and transhistorical connections and similarities between drag and camp. In both examples, the drag queen/quean understands the function of camp to enact coded amity towards another effeminate man through a theatrically heighten subjectivity; to hold defence against danger or enact positivity towards a prosaic sense of queerness.

Temporal drag/camp

The final viewpoint on drag and camp looks at camp as a theoretical strategy to be employed by reading drag performance. This section considers what

symbolic layers are happening in a lip-synch performance of a drag queen; as the body on stage is mouthing the words of another, and in doing so, making a connection to the absent one they are embodying. This chapter turns to queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman's ideas on temporal drag to identify a methodology that allows a way to think about remnants of queerness in the past and then how they might be used purposefully in the present.

Freeman develops Judith Butler's (1990) early ideas in *Gender Trouble* and examines how the body can enact an anachronism through the repetition of gendered bodily markers. She critiques Butler's early theory on gender performativity as this 'disregards citations of the past that [. . .] signal the presence of life lived otherwise than in the present' (Freeman, 2010: 63). In Freeman's concept, the term 'drag' is two-fold. First, 'with all the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present' (Freeman, 2010: 62). This 'drag' signals a weighty gravitational pull that an identity position has in being a 'stubborn identification with a set of coordinates that exceed one's own historical moment' (Freeman in Halberstam, 2005: 179). Second, the burdensome 'drag' that essentialist representations, or performances of gender identity, sometimes exert on queer and post-modern notions of gender fluidity. When reviewing the three instances of camp and drag in this chapter, the connection between these is the use of the term 'queer': whether as a historical sign for something resistant to the norm or as a contemporary term to reclaim negativity and used as a strategy. Considering camp as temporal drag 'allows us access to a counter history itself – an antisystematic method that informs other, much later artistic productions travelling more under the sign of queer' (Freeman, 2010: 95).

Freeman's theory is useful to explore what happens in the lip-synch performance of a drag queen. Now an archetype of queer performance, the lip-synch demonstrates a moment of temporal porosity. As Halberstam writes, 'queer performance [and the lip-synch as an example of this] points the way to an immensely subtle and complex understanding of the relations between the "now" of performance and the "then" of historical time' (Halberstam, 2005: 180). Similarly, Stephen Farrier writes on the power of the lip-synch to 'call to a place outside the immediate temporal world of the act, whilst an audience is also connected to the immediate world through history and geographic specificity' (Farrier, 2017: 196). There is a moment of shared subjectivity happening in such a performance as the body of the drag queen becomes a place holder to exist beyond the stage, to encounter this not only across space and location but also across time.

Rather than develop the idea of temporal porosity that a lip-synch demonstrates, here I read such work as a *palimpsest* of popular culture, history and subjectivity.[7] The performance work might be enacting a

performative moment when time and space merge. However, this work is visually and aurally layered as the performer mouths the words of another. To think of this image as palimpsest is to engage with performers re-writing the historical 'text' through the body; but, as an audience member, we see the previous layers of history.[8] To return to Freeman for such a consideration, she writes: 'Camp performance [. . .] might be seen as a kind of historicist *jouissance*, a *frisson* of dead bodies on live ones, fading constructs on emergent ones. Or, what Annamarie Jagose has called "the figure of 'history' – its energizing of the very tropes of before and after"' (Freeman, 2010: 120 [italics as in original]).

There are different layers and levels of visual and intertextual recognition happening in a lip-synch performance to render it camp, like the intertextual manipulation spoken of by Sontag and Ross. In a lip-synch performance, there is parody, irony, comedy, but also something political. Understanding the reference points a drag performer makes, or the chosen texts used to lip-synch, depends on the viewer's vantage point, or subject positioning. From a queer-subject positioning, the lip-synch, and understanding camp references or nuances, is another addition that connects towards this shared sense of subjectivity and even historical belonging.

To conclude, it is curious to note the connective threads or reoccurrences central to ideas made throughout considerations of camp. I started with the question: why would we call a drag queen camp – or what is explicitly camp about the performance of drag – and proposed four vignettes as micro case studies, rooted in historical critical sources, to bring together some of the breadth of scholarship and research on the subject of camp and drag performance. The relationship between work and leisure arises throughout each example. On a surface level, the camp of a drag queen is exposed through makeup and costume or in the energies between the performers and the audience; however, behind such theatricality is the labour of a working artist. Although understandings of camp are historically contingent, they are all connected by a strategic impulse. Using Freeman's ideas, and the proposition of the palimpsest, allows a way to theorize the layers of artistry and history happening when such work is defined as camp.

Notes

1 Polari was a secret language taken up by some gay men in the UK during the twentieth century. It was used to communicate safely without outsiders understanding. Polari also has ties to theatrical and entertainment circles. See Baker (2002) for more on Polari.

2 **camp** /kæmp/ *adjective*: flamboyantly effeminate, original, amusing, homosexual, affected. Originally used at the beginning of the twentieth century. Possibly derived from the acronym *KAMP:* 'Known As Male Prostitute' (Baker, 2002: 168); **drag** /dræg/ *noun*: 1 any type of clothing; 2 women's clothing when used by a man, or vice versa. Used in the nineteenth century to refer to a party or dance attended by men wearing feminine attire (Baker, 2002: 173).
3 This chapter cannot cover a comprehensive account of drag and camp and further scholarship needs to include women and camp; race and camp; drag kings and camp; however, please see Cleto (1999) as a starting point for further reading.
4 Sontag's essay is dedicated to Oscar Wilde and various Wilde quotes are incorporated throughout her writing. This demonstrates that the learned homosexual Sontag refers to is somewhat a bastion of the 'Wildean queen'. See Alan Sinfield (1994) for further reading on how the image of Wilde (and the publicity of his court trails) fed the public imagination a 'disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisured idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism' (Sinfield, 1994: 118).
5 In 'Notes to the Reader' Newton (1972) clarifies that '[i]n the mid-sixites, "camp" was an in-group word which denoted specifically homosexual humor [. . .]. The most highly esteemed female impersonators were all "camps," virtuso verbal clowns'.
6 The social markers of effeminacy coalesced with homosexual activities that were illegal at the time. See Houlbrook (2005) for a comprehensive account of historical queer experiences in London between 1918 and 1957.
7 Palimpsest comes from the Ancient Greek palímpsēstos, which means 'again scraped' or 'scraped clean to be used again'. A palimpsest is a writing surface that has been erased or re-used for new writing and traces of the original text become part of the new one in the process.
8 I am inspired by Lynn Sally who conducts a similar reading of the female body in burlesque. Sally argues that the 'explicit female body serves as a palimpsest whereby traces of historic renderings of the body remain, but the burlesque performer is able to "rewrite" her own image on top of those remnants' (Sally, 2017: 168).

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8

Vonni Diva: Showgirl

Rosslyn Prosser

The city of Adelaide, South Australia, has a population of 1.7 million, an annual LGBTIQ Festival, *Feast*, and is home to several well-known venues such as The Mars Bar (now closed), Colonel Light Hotel, Edinburgh Castle Hotel, Garage Bar and Mary's Poppin, each hosting showgirl and drag performers with a wide range of styles and experience. At the opening night of *Feast* in Adelaide in 2015, the performer Conchita Wurst gave her first Australian performance.[1] At this event Australian drag artists attempted to set a Guinness World Record for the largest number of drag queens on stage. Conchita was accompanied by transgender performer, Vonni, whose story is partially told in this chapter.

Vonni's professional experience of showgirl performance brings to the narrative of drag a particular history and life story. With a national and international background in *Les Girls* cabaret show,[2] Vonni's own showgirl performance style and mentoring activities for younger drag performers represent an overlap between showgirl and drag performance.

Now in her late sixties, Vonni's life story is set against the background of growing up in Adelaide's northern suburb, Elizabeth. Home to many migrants from the United Kingdom, the suburb was renowned for being poor and working-class (Peel, 1995). Growing up in the working-class suburb of Elizabeth was 'as rough as arseholes in the 70s, not the kind of tree lined place it is today, I tended not to do that – (being trans) in Elizabeth, if I was being chased by a mob I know how to jump start a car or break into the car and just go' (Prosser, 2016).

A well-respected figure in the Adelaide LGBTIQ community, Vonni has been performing for over fifty years in a range of capacities: as a stripper, a performer in *Les Girls* cabaret and as organizer and compere of live drag shows. In her performances Vonni makes routine reference to her transgender surgery, sex life and class background through a form of derogatory humour that draws attention to these parts of her life. In so doing she confronts transgender stereotypes. Having one of the first gender re-assignment surgeries in Australia, Vonni was invited to speak on an Australian

television show *A Current Affair* in the 1970s, where she made the following comment:

> I don't consider myself a woman at all, I'm not a woman, I don't pretend to be a woman, I am just myself, I didn't have my operation done for the public, I had it done for myself, peace of mind, I just am what I am, I work during the day as a female, I work at night in an all-male revue, I can do both, I strip as a female in a number of places around the Cross, and out in the suburbs, I'm not trying to be a woman, I'm not stating that I aim to be a woman or ever will be, I'm just myself, I'm an individual, the same as what a lot of other individuals are around.
>
> Willessee n.d.

In the interview with journalist Mike Willessee, Vonni talks about the historical period of the 1970s and ways of talking about drag and transgender or as it is called in the interview 'transsexualism'. Never afraid to speak her mind in a very straightforward manner, and always polite, the idea of the individual rather than that of a collective choice is posited. At the same time Vonni was deeply embedded in a community of people who have taken up the opportunity afforded by medical technology of the 1970s, which in part enabled medical transition to affirm transgender identities. Through Vonni's life story it is possible to see how to live as a transgender person and, rather than only ever asking psychological or sociological questions, to tell the story of a life lived to the full, with an understanding of who one is and how one is viewed. The shifts and changes in attitudes are significant from the 1970s to the present, however transgender people still face fierce and often violent discrimination.

Following an invitation from Carlotta, Australia's most recognized transgender performer, Vonni became part of Melbourne's *Les Girls All Male Review* touring show. In 1978 she joined the original Sammy Lee *Les Girls* at Kings Cross, an all-male revue. Known for its spectacular shows choreographed by Sheila Cruze, dancers performed to the music of James Last and Daly Wilson Big Band, among others (Prosser, 2016). Vonni left *Les Girls* in 1986 and began pursuing an international career, touring throughout the South Pacific with her agent Vicki Power. On her return to Adelaide in 1996, she began staging her own shows at the Edinburgh Castle and Old Queen's Arms hotels. In 2005 she performed at the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival with her friends Fifi and Rochelle, significant named regulars of Adelaide's Mars Bar.

The overlapping histories of older showgirls and younger drag queens are seen in costumes and performance styles. While drag queens are visually

striking, notwithstanding that most if not all are gay men, costumes are often outlandish and extreme: high stiletto heels, unique and individual costumes, wigs, sequins and the special art of emphasis are embodied in drag costume. The showgirl is often transgender, 'well-dressed and a lady' (Deen, 2017).

From beginning her performance career in Adelaide in the 1960s as a stripper and showgirl, Vonni now manages her own drag events. Cross-dressing and female impersonation or drag has long been a tradition in the gay community, with amateur theatrical groups providing a safe haven for generations of camp men and women (Bollen, 2008, 2010). Vonni's transgender identity is significant to the idea of showgirls, as many of the performers in *Les Girls* were transitioning or had transitioned. This outward performance of transgender is not found in all drag. This marks the difference between Vonni and the drag performers; however, throughout Adelaide venues a range of gender and sex identities can be found. While diverse gender and sexual identities are currently more visible, with a more open discussion occurring in the media and in society, to be transgender is still outside of societal norms and expectations. In this situation, Vonni and the group of performers in Adelaide survive and function at a local, interstate and international level by knowing each other as friends with long-held and strong connections. Vonni lends or gifts her costumes, and a culture of calling on favours exists through connections and business contacts in the community. This forms a large part of the community's intertwined lives, a significant element in the world of drag and showgirl performance. This, though, is always hard won and not to be assumed (Prosser, 2016).

At the Colonel Light Hotel, *Vonni's Big Arvo* with Vonni as host and MC featured performances by drag queens, and was sometimes themed while at other times competition based. Most drag shows Vonni performs in utilize comedy routines and comedic banter between acts, which can be crude and laced with sexual innuendo. The jokes are often vagina centred, including transgender vaginas, and mostly reference sexual activity. While pubs and clubs are often intimate or smaller venues, *Les Girls* or other big cabaret performance shows were presented in large clubs and venues and touring shows in town halls or clubs.

At the opening of Vonni's *Big Arvo* at The Colonel Light Hotel in 2012, the Mayor of Adelaide, Stephen Yarwood, said: 'I've always wanted to say this and I think I can say it in this company "How the fuck are you?"' Why did the Mayor of Adelaide think it was okay to say this in the company of queer people? At the time I found it quite shocking. Clearly the Mayor was feeling uplifted by the energy and the sight of drag queens and others. He obviously felt that this audience would accept an expletive. For this venue opening, Vonni wore a gown and a pink crystallized organza coat, both designed

and made by Jullianne Deen, a significant showgirl and performer who for over thirty years has designed and made Vonni's costumes. This enduring partnership with Jullianne began in Melbourne during *Les Girls*' touring days.

As *Vonni's Big Arvo* became established, themed shows were developed, rehearsed and performed over two to three weeks alongside open mic nights, Miss Drag South Australia and other events that punctuated the calendar. At the centre of this activity is Vonni, whose offstage and onstage presence is marked by humour, hospitality and generosity. Her well-honed dance performances draw on classic cabaret and showgirl routines. These routines are marked by glamour, through costume and movement. Vonni calls herself a transgender showgirl, distinguishing herself from the drag queens she hosts and performs with at her regular shows across Adelaide. Showgirl performance relies on dance moves and gestures, and this unique cross-over of showgirl performance into drag comes about through particular circumstances and demonstrates a set of historical conditions that often lead back to stories of *Les Girls*, first in Adelaide, then Sydney and Melbourne, and touring. The shows feature a range of representations of real-life performers from Shirley Bassey to Lady Gaga, anthemic songs such as Gloria Gaynor's 'I Am What I Am' to Alison Jiear's 'I Just Wanna Fuckin' Dance'.

One of the main elements of showgirl performance is the choreographed group performance; this has carried over into what is now known as drag. The show *X*, performed at Colonel Light Hotel is a demonstration of the cross-over styles of showgirl and drag. The show featured a number of songs with matching outfits for the performers, dance routines echoing showgirl performances with Vonni, and performers Malt Biscuit, Mel Burn and Oktavia lip-synching and dancing to 'I Just Wanna Dance', Alison Jiear's 'Sex Horny Motiv-8 Mix Show' featuring the Sleaze Sisters with Vicki Shephard, 'I Am A Good Girl' by Christina Aguilera and 'The Penis Song' from the film *The Sweetest Thing* (2002).

The opening song 'I Just Wanna Dance' has become anthemic in its use at a range of queer festivals, with videos of Alison Jiear[3] performing at London Pride on YouTube. This signals the place of dance and song in a history of queer cultures where nightclubs, gay dances, rave parties and sleaze balls are significant sites for queer community. As a lead-in to 'Sex Horny Motiv-8 Mix Show' featuring the Sleaze Sisters with Vicki Shephard, performers wore red lurex 'X's over a burlesque outfit and ended the song with the word 'Sex' emphasized vocally. Segueing to Vonni stripping to Christina Aguilera's 'I Am A Good Girl', the show develops and extends the meanings found in the original song presentation. Vonni worked as a stripper and showgirl before her current career as manager, MC and performer in drag

shows. While she copies some of the moves in the Aguilera music video, she strips completely in her own performance. The lip-synching of these songs relies on the familiarity and cultural knowledge of the audience. A traditional strip instrumental is usually deployed in the lead-in, signalling the show to come. Vonni's lip-synching is practised and well honed over many years, demonstrating an accomplished believability, signalling her showgirl training in *Les Girls*. The signs of poor performance in drag are often commented on by audiences; these include the performer's inability to lip-synch, the forgetting of the words making the failure of lip-synching obvious or being out of time with the soundtrack. Vonni stated that it is 'like most other aspects of drag with the use of over-emphasis and exaggeration' that works towards believability (Prosser, 2016). It is the sum of the parts with costume, dance, gesture and emphasis constituting a coherent and seamless performance.

'The Penis Song', from the film *The Sweetest Thing* (2002), performed in the *X* show produces new meanings through the exquisite rendering of the idea of the penis as something hidden from view in the illusion of drag, yet always present in the understanding of most drag being presented by men. On stage and as MC, Vonni regularly makes reference to her transgender body, her surgery and her sex life. This outward performance of transgender is not found in all drag performances. The use of 'The Penis Song' as an audio text without vocal sound from the performers produces playful erotics; the lyric 'You're too big to fit in here' (ibid.) presents a new meaning activated for and by a predominantly queer audience. In the film version the song is coded for heterosexuality and features three women exchanging views on the size and shape of a penis as an ironic flattery of men. The inclusion of two male voices in the film is replayed as male voice-overs in the drag queen performance, shifting the meaning again. It is unusual to see drag queens performing to a male voice; in the short burst of male voice in the drag performance of this song the believability is challenged. It is, however, acceptable as the audience knows that these are men performing drag. Where the film used objects such as a glass or a vase of flowers, performers use a dildo as a prop, thus reconnecting the audience through a familiarity with the dildo as a direct indication of sexuality rather than a euphemistic sign. The type of drag performance seen in *X* relies on training in showgirl choreographies, gestures, dance routines, lip-synching, costume and bodily performance. These aspects of performance are not only spectacle and entertainment, they are also the physical enactment of the development of a drag identity.

The prevalence of physical and online sales of drag costume and associated accessories represents a shift in the culture of showgirl and drag, with

costumes previously made for the performer or leant in informal exchange between performers. The showgirl as it is seen in the Australian context comes from a tradition of *Les Girls* cabaret shows and the influence of Sheila Cruze, who 'relayed the glamour choreography of theatrical revue onto the floor shows of Sydney's nightclubs for more than twenty years. Like Tuppy Downs at the Lido, Cruze had been a dancer on the variety circuit at an early age' (Bollen, 2013: 63).

Showgirl presentation is about glamour, style, costume, accessories, wigs, shoes, makeup, feather boas, large feathered head-dresses and other accoutrements that go in to the construction and making of a particular type of performer. The showgirl performance era was one of big choreographed shows. The choreographer Sheila Cruze was celebrated for her technique. Cruze was especially admired for the gender knowledge embodied in her choreography: 'she had the knack of teaching boys how to actually move like girls' and 'how to walk properly in high heels, it was all in the way you held yourself on stage, your leg positions, all the little hand movements' (Bollen, 2011).

Choreographers carried the Tivoli theatre traditions of variety performance and showgirl revues into night clubs in Sydney as well. 'Sheila Cruze – who had worked on Harry Wren's variety shows in the 1950s was ballet mistress at Sydney's Chequers nightclub in the 1960s and also choreographed the *Les Girls* drag kings [*sic*: I think Bollen means queens not kings] at Kings Cross' (ibid.). Vonni's stories of Sheila Cruze's influence on Australian showgirl and drag performance echo those of Carlotta, an original member of *Les Girls* (Carlotta and Cockington, 1994). The movements and gestures of Judy Garland, Donna Summer, Dusty Springfield, Shirley Bassey, Greta Garbo, Cher, Madonna and Kate Bush are also significant to drag performance and are passed from performer to performer informally and formally.

The showgirl performer exists now in a continuum with the world of drag where the ubiquitous nature of the internet and the instruction in drag through reality TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* have made ideas about drag more accessible and readily available. The internet and the recording of make-up tutorials and dance routines on YouTube also have an impact on younger performers. The showgirl performance style produced in another era works within this and holds on to the identity of the showgirl. This may be due to the age of the showgirl, mostly over 60, whose training and knowledge of music styles from another era continue to be present in their performances. Importantly many of the showgirls are transgender, with drag queens predominantly gay men. Drag performance is a significant part of LGBTIQ festivals that moves it out of the space of bars and clubs into more

mainstream and accessible sites. The audience for these is often composed of many who identify outside LGBT and who are now more likely to venture into these events as they are part of a festival (Markwell and Waitt, 2009).

Before I started this research I held stereotypes and beliefs about men (particularly men in drag), and transgender men and women, but I have radically shifted my perspective in part because of the time spent with Vonni interviewing, documenting and attending drag shows and through attempting to educate myself in order to understand my own responses. In 2016 this relationship and my own interest in costume culminated in the curation of an exhibition of Vonni's costumes. The exhibition provided a way to include a transgender woman's story in the normally heteronormative and mainstream South Australian History Festival and featured performance costumes worn by Vonni. The costumes feature sequins and beads, feather boas, jewelled headdresses and colourful fabrics. These all speak to the tradition of showgirl performance and demonstrate the material relations of these aspects of performance that mark out showgirl and drag costume as part of performance histories different from mainstream performance histories. This was evident in an in-conversation event, 'On Glitz and Glam',

Figure 8.1 Vonni at South Australian History Festival, photo Rosslyn Prosser.

that took place at the Migration Museum, Adelaide, on 28 May 2016. The discussion moved from being between Vonni and myself to a spontaneous and well-received inclusion of Jullianne Deen, whose handmade costumes featured in the exhibition. This impromptu discussion provided detail about the stories of the costumes, from both the maker and the wearer. Anecdotes were exchanged between Vonni and Jullianne about some of the costumes and the many hours spent making them. Jullianne's innovative use of fabrics and materials demonstrates extraordinary crafting in the art of costume making. Costumes can be read as part of a wider framework of thinking about material and material culture, however drag costume produces a set of meanings that circulate both through and within drag and non-drag culture, set to a background of pre-existent prejudices and attitudes. The important place of the costume, often called the gown in showgirl drag contexts, is enabled through discussions of the object and related ephemera. In his important work about clothing, Peter Stallybrass states: 'material . . . is richly absorbent of symbolic meaning, and in which memories and social relations are literally embedded' (1993: 15).

The costumes on display, designed and produced by Deen over a thirty-year period, enabled discussion about the process of design and collaboration that highlighted the specific cultural and social conditions underpinning experiences of showgirl and drag performance. This included commentary about making do and being inventive in costume making. Vonni finds inspiration in Barbie's high fashion designs and these are handmade by Deen – for instance, a costume made with gold lame, a diamante encrusted bodice and hoops made from hula hoops was inspired by Madame du Barbie doll (based on a gown designed for Barbie by Bob Mackie[4]). Working from ideas brought to her by Vonni, Jullianne crafts each item, often coming up with solutions to difficult structural issues. The costumes on display were a small selection of Vonni's vast collection amassed over her long career. From the elaborate showgirl style of the 1970s *Les Girls* era,[5] to looks inspired by 1980s glam and pop culture and Barbie doll couture (Vonni is a passionate collector of the iconic Barbie doll), Vonni has taken inspiration from the fashionista's fabulous wardrobe, using Julianne's expertise to transform Barbie's style into Vonni's own, the costumes reflecting the changing influences and fashions in drag performance.

Part of the entertainment industry in Australia for many years, Vonni has developed strong connections, professional relationships and lasting friendships within the LGBTIQ and drag performance communities. The exhibition presented an opportunity to think through the intricate networks that exist from person to person and city to city. It developed a way of expressing that the costumes and material objects of Vonni's life are not only

a story about one showgirl but stories about the strongly held connections within a particular group of performers and audiences. Importantly, the exhibition highlighted the significance of Vonni to the cultural life of Adelaide and other national and international communities and moved the costumes and their wearer into a different setting, enabling a different story to surface.

Costumes are an important way into storytelling and the documenting of memory. Each costume has a story of who made it, where and when it was made, or where it was bought. Details emerge in the stories of what shows have been performed in each costume, who else was in the show or shows, and where the shows were held, in what year and in what venue. Documenting stories that relate to costumes can cover a wide range of material that involves the life of the wearer and their many lived connections. It is possible through costume to tell the history and story of Vonni and the drag performance scene in which she works. Stallybrass suggests that: 'A network of cloth can trace the connections of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value' (Stallybrass, 1993: 15). The costumes in the exhibition carried the absent body of Vonni; indeed, in the images where Vonni stands next to a mannequin in costume, it is hard to distinguish Vonni from the mannequins. Audiences in the exhibition are able to look closely at the costumes, something that cannot be done in the performance site. In the performance venue so much else is happening that focus on the costume is difficult. Music, lights, lip-synching in many cases, audience behaviour and interactions interfere with looking closely at the costumes. The costumes provide a visual and material documentation of the many years that Vonni has spent performing and present through their changing styles an appreciation of the artform of costume.

Entering into the realm of observation and asking for permission to study, to interview, to photograph was not the minefield of power dynamics that I was told would exist. The dominant cultural stereotype of bitchy drag queens is part of the performance of drag and is used as humour that utilizes sexualized jokes and innuendo. These present a kind of reverse discourse that confronts and tears at the fabric of normative heterosexuality. The drag queen as performer is generally a man; the illusion and pleasure produced in watching the performance of a man in heels is not the same as the reveal when only a wig was removed, rarely seen now in drag performance and once done as a way to break the illusion and protect the performers from later unwanted advances, audience members believing fully that they were watching women (Prosser, 2016).

An important element within both drag and showgirl communities is the sharing of advice about performance technique, incorporating makeup, hair,

gesture and wardrobe. Over her long career, Vonni has been guided by a number of mentors who have become close friends and she continues this tradition, as a mentor to others. Vonni cites the showgirls Carlotta and Debra La Gae as two of the significant mentors in her life. Early in her career Vonni's close friend Debra La Gae helped her the most. Over the years they have given each other costumes. In 2010 Debra finished her performing career and gifted the fabric to Vonni. Showgirl costumes are costly to make and treasured by their owners. It is rare for these costumes to be lent or gifted. When this does occur, it is often as an expression of thanks or as a gesture of friendship. Showgirls endure in their friendships and this too is part of the overlap to drag cultures.

Notes

1 See Russell (2015).
2 SeeNette (2015).
3 Alison Jiear YouTube links: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOuX95yyLcc (accessed August 2019) as a remix for London Pride and Winter Pride 2016 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RikHcgSJmc0 (accessed August 2019).
4 See: The Barbie Collection. Available at: http://www.thebarbiecollection.com/bob-mackie/bob-mackie-madame-du-barbie-doll-17934 (accessed February 2018).
5 SeeWindsor (2018).

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9

'FagHag Drag': Penny Arcade's Archive of Otherness

Joseph Mercier with Penny Arcade

Introduction

This chapter was born out of an insistence that any consideration of drag histories and discourses should include an entry about the life and work of the legendary performance artist Penny Arcade, aka Susana Ventura. Although Arcade is not a drag artist per se, she does have a long, multifaceted historical relationship to drag cultures. What's more, her work can be usefully read through a prism of drag as a political and performance methodology. This methodology I suggest as an assemblage of identificatory materials and processes: 'FagHag Drag'. This chapter traces some of her intersecting relationships with gay men (Fag), her experiences of misogynistic exclusion and disqualification (Hag), and her interaction with various drag subcultures (Drag). I frame these processes with Jose Muñoz's (1999) notion of disidentification, which describes a composite approach to selfhood undertaken by many minoritarian subjects, as well as Heather Love's (2007) exploration of locating political subjectivity from a position of damaged or refused agency. I argue that Arcade's 'FagHag Drag' might usefully be described as an archive of queer experiences, histories and identities, an archive of otherness: a political otherness, a hybrid otherness, and otherness that Arcade wears in the way a drag queen wears makeup and heels.

This chapter has been constructed as a conversation between two voices and written simultaneously as an analysis of Penny Arcade's work – Mercier's contribution – and also as a personal, historical narrative – Arcade's contribution. Arcade's performance work is predominantly fuelled by autobiographical experiences, and so her performance practice and her approach to being in the world are intrinsically connected. Because of this, the chapter seeks to cultivate multiple entry points. Intertwined with my prose – in which I also draw on excerpts from her shows and past interviews – is Arcade's own narration of her personal, rhizomatic history in relation to drag cultures: as a performer, as a participant, as a witness, as a commentator,

as a critic and as a friend. Arcade's writing, which was written specifically for this chapter, appears in italics throughout.

I would say that drag is part of my artistic and cultural orientation. When I was young, there were three kinds of drag. First, drag which sought to pass in the heterosexual world – i.e. either for the sake of passing in everyday life or male prostitutes who used drag as part of their business. The second was the kind of drag that entertained – i.e. professional cross-dressers. And the third kind were at the bottom of the social barrel: those who dressed in drag because they felt like it, because it reflected or expressed part of their personality or nature, and these were the people I found myself with. These were who I resonated with and with these people there was an aspect of drag as performance not limited to the stage, nor were they trying to pass as biological women.

With the exception of Jackie Curtis, who informed me as a performer and my early performance style – which I outgrew by age 20 – I was not influenced by drag 'performers' as such. Not as much as I was by people who used drag as a provocative gesture outside of performance and entertainment. People like Dame Margo Howard Howard, Frances Francine, Candy Darling, Bunny Eisenhower and Marsha P. Johnson. These were originators and their stage was the world and they played for real and they played for keeps.

Dragging towards truth telling

I would like to start with a simple proposition: that Penny Arcade is the drag persona of Susana Ventura – her 'real' name. What's more, the distinction between Ventura/Arcade has been usefully collapsed; the drag persona has displaced the 'original', just as the onstage persona is indistinguishable from herself offstage. It is this performative collapse between 'the actor' (Susana Ventura) and the 'drag character' (Penny Arcade) in which I am most interested, as a model for queer self-fashioning and world building. In living her life through, and in conversation with, the 'character', Arcade is insisting on a resistive practice of subjectivity, assembled through her experience of otherness and difference. This theatrical approach to her identity is the space in which Arcade cultivates her unique stylization of the self and much like the people who inspired her – to paraphrase from above – 'the stage is her world and she plays for real and she plays for keeps'.

You are not the first person to bring up the idea that Penny Arcade is Susana Ventura in drag. Yes, it is true. When the press asked me why my name was Penny Arcade, I would tell them I was saving my real name, Susana Ventura,

for when I did something good. Unfortunately, it took so long, I got stuck with the name Penny Arcade.

The first time I met Arcade was before I had seen one of her shows. We met at a festival in Copenhagen, hosted by queer arts space Warehouse 9. She introduced herself to me after my performance – I missed her show the night before. When the festival wound down, about midnight, we both returned to the hotel in which we were staying. Over a cup of tea, she told me as much of her life story as she could until the time we finally crawled into our beds late into the next morning. It was one of the most memorable nights of my life, sitting in the kitchen of a little boutique hotel in Copenhagen, drinking tea, listening to the stories of this legendary queen of the New York underground. I was an instant fan, willingly seduced by her intellect, generosity, humour and virtuosic articulation of a lived queer politics.

A year or so later, I finally saw one of her shows live – *Bitch! Dyke! FagHag! Whore!* (2012). I was struck then by how much being an audience member for her show felt like the conversation we had had in the hotel in Copenhagen. Or, perhaps, the conversation had been like one of her shows. I realized then that there is little difference between how she performs herself onstage, or offstage over a cup of tea: larger than life and animated; she is a character – and I mean this in both senses of the word. Here I am by no means implying in my use of the word 'character', a lack of authenticity or that Arcade, in our conversation in that hotel, was any less genuine than I originally perceived her to be. I am resisting here an anti-theatrical prejudice (Barish, 1981) that might place theatricality in opposition to truthfulness or authenticity. As Barish notes, there is a tendency to assume that someone is more truthful the less they are 'performing', but Arcade's approach contradicts this paradigm: '[s]ometimes I can get closer to what I'm trying to portray by acting it' (Arcade in Johnson and Arcade, 2015: 143). In Arcade's work, theatricality and truthfulness are imbricated. What's more, the pursuit of truth is a key value in Arcade's political and performance work, and she has described what she does as truth telling – she uses the term *parrhesia*, which she has borrowed from Foucault's (1978) thinking around *ascesi*s (self-care) and *parrhesia* (truth telling): 'I want to be a *parrhesiaste*, a personal truth teller. Someone is said to use *parrhesia* and merits consideration as a *parrhesiaste* only if there is a risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth, a transformation takes place' (Arcade in Johnson and Arcade, 2015: 141).

Speaking the truth is one of the key mechanisms in her particular stylization of herself that I am speaking about here – and this, I believe, is the transformation to which she is referring. Her truth telling has performatively produced the performance of self that is Penny Arcade. Perhaps it is useful to

describe the materials of Arcade's drag as a *parrhesiastic* and therefore Arcade herself as someone who drags up with the truth.

Furthermore, the sense of risk she identifies in the practice of truth telling is one that Heather Love (2007) identifies: how does the queer subject 'engage with the past without being destroyed by it' (Love, 2007: 1)? Perhaps, the 'character' that I have identified above might be thought of as the discursive vehicle through which Arcade negotiates this risk. I have come to understand this stylization of the self as an assemblage of multiple identificatory interactions, some positive or affirming, but equally as many, negative, traumatic and harmful. This stylization was born out of curiosity about herself, in relation to the people and subcultures she encountered, and also of necessity, survival. This, Arcade writes, is a process of self-care:

> In order to become who you'd like to be, you have to nurture yourself. You can't sort of just hope that you're going to become what you want to be. So, I think I have had a rigorous inquiry my entire life into the kind of person I wanted to be and the best part of it is that I grew up to be who I wanted to be.
>
> Arcade, 2016

This sense of nurturing oneself as a rigorous inquiry is the kind of ascetic project that Foucault was beginning to write about in his later work – I am using a light touch here, to avoid getting too distracted by Foucault's genealogical account of these terms. Most important for this discussion is the relationship between self-inquiry and truth telling: a sense of nurturing oneself is related to survival, especially in Arcade's personal narrative. The self-investigatory process that she has undertaken above is the precondition for both an articulation of truth and a navigation of the risk that attends that articulation.

What's more, truth telling is also a performative act that produces her understandings of the self. This active process of self-inquiry has been enabled by and enacted through her performance of the character of Penny Arcade and we might usefully think of 'the character' as an arena for discursive interactivity and negotiation. This is the premise on which I am considering Arcade as a queer archive.

Drag often begins with a renaming: I was coming home one night after being on LSD with friends and I picked up a book on a garbage can cover on the corner of Avenue A and East 9th Street in New York's East Village. I opened it up and the protagonist's name was Penny Kinkaid. I was going home to East 9th, where I lived with Jaimie Andrews, a gay man of 27 – ten years older than me – who had taken me in off the streets. He lived in a one-room studio: he slept in a loft

bed and I slept on his drawing table. I had been living with him for several months and the terror of having been homeless, and at the mercy of so many predators, made me worried about getting thrown out of Jaimie's apartment. I knew I was putting a serious cramp in his social life. I got home, laid down on my makeshift bed (Jaimie was a photographer and an architect but he was working doing market research). It was 4.00 am. I knew that at 6.00 am the alarm clock would ring for Jaimie to get up for work, and as I lay there I became more and more anxious that I was coming to the end of my welcome in the apartment. At 6.00 am the alarm rang and I heard Jaimie groan. I thought the groan was about my presence, and I shouted out, without thinking, 'Jaimie! I changed my name!' Being that curious gay guy, Jaimie went up on one elbow and said 'Really? To What?' and without thinking I said 'Penny Arcade'. It was an improvisation on the protagonist in the book I had found on the street, but I hadn't thought of it. I just blurted it out, apparently some kind of function of my subconscious mind. Jaimie however LOVED it! He said, 'That is fabulous! Do you want an egg?' – on days when he liked me he always offered me a soft-boiled egg. He then went to John Vaccaro of the Playhouse of The Ridiculous, who he was working with and told him of my name change. Within a month I was part of the company.

I always say to younger queer people: 'Show me the 27-year-old gay guy who is taking in a homeless teenage girl today?' This is the best way to understand what community meant in the LBGT world of the 1960s. We took care of each other, we created family and community.

FagHag: Disidentification and the politics of trauma

Particularly useful to my analysis of Arcade's work is Muñoz's (1999) considerations of 'the power and poignancy of crisscrossed identificatory and desiring circuits' (15) as a 'blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres' (5). Like Muñoz I am interested in engaging with a conceptual model of the self that moves beyond the binary of essentialist versus constructivist understandings of identity formation, especially in the consideration of the minoritarian subject. I propose a consideration of Arcade as a minoritarian subject: one who has faced exclusion, disqualification and violence perpetrated because of her otherness. Like many of the 'minoritarian subjects' that Muñoz writes about, Arcade has had to 'interface with different subcultural fields to activate [her] own sense of self' (ibid.: 5), cultivating an identity 'formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny' (ibid.: 5). I argue that Arcade's relationship with gay subcultures is one of disidentification: an identity that emerges in

and through difference (Muñoz, 1999). For Arcade this difference is multidimensional: it is the sense of 'being different' from normalizing forces that she shared with particular groups of gay men, but can also be read in particular iterations of misogyny within these subcultures. Muñoz's model for a 'counternarrative of identity' is usefully located in 'ideological contradictory elements' and I draw on this to examine Arcade's relationship to gay men and drag cultures: these subcultures offered her new possibilities for self-making and community – as she identifies above in the story about her friendship with Jaimie Andrews – but they also cultivated misogynistic understandings and attitudes to womanhood and the female body.

Arcade's drag can be usefully located within a discourse around queer negativity that insists on including the negative affective materials of queer experience as important fixtures for models of political subjectivity. Halberstam (2011) suggests that this approach might offer 'the possibility of rethinking the meaning of the political through queerness precisely by embracing the incoherent, the lonely, the defeated and the melancholic formulation of selfhood that it sets in motion' (148). For Love (2007), 'we cannot do justice to the difficulties of queer experience unless we develop a politics of the past' (21) burdened with the weight of 'difficult personal and collective histories' (19). Arcade's own personal history, as narrated in many of her shows, is permeated with trauma, loss and exclusion – even from within some of the subcultures in which she was seeking refuge. Her work 'describes what it is like to bear a "disqualified" identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury – not fixing it' (4). And rather than seeking to 'transform . . . the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency' (18), Arcade insists on retaining them within the frame of her articulation of selfhood. She does not resist particular sites of identity that had previously been deployed to invalidate her, but rather plays into them, incorporating and transforming them through her self-stylization – this is most apparent in the title of one of her shows: *Bitch! Dyke! FagHag! Whore! (B!D!F!W!)*. Like Love, Arcade is interrogating 'the recognized or allowed styles of political subjectivity' (162) and, in doing so, constructing an 'expanded gestural repertoire' (ibid.) for what might constitute 'the political'. I read the drag persona of Penny Arcade as a strategy for developing this 'expanded gestural repertoire' and these gestures are the materials that make up what I am suggesting as Arcade's Archive of Otherness.

As someone who came into their teens in the 1960s, when being gay was illegal, the gay world was a stronghold for outsiders, and offered a community in which to define yourself against the dominant capitalist culture. Gay was one of the

subversive actions one could take. I first went in drag, boy drag, as a 17-year-old, all without any knowledge of famous cross-dressers of the past like Colette, George Sand, etc. I did it to be camp, long before camp was associated with feather boas or silly caricature. It was meant to show your camp, to show where you stood. The people who really recognized me as a young person were mainly drag queens who used drag to assert their point of view, and the gay men who were sympathetic to drag queens, because this was a marginalized population at the very edge of even the gay world of that time.

There is a great deal of misogyny among gay men so naturally I had to navigate that. Drag Queens who I encountered in the 1960s identified and were sympathetic to the misogyny women experience, because the problems that beset people because of effeminacy is so close in nature. Quentin Crisp said, 'Yes, many men hate effeminate men but they also hate effeminate women.' People love to worship the goddess as long as it is not in a biological woman's body.

A fixture in Arcade's personal narrative is her relationship to gay men and gay subcultures. 'When I say that I was raised by gay men, I mean that I was taken in by a tawdry band of drag queens and their minions and that I am who I am today because of those gay men' (Arcade, 2009: 103). As a teenager, gay men offered her refuge from a difficult childhood home, a place of exclusion. In these queer spaces, a teenage Arcade found her sense of difference embraced and enabled. These subcultural spaces opened up new worlds of self-understanding, not only in how they cultivated a shared sense of otherness, but also in how they introduced her to new social and cultural practices: partying, drugs, cruising, art making,[1] activism and, of course, drag.

However, as Arcade alludes to in the passage above, the politics of gay subcultures were not homogenized, and she is critical of those gay cultures that emerged in the 1970s fixated on sameness – i.e. 'clones' – and those that were reaching towards assimilation in heteronormative, capitalist systems (Arcade, 2009). So even within gay subcultures, she found herself aligned with a very small faction, whose sense of togetherness centred precisely on an insistence of difference. What's more, her relationship to these subcultures was not a simple process of identification. She hints at this complexity with a simple example in *B!D!F!W*: 'You see the thing is that no matter who you're raised by when you're a teenager, you will rebel . . .. And being raised by gay men, I personally drew the line at Judy Garland and Barbara Streisand. "I don't want to listen to 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' I want to listen to the Rolling Stones"' (Arcade, 2009: 103).

While this might seem trivial, it highlights an important tension in Arcade's relationship to gay male subcultures. For Arcade, something as simple as music choice is a symbol for her critical engagement with gay (sub)

cultural sites of production. This push and pull is precisely what I am interested in: Arcade's sense of selfhood could not be wholly invested in gay male cultures, and 'her rigorous self-inquiry' included pursuit of other cultural materials. Furthermore, this simple music example exemplifies Arcade's absolute pursuit of her own 'truth' through difference. Even within a community that offered her refuge – literally and figuratively – she was still carving out a sense of difference. She was not/is not simply, to quote an oft heard phrase, 'a gay man trapped in a woman's body'.

Arcade is quite clear in naming her relationship to gay men; she has firmly staked a claim to the moniker of FagHag (Arcade, 2009). Her use of this term effectively gestures towards the ebbing quality of the disidentificatory process I have been exploring here. Within this term, two excluded identities are expressed through the very terminology employed to enact that exclusion. It is at once both homophobic and misogynistic and the misogynistic signification is double edged: branding a woman not useful – read: unfuckable – because she is either too ugly for straight men, or too female for gay men. In *B!D!F!W!* she charts the history of her relationship to the term and her amelioration of this exclusionary term is originally rooted in a deeply political act, connected to helping gay men resist and navigate homophobias:

> I was a faghag when to be a faghag was a glorious thing!! [sic] We weren't simply extending someone's fashion statement then. We weren't considered mere accessories. Faghags made it possible for gay men to move in straight society. Faghags made it possible for gay men to move up in straight society! Faghags were hiding gay men in plain sight.
>
> Arcade, 2009: 105

However, as she notes when more people felt able to 'come out' in the 1970s, the role of the faghag shifted. She recalls a conversation with her friend Richard on Fire Island, who said, 'Well, Penny, that's how it is now. It's all about sex for gay men now. That's what the gay world has turned into. Faghags are obsolete' (Arcade, 2009: 105). What's more, in *Bad Reputation* (2009) she speaks about how helpful gay male subcultures were in 'supporting her identity', but how she faced revulsion when it came to expressing her sexuality, and her identification as bisexual seemed to have confounded this. Her relationship to gay men shifted again in the 1980s because of the AIDS crisis: 'I spent the 80s in hospitals and cemeteries, burying my friends' (Arcade, 2011). The faghag became a carer and a mourner. Her performance of the FagHag includes all of these relationships with gay men: a deep and caring kinship, a political ally, but also, exclusion, denial, frustration and loss.

Drag as an archive of otherness, and some concluding thoughts

In 1970 I expressed the desire to do 'drag' of people who I knew, but this was dismissed by everyone except Andy Warhol, who encouraged my idea, but I did not have the skills needed at the time to pull it off. In 1981, working with Jackie Curtis, I decided to attempt the drag idea I had had at the age of 20, having more confidence. I created my drag version of Dame Margo Howard Howard[2] *and then branched out to others.*

My choice to do drag, i.e. to become the real people who I was performing, created a new aspect to drag hitherto not done because, unlike Carol Burnett or Lucille Ball and other actresses or comedians who did drags for laughs, I did drag to tell the stories of specific people in their own words, as them. I used a fiction to tell non-fiction. It was me performing Margo Howard Howard, who up to that point was not a performer, that inspired Margo to go on stage. I was a woman impersonating a man impersonating a woman. Certainly in the early 1980s almost no one was doing that except perhaps Split Britches and WOW. I was not part of WOW: it wasn't particularly friendly towards bisexual faghags, but I had a strong relationship with Diane Torr, and was friendly with Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver who were examining some of the same aspects of gender and identity construction as I was.

Drag no longer plays the role in my work that it did in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in that I do not dress up anymore. I got to the point where I could become other people through the sheer force of my acting. However, when I do the old works, I do enjoy putting on the drag and becoming other people. Certainly, Penny Arcade is my drag name, without question, and I suppose one could say that what remains of drag in my work is my name.

I want to close by suggesting that we might think of the persona of 'Penny Arcade' as an archive of queer experience: a collection of multiple identifactory entry points, histories, traumas, losses and negative affects. Her shows are a public display of this archive: 'I dig my way backwards' (Arcade in Johnson and Arcade, 2015: 140). Love's (2007) central metaphor of 'Feeling Backward' is apt here: standing in the present and reaching backwards through a history of feeling out of place or time, multiple layers of disruptions and otherness. My experience of being an audience member in Arcade's shows is one of seeing this process in action, witnessing her reach into her vast archive and reanimate the materials of the past. 'I am the *designated mourner* for a whole world that's disappearing' (Arcade, 2015: 140).

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich (2003) suggests that queers have used (solo) performance as a way to construct archives from 'memory and personal

experience . . . in the wake of a dominant culture that provides either silence or homophobic representations of their lives' (26), making this form 'a forum for personal histories that are also social and cultural ones' (ibid.). I think this is a useful way of thinking about Arcade's performances generally, but more specifically how we might read the construction of the drag persona of Penny Arcade: an archive that has collected materials of otherness and difference over the course of a richly lived life, for Arcade herself has noted, 'few people have lived as hard as I have lived' (Arcade in Johnson and Arcade, 2015: 137).

I will always be Penny Arcade. I have used that name now for 50 years. Although my birth name is always in the programmes and publicity. There is a certain amount of pride in the fact that I was able to create a persona and a career for that persona and to keep it in the public eye for fifty years. I recently saw super 8 footage of me at 19 years of age at Jackie Curtis's famous wedding in 1969. At one point a man, in his late twenties turns to me and says, "Really Miss Arcade". So already at 19, two years later after I named myself, people took me seriously. I was immediately given recognition with this name as an 'entity' and I think this is remarkable.

Being Penny Arcade has not been the easiest for my work, or for being taken seriously. The best one can say about it is that it is memorable. The Drag Queen Holly Woodlawn stated: 'People hear the name Penny Arcade and they have no idea how intelligent she is, they think she is fluff and she is not.' So the name is problematic in that people assume that I am a fringe act and I am not.

There are some things that one creates that carry an imperfection that creates a flaw and one must live with that flaw and in this case the name Penny Arcade is opaque, the way drag is opaque. Opaque like pancake makeup or clown white is opaque in that it erases the original and allows you to draw another thing upon it. Drag is many things but it is not transparent. Drag is camouflage.

Notes

1 Of note here are her friendships with famous gay artists such as Jack Smith, Quentin Crisp, John Vacarro and Andy Warhol.

2 *Arcade: Margo Howard Howard was a real person. Born Robert Hesse in Brooklyn in 1940, she was a brilliant person, but a lifelong petty criminal and drug addict. Margo worked among the high-end street prostitutes on 7th Avenue in New York in the 1960s, with a small group of other drag queens who were able to pass as women in that milieu. In the mid 1970s, Margo met Jackie Curtis and became her 'acting coach' and entered bohemian performance culture through Jackie. In 1983 I performed as Margo in one of Jackie Curtis's plays,* I Died Yesterday, *and the verisimilitude that I achieved shocked even Margo, who said:*

'Penny Arcade is a better Margo Howard Howard than I.' I then included Margo Howard Howard as a character in my solo performances, which increased both Margo's fame and notoriety. Margo would often come to my shows and say the same lines – from the same stories I was telling which I heard from her. In 1987–1988 Margo began to perform publicly. Sadly, she died from complications from a bleeding ulcer in September 1988. Her book, which is still in print – I was a White Slave in Harlem – *was published shortly after her death.*

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10

Nobody's *Trash*: Holly Woodlawn's Puerto Rican Drag and the Subversion of Authorship

Gabriel Mayora

When the Puerto Rican transgender performer Holly Woodlawn died on 6 December 2015, she garnered the kind of high-profile media attention she had so fervently sought – yet seldom received – throughout her decades-spanning career in show business. Woodlawn's celebrity status goes back to her incandescent breakout film acting debut in the hit 1970 underground film *Trash* directed by Paul Morrissey and produced by Andy Warhol under his famed Factory. In *Trash*, Woodlawn plays Holly Santiago, the male protagonist's frustrated live-in girlfriend and the film's most prominent supporting character. Upon the movie's release, Woodlawn's performance – though polarizing – elicited such acclaim and attention that she became one of the movie's biggest talking (and, in turn, selling) points. The critical and financial success of *Trash* gave Holly Woodlawn a platform and a point of entry into the vibrant New York avant-garde circuit of the late 1960s and 1970s, where – for a brief moment – she was heralded as a star of the underground, a new status crystallized by a highly publicized (if, sadly, unsuccessful) campaign led by the renowned Hollywood director George Cukor, with the support of famed actors like the Oscar-winning Joanne Woodward, for Holly Woodlawn to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Davies, 2009). Naturally, Woodlawn herself happily fed into this discourse, foregrounding her desire for fame and recognition in the media. At the top of a 1977 profile featured in the now-defunct pornographic gay magazine *Mandate*, Woodlawn unequivocally proclaims, 'I *will* win an Academy Award if it kills me' (Llewellyn, 1977). Author Michael Llewellyn goes on to list the performer's recent work in the entertainment industry (starring roles in a handful of little-seen art films, a critically praised cabaret act, a 'one-time' modelling gig advertising a high-end department store chain) before naming Woodlawn 'a phenomenon that boggles the mind' (Llewellyn, 1977). With *Trash* fresh in audiences' minds, Holly Woodlawn seemed destined for

mainstream stardom. Yet, within a couple of years of the profile's publication, the one-time starlet was waiting tables in Miami.

Unsurprisingly, given the history of erasure that has defined the legacy of queer Puerto Rican and Latinx public figures whose fame is primarily associated with esteemed white gay artists, Woodlawn did not win an Oscar nor did she go on to become a celebrity beyond some queer circles, where she was primarily known as one of the last surviving Andy Warhol 'superstars'. Indeed, by 2015, the 69-year-old Puerto Rican performer was relegated to self-referential cameos in niche LGBT-themed films and TV series (Grimes, 2015). Despite the relative obscurity surrounding Woodlawn's public image, news of her death resulted in a series of commemorative pieces memorializing her legacy across a wide range of outlets, including reputable US-based and international news publications (*The New York Times*, *NPR News*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News*), industry trades (*Deadline*, *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*), print and web-based entertainment magazines (*Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, *Vulture*) and countless LGBT-themed publications (such as the notoriously mainstream gay magazine *The Advocate*). The posthumous commemoration of Woodlawn's legacy even shockingly extended to the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences as she was featured in the 'In Memoriam' segment at the 2016 Academy Awards ceremony. It seems like dying was the key that finally allowed Holly Woodlawn to gain the fame and prestige that eluded her when she was alive.

The transformation of Holly Woodlawn from semi-forgotten relic into a legend whose life and death were now deemed worthy of public memorialization in the popular imaginary signalled a new phase of the Woodlawn public persona in which her physical death engendered a new symbolic life as a beloved queer icon and pioneer. However, unlike Llewellyn, whose *Mandate* profile emphasized Woodlawn's own professional landmarks as a way to label her a 'phenomenon', a troublesome pattern emerged across the majority of these commemorative pieces. Apart from a few notable exceptions – such as William Grimes's refreshingly non-sensational *New York Times* obituary – these articles seemed to be only capable of relating the significance, the 'worth' of Holly Woodlawn as a queer icon vis-à-vis her so-called contributions to the cultural productions of two late venerated white gay artists: *Trash* producer Andy Warhol and musician Lou Reed, whose iconic song 'A Walk on the Wild Side' is based on Woodlawn (and mentions her by name). Over and over, these pieces invariably characterize Holly Woodlawn as Lou Reed's and Andy Warhol's 'muse', 'inspiration', 'subject' and 'superstar' (Ennis, 2015; Kreps, 2015; Lowe, 2015; McHenry, 2015; Saperstein, 2015; Yaeger, 2015). As such, they reflect and highlight a process of appropriation and commodification that consists of invoking Puerto Rican drag performance aesthetics in order to

celebrate and aggrandize the cultural value of prestigious white artists – artists for whom Puerto Rican drag was considered prime material to be mined into something they deemed to be 'of worth'. The message is clear. On her own, Holly Woodlawn cannot be a phenomenon; instead, her presence in the archive of US popular culture, and more specifically LGBT popular history, must be justified insofar as it serves to reaffirm the already iconic status of the more famous and traditionally prestigious white male artists with whom she collaborated.

This chapter represents an attempt to challenge the troublesome pattern of imperialist commodification, appropriation, *and* (de)valorization of 'celebrity' diasporic Puerto Rican drag performers through the disavowal of their performers autonomy and agency. More than identifying the regulatory processes that have worked to simultaneously elide and construct Holly Woodlawn's legacy as an icon of 1960s and 1970s queer avant-garde film and a signifier of the genre's ostensible progressive politics, I focus on questions of authorship, performance and autonomy, thus reframing the hegemonic assumptions surrounding the value attached to Woodlawn's public persona in the national imaginary. In particular, this chapter engages with Holly Woodlawn's legacy as a Puerto Rican drag performer by revisiting the Paul Morrissey-directed film *Trash*, which not only marked Woodlawn's splashy entrance onto the popular consciousness but remains the most widely known (and celebrated) film in the star's filmography. While *Trash* has been the focus of scholarship in art history, film studies and queer theory, Holly Woodlawn's performance and creative input – which, even in this chapter, remain tied to the success of *Trash* – have seldom been engaged through a queer Puerto Rican and Latinx studies critical lens that takes into account the ways in which the aesthetics of diasporic Puerto Rican drag informed the production, acclaim, profitability and eventual canonization of *Trash*. This gap has, in turn, facilitated the propagation of various assumptions and misconceptions regarding the roles that director Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol played in realizing Woodlawn's transcendent, indelible performance.

I frame my discussion of *Trash* within the tradition and politics of diasporic queer Puerto Rican and Latinx strategies of resistance, particularly as they relate to drag and camp aesthetics. Most scholars who have written about the Factory's performers tend to group Woodlawn's performance style and legacy with that of her Caucasian contemporaries Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling, all of whom appeared in Factory productions in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Morrissey-directed 1971 film *Women in Revolt*, in which the three of them shared the screen. In *The Films of Paul Morrissey*, Maurice Yacowar uses transness as a way to delineate the difference between the 'two opposite [performance] styles' that he claims Morrissey favoured in his filmography.

For Yacowar, there is the 'histrionic' and 'flamboyant' work of 'the transvestites Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling' – to whom he subsequently refers as 'Morrissey's transvestites' with no sense of irony – and then there's the 'passive object of predatory and voyeuristic attention' represented by cisgender male *Trash* protagonist Joe Dallesandro (1993: 7). Writing from a more historical perspective, queer historian Martin Duberman's *Stonewall*, a chronicle of the Stonewall riots of 1969 that played a key role in the recovery of the then-forgotten legacy of the Puerto Rican and Venezuelan trans pioneer Sylvia Rivera, points to the three queens' fame as a marker of the public visibility of drag at the time, arguing that: 'By the early seventies, drag had very nearly gone mainstream, with Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling, and Holly Woodlawn all becoming Warhol-made celebrities' (1993: 126). Situating Woodlawn's legacy alongside that of Curtis and Darling significantly emphasizes the Factory's reliance on drag aesthetics to construct its brand of queer avant-garde underground cinema; moreover, for a historian like Duberman, the relative (if overstated) success of the three performers points to the larger effects of trans visibility within queer cultural productions at a time when the gay liberation movement was, at best, reluctant to foster a space for the needs and demands of gender-variant bodies, many of whom were racialized and further marginalized, such as those of iconic transgender activists and Stonewall veterans like Rivera and Marsha 'Pay It No Mind' Johnson. Yet, in grouping the three figures together, the specificity of Woodlawn's aesthetics, history, legacy and challenges as a queer Puerto Rican drag performer are elided in favour of a less complex, more globalized perspective that ultimately defines the queens' relevance vis-à-vis the creative output of Morrissey ('Morrissey's transvestites', in Yacowar's words) and Warhol ('Warhol-made celebrities', per Duberman). Such an approach, then, fails to take into account how, as Ragan Rhyne reminds us, drag not only refers to a 'gendered performance' but also constitutes a performance of 'race, class, ethnicity, and all of the other axes around which identity is structured' (2004: 187). If we take into account the racial, ethnic and class dimensions of drag alongside questions of gender, then Woodlawn's interpretation of an abjectly poor white woman like the one she plays in *Trash* represents a type of drag performance that is different from – no more or less valid or worthy of study – the type of idealized, aloof, polished and undoubtedly aristocratic version of white femininity that Candy Darling strove to achieve through her drag aesthetics on and offscreen. As such, I argue that a queer Puerto Rican and Latinx critical lens provides an alternative perspective to more thoroughly and directly engage with Woodlawn's performance – and her legacy at large – that foregrounds diasporic Puerto Rican avant-garde drag performers' radical potential to subvert traditional notions of authorship, agency and artistic prowess. In so doing, I interrogate the discourse of 'worth'

attached to queer diasporic Puerto Rican subjects while simultaneously inviting audiences to consider how these subjects deploy tools that allow them to disrupt the imperialist appropriation of their artistic and political autonomy.

This study is a continuation of the foundational research of authors in queer Puerto Rican studies like Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004), Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2009) and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé (2015). Writing about Holly Woodlawn in her 2004 book *Boricua Pop* – to date, one of the only scholarly studies that engages with the Woodlawn persona from a queer Puerto Rican critical lens – Negrón-Muntaner points to the 'uneven power relations' informed by the colonial dynamics between the United States and Puerto Rico that 'have resulted in a situation in which white queer artists are valued for their contributions to "art" (theater, painting, film), while Puerto Ricans and other Latinos involved in these cultural projects are routinely ignored' (2004: 111). My reading of Woodlawn's performance examines how these 'uneven power relations' continue to mediate the construction of the Holly Woodlawn persona at a time when she is being memorialized (and no longer being ignored). Revisiting the film through a queer Puerto Rican critical framework represents an opportunity to reframe the hegemonic rhetoric through which Woodlawn's agency and authorship as a diasporic Puerto Rican drag performer and artist have become subjugated. Thus, I am interested in challenging the processes through which figures like Woodlawn have exclusively been allowed to enter the US queer popular imaginary through their 'association with gay, white, avant-garde artists such as Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Charles Ludlam rather than for their own talent and originality' (La Fountain-Stokes, 2009: xxiv).

Queer Puerto Rican drag aesthetics

As previously mentioned, I frame my discussion of Woodlawn's strategies of resistance within theoretical approaches to diasporic queer Puerto Rican and Latinx camp and drag aesthetics. In writing about Woodlawn as a drag performer, I do not seek to dismiss or negate her subjectivity as a transgender woman nor am I interested in providing a rigid, absolute label to categorize Woodlawn's queerness. Rather than place 'transgender' and 'drag' as oppositional terms, I approach 'transgender' as a term that, in the words of seminal transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker, describes 'any and all variations from gender norms and expectations', thus encompassing 'the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities' (Stryker, 2008: 19). Stryker's definition is particularly valuable to critically engage with Woodlawn's diasporic Puerto Rican queer expression due to Stryker's refusal to excise non-normative,

'culturally or ethnically specific' modes of gender and sexual identification and performance from the category of transgender; hence, this definition serves as a reminder that in order to account for the 'global catalog of specialized terms for gender variety', 'transgender' must remain a 'very flexible' concept (Stryker, 2008: 23).

My analysis of Holly Woodlawn's performance in *Trash* vis-à-vis drag aesthetics moves away from notions of drag exclusive to cross-dressing gay men. Rather, drag becomes a theoretical tool to engage with Woodlawn's *public* performance of femininity and whiteness as a queer diasporic Puerto Rican artist. Writing about the drag communities of colour featured in Jennie Livingston's canonical documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Judith Butler develops an understanding of the political potential of drag as 'a pleasurable and subversive spectacle' that can function as a tool to 'grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced *and* altered in the course of that reproduction' (Butler, 2004: 218). This understanding of drag as a political tool that encompasses spectacle, subversion, reproduction and transformation invokes José Esteban Muñoz's study of queer Latinx performance strategies of resistance. Muñoz develops the concept of disidentifications to consider how 'the *act* of performing and theatricalizing queerness *in public*' (1999: 1) constitutes a set of 'survival strategies' that queer Latinx subjects deploy 'in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship' (1999: 4). For Muñoz, disidentification mines the potentiality of queer Latinx performance to function as a mode of resistance that allows disenfranchised subjects to work 'on and against dominant ideology' (1999: 11).

I argue that through her performance as Holly Santiago, Woodlawn's queer diasporic Puerto Rican subjectivity has a dual effect. On one hand, Woodlawn's presence in *Trash* can be seen as another example of avant-garde white, gay artists' appropriation and deployment of drag, and queer brown drag aesthetics in this case, to legitimize the 'authenticity' and 'rawness' of their cultural productions while dismissing these performers' creative input or talent. During *Trash*'s original theatrical run in the fall of 1970, Woodlawn's performance received such acclaim that the newcomer became a major *selling* point for the film's marketing. Warhol scholar Steve Watson notes that: 'With [lead] Joe Dallesandro's bare body on the ads and buzz about Holly Woodlawn's performance, [*Trash*] became the biggest commercial hit ever produced by either Warhol or Morrissey' (2003: 404). Woodlawn, then, was not merely a performer in the film's ensemble; she was its unlikely star, was marketed as such, and played a key role in the film's improbable financial success through the strength of her performance (as opposed to the passive consumption of her body as in the case of her co-star Joe Dallesandro). That – in accordance with

the exploitative labour practices of the Factory – Woodlawn never received royalties for the film which further highlights the lack of worth conferred to her by Warhol and Morrissey early on (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). Moreover, when assessing the appropriation of Puerto Rican drag in *Trash*, we must consider the conservative politics of director Paul Morrissey, who developed the film as the second entry in a trilogy that sought to indict 'the broader ills of its era: narcissism, commodification, exploitation, the self-indulgence, corruption, and waste that Morrissey found so disgusting within bohemia' (Davies, 2009: 48). Though I argue that *Trash* utterly fails as any sort of indictment of 1960s street culture, the deployment of Woodlawn to star in a film meant to denounce her character as a threat to the ostensible stability of the nation points to the larger US cinematic tradition of casting minority actors in films designed to contribute to their marginalization. The director's conservativism extends to his refusal to avow Holly Woodlawn's femininity on its (or Woodlawn's) own terms. As Jon Davies explains, 'Morrissey saw the casting of a trans woman as a means of achieving cinematic truth' (2009: 55). Davies goes on to support his claim by quoting Morrissey, whose explanation for casting a drag performer as the film's cisgender female heroine necessarily relies on the director's disavowal of Woodlawn's womanhood: 'I think the artifice of using a man [*sic*] as a woman makes it more of a movie. And movies are great because they create artificial situations, and only through artificial situations does the real truth sneak out (Bahr 2000)' (quoted in Davies, 2009: 55). Not only does trans femininity explicitly become appropriated as a cinematic tool for the pursuit of some abstract version of artistic 'truth', but Morrissey's justification is dependent on the notion that trans femininity can only serve as an allegorical or symbolic commentary on 'real' (i.e. cis) womanhood.

At the same time, the hegemonic forces that worked to appropriate the queer Puerto Rican body in *Trash* do not delimit the potential for resistance against these same forces. While operating within a dominant structure determined to subjugate, appropriate and regulate her agency, Holly Woodlawn invokes a set of performance strategies rooted in queer Puerto Rican and Latinx camp and drag aesthetics that consistently disrupt Morrissey's conservative agenda for the film at the same time as they allow for a reclamation of the authorship and selfhood she has been denied through her (and the film's) association with Warhol and the Factory in the popular imaginary.

My trashy lady: The 'discovery' of Holly Woodlawn

When it comes to the role of authorship in *Trash*, the majority of the discussion among experts has revolved around the tensions between Paul

Morrissey's direction and Andy Warhol's input as a producer. This debate emerged in response to the common tendency to call *Trash* – as well as other Morrissey-directed Factory films like *Flesh* (1968) and *Heat* (1972) – an Andy Warhol film (Yacowar, 1993). Morrissey scholar and defender Maurice Yacowar insists that although Warhol financed these films, he 'otherwise had nothing to do with [them], either creatively or consultorily' (1993: 2). Yacowar, therefore, dismisses the notion of a Morrissey–Warhol film collaboration in these films as 'inaccurate' (1993: 3). The persistent misconception that *Trash* is an Andy Warhol movie can be seen in the commemorative pieces following Woodlawn's death. In fact, framing *Trash* as the cultural production of a famed, prestigious and idolized figure like Warhol instead of a relatively obscure director is crucial to the process of building up the cultural capital surrounding the Woodlawn persona without allowing her fame to overshadow that of the creator with which her celebrity status is associated. Yacowar's refusal to entertain the idea that Warhol played any sort of essential role in the creative production of *Trash* represents a necessary disruption of the producer's presumed authorship of films in which – by most first-hand accounts, including Warhol's – his contributions remain dubious at best. Still, the scholar's claim that 'Morrissey was solely responsible for *Flesh*, *Heat*, and *Trash*' must be approached with a similar type of scepticism (1993: 2). I am interested in looking at how *Trash*'s conception and production history function as significant sites to critically expand debates of the film's authorship to incorporate Holly Woodlawn's contributions.

Paul Morrissey's conservative politics were the major driving force behind the conception of *Trash*. According to the director himself: 'The basic idea for the movie . . . is that drug people are trash. There's no difference between a person using drugs and a piece of refuse' (quoted in Yacowar, 1993: 39). The film stars Factory actor Joe Dallesandro as Joe, a heroin addict and street hustler who spends the bulk of the film wandering around the streets of New York City trying to score drugs. The plot is loosely structured around episodic vignettes featuring a naked Joe attempting to convince different characters to help him get heroin in exchange for sex; to everyone's displeasure, Joe's drug use prevents him from achieving an erection, causing the other characters to become frustrated or fed up and making Joe's pursuit of drugs a perpetually failed enterprise. Holly Woodlawn plays Holly Santiago, the woman who lives with Joe as his sexually frustrated romantic partner. Though the film mainly follows Joe's perspective, Holly becomes more central to the narrative as the plot becomes increasingly interested in Joe and Holly's home life. Holly has a predilection for collecting objects found in the trash around the streets of New York in order to recycle them into accessories she can use to build a home with Joe. The queer domestic relationship between Joe and Holly

ends up anchoring the film narratively and emotionally, taking over its final act as the two characters' fraught but surprisingly touching pursuit of some semblance of home drives the conflict and tentative resolution that end the film.

The increasing prominence of Holly in the film's narrative trajectory can be traced back to Morrissey's filmmaking style, which places a strong emphasis on the performers' improvisational skills to guide each scene. Given the relevance of the performers to Morrissey's cinematic aesthetic, the casting of Holly Woodlawn had a major influence on the production of *Trash*. Whereas the majority of the ensemble comprised regulars who had appeared in previous Factory productions, Morrissey followed a different approach when recruiting Woodlawn for his film. The director first learned of Woodlawn after coming across a newspaper article in which the performer, who by that point had never acted on screen nor worked with Warhol or any of the Factory's filmmakers, spoke extensively about her successful career as an Andy Warhol superstar. Morrissey's rendition of the story simultaneously credits Woodlawn for what he frames as her innate talent while stressing his own ability to recognize and tap into this talent:

> I simply had a hunch that here was some kind of 'character' or personality . . . While I have always cast people very quickly depending on personality, I had never cast anyone before or since without having met them first. But without mentioning it to Holly, [her] interview in the paper had given me the idea for a major part of the film I wanted to make . . . That afternoon, I photographed for only about one hour, but I knew within minutes of filming that my hunch was right . . . On that first day I saw only a glimmer of what Holly was capable of later on in filming but Holly struck me then as now as a basically very shy and unassuming person, unfailingly polite and instantaneously likeable. That so much determination and energy lurked beneath this façade was still, that first afternoon, only another hunch.
>
> Woodlawn and Copeland, 1992: ix

In retelling this sort of origin story for Holly Woodlawn, Paul Morrissey is only able to credit the Puerto Rican star by foregrounding his talent for finding her in what he describes as 'some throwaway underground newspaper' and recognizing the skills beyond her 'façade' (Woodlawn and Copeland, 1992: ix). Morrissey's account is filtered through a colonial dynamic that positions the Puerto Rican drag performer as a precious object-to-be-discovered *and* mined by the sophisticated eye of the white creator. The story, then, is rooted in discourses surrounding diasporic Puerto Ricans at the time, especially those

in New York City. Specifically, Negrón-Muntaner writes that 'during the 1960s and 1970s, the height of the queer avant-garde, it was common to conflate unsanitary conditions or devalued objects' with Puerto Ricans (2004: 112). On the surface, Morrissey does not immediately appear to see Woodlawn as 'unsanitary' or 'devalued'. In fact, by detailing the evident differences between Holly Woodlawn's personality and that of the character of Holly Santiago, he notably challenges the myth that Woodlawn is merely playing herself in the film, a myth that Maurice Yacowar's own scholarship on the director reinscribes when he patronizingly characterizes the drag performers in Morrissey's films as 'already well-known New York presences who were invited to "perform" in front of the camera' (1993: 7). Yet, the director's rhetoric in this retelling insists on constructing Woodlawn as a discarded, primitive object (one simply found in 'some throwaway' paper) whose worth is dependent on the white artist's perceived innate knack for discovering the larger-than-life star underneath her subdued offscreen personality and mining her full potential in front of the camera (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). In this context, Woodlawn is not a collaborator whose improvisational skills and Puerto Rican drag aesthetics inextricably shaped her character arc and the film's overall narrative; rather, the performer's input is diluted to a 'hunch' based on the performer's undefined 'kind of "character" or personality'. The queer Puerto Rican performer is valued insofar as she provides the genius white filmmaker with the inspiration and the prime material to produce his art.

Beyond highlighting the colonial dynamics between queer Puerto Rican performers and white avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, Woodlawn's origin story represents an example of disidentificatory strategies of survival that allowed the struggling performer to become a Warhol superstar. Morrissey notes that he had to convince Andy Warhol to let him cast Woodlawn in *Trash* since she had not only lied about being a Warhol superstar in a public forum, but she had also been previously caught trying to charge merchandise to Warhol's account. According to Morrissey, 'the combination of lying and larceny only increased [his] curiosity' (Woodlawn and Copeland, 1992: ix). The story feeds into the American public's portrayal of Puerto Ricans as deceitful, criminal and untrustworthy, an image that was especially popular at the time of the film's production as a result of the increasing visibility of Puerto Ricans in the continental United States (Briggs, 2002; Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). At the same time, Woodlawn's decision to publicly present herself as a Warhol superstar through 'lying and larceny' directly led to her starring role in what is now regarded as 'arguably one of the Factory's best productions' (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004: 101). Recalling the interview that led to her casting in *Trash*, Woodlawn writes, 'I thought, what the hell? If I wanted to be a Warhol Superstar, I'd better just go out and grab

it' (Woodlawn and Copeland, 1992: 131). Thus, Woodlawn highlights her agency vis-à-vis her decision to author herself as a Warhol superstar by lying, so that negative hegemonic portrayals of Puerto Ricans end up providing her with the necessary platform to become a breakout star of the queer avant-garde circuit of the time.

'You're both junk': Redefining *Trash*

If the casting of Holly Woodlawn points to the performer's ability to exercise an authorship of the self that allowed her to gain access to New York's queer underground scene as a Warhol superstar, her performance in *Trash* showcases the ways in which she continued to enact this subversive authorship of the self in front of the camera, disrupting the film's attempts to regulate the queer Puerto Rican body. As with the origins of her casting, the indelible influence of Woodlawn's performance on Morrissey's final cut of *Trash* is often brought up by critics attempting to frame the film as representative of the presumed radical aesthetics of 1960s and 1970s avant-garde directors. Again, the objective here seems to be directed towards exalting the creative genius of the directors while remaining largely disinterested in Woodlawn's own radical performance. My discussion of performance, then, is invested in reframing Holly Woodlawn's participation in *Trash* as a site of agency and resistance.

Trash followed traditional modes of production associated with other underground films of the era: no script, no soundstage and a very short filming schedule. Filming took place in the basement of the director's New York home over a weekend in October 1969, with an estimated budget of $25,000 (Davies, 2009: 60). Per Woodlawn's recollection, there were 'no retakes, no cuts, no changing camera angles, and no makeup person to powder me down' (Woodlawn and Copeland, 1992: 136). The low-budget, improvisational style that defined the film's production inevitably gave the performers a certain level of agency over their performances that would seldom be available to them in a traditional studio movie. Based on a combination of Morrissey's vague directions and the lack of a shooting script, Woodlawn had a unique opportunity to define her character's trajectory, one rarely afforded to most actors, let alone one who had never acted for the camera before. As detailed in Morrissey's recollection of the shoot, Woodlawn thrived under these conditions to such an extent that her scenes provided the film with its narrative thread: 'I told her: Joe looks for junk to shoot and you look for junk in the streets and you're both junk. So I shot a reel and looked at it on Tuesday and she was great. So now I knew my movie. It was going to be about *her* and Joe' (quoted in Yacowar, 1993: 40). Morrissey's only vision

for the character of Holly Santiago before filming began was that she searches for 'junk in the streets' and that she and Joe are 'both junk', a simplistic perspective that replicates Negrón-Muntaner's aforementioned connections between Puerto Ricans and 'unsanitary conditions' and 'devalued objects' in the then-contemporary popular imaginary. By the time principal photography wrapped, it was Woodlawn's realization – and, I'd argue, disidentification – of that vision through her improvised performance that taught Morrissey what the film was about. Holly Santiago might be 'junk' but Woodlawn, much like her character, did not see junk as worthless; rather, she turned Holly and her main trait of collecting and repurposing trash from the streets into what is arguably the most essential figure in the development of the film's narrative.

Plenty of critics have praised Woodlawn's performance and even credited it for elevating *Trash* above the quality of other films produced by the Factory; this praise, however, 'does not link Woodlawn's outstanding performance to her ethnicity or transcultural identity' (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004: 106). Queerness has often served to elide the cultural specificity of Woodlawn's performance in critical discourses of the film. In his indispensable book on the film, Jon Davies writes that 'Woodlawn used cinema's power to suspend disbelief as a means of accomplishing her gender transition, cementing her status as a "real" woman in the eyes of her audience' (2009: 151). Davies sees Woodlawn's performance of 'real' womanhood in the film as a triumph of 'self-image' over 'objective image', highlighting the performer's ability to exercise an authorship of the self. The author concludes that 'Morrissey's representation of [Woodlawn] as she really was – that is, as she saw herself – was a form of acceptance' (Davies, 2009: 151). This last point seems to replicate the widely accepted implication that Morrissey's treatment of Woodlawn in the film complicates the director's conservative politics while serving to dissociate Woodlawn's gender performance from her ethnicity.

Negrón-Muntaner challenges the erasure of diasporic Puerto Rican drag aesthetics in critical discourses of Woodlawn's performance through her reading of camp from a culturally specific lens. She argues that Woodlawn and other Puerto Rican drag performers in the diaspora invoked a type of camp aesthetics simultaneously informed by the tradition of white queer camp as well as Puerto Rican performance traditions to produce 'a sense of ethnic and sexual exteriority that was "intellectual" in the sense that it assessed the social as comedy (from a distance), but it was also "heartfelt," seeking connections to the audience' (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004: 110). Expanding on Negrón-Muntaner's argument, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé zeroes in on scholarship on camp to engage with the erasure of diasporic queer Puerto Rican artists' cultural productions in critical discussions of 1960s and 1970s queer avant-garde cinema. He believes that in addition to 'discriminatory interracial and

interethnic politics', this erasure can be attributed to scholars' hegemonic tendency to read camp exclusively in terms of ironic distance (Cruz-Malavé, 2015: 594). If Negrón-Muntaner describes Woodlawn's camp aesthetics as a mixture of the 'intellectual' and the 'heartfelt', Cruz-Malavé argues that diasporic queer Puerto Rican avant-garde artists 'oscillate between irony and belief' (2015: 594).

Woodlawn's performance style in *Trash* reflects this type of hybridized camp aesthetics that thrive in the in-betweenness of the intellectual and the heartfelt, irony and belief. Woodlawn is tasked with invigorating the film's comedic sensibility while serving as its emotional core. This delicate balance is perhaps most evident in an infamous scene towards the end of the film in which a sexually frustrated Holly masturbates with a beer bottle next to Joe, with Woodlawn simulating the masturbation for the camera (this is perhaps the only simulated sex act in a film known for its explicit unsimulated sex scenes). Negrón-Muntaner reads this moment as constitutive of Morrissey's exploitation of Woodlawn's shame, an interpretation that is framed around the performer's confession that she was mortified by the scene. While it is significant to consider Woodlawn's perspective of this moment, her acting throughout crystallizes her ability to engage with camp as both irony and belief. The scene marks the culmination of a long sequence featuring Holly and Joe's home life; it begins with Holly attempting to get Joe aroused while telling him about her plans to apply for welfare so they can raise her pregnant sister's child once she gives birth. The scene places Holly's desires at the forefront, desires that include her sexual satisfaction as well as her desire for a family unit with Joe and her claim to legal recognition and state support in the form of welfare. When Joe is once again unable to achieve an erection, Holly lies down in bed and goes on to masturbate with a beer bottle while Joe sits right next to her drinking beer without reacting to her. Woodlawn's performance here is impressively committed and hyperbolic, her entire body twisting and turning as she yells 'I want welfare!' (*Trash*, 1970). The image of a dishevelled Woodlawn simulating masturbation and screaming about welfare is campy to the extent that it relies on a queer comedic artificiality and exaggeration. This scene always strikes me as a departure from other sex scenes in the film in which the various women Joe tries to seduce in exchange for drugs become frustrated with his non-existent sex drive. Of these women, Holly is the only one whose reaction is to take control of her own pleasure by recycling a beer bottle and turning it into a sex toy. The humour, then, partly emerges from Holly's ability to use her wit to counter Joe's soporific personality. Yet, it is the end of the scene that points to the brilliance of Woodlawn's performance while showcasing the collaboration between director and performer. Rather than ending the scene with Holly's orgasm, Morrissey continues the scene for a beat longer as Holly plainly,

heartbreakingly, delivers one last line: 'Joe . . . no more beer bottles' (*Trash*,1970). The vulnerability and longing with which Woodlawn infuses the line grounds the outrageous moment in her character's insistence on her right to be satisfied and her desire to be with Joe. As a performer, Woodlawn runs the gamut of shame, dignity, survival, agency and desire in a few minutes, exemplifying the potential of her artistry to produce moments of resistance.

Conclusion

In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, performance studies scholar Diana Taylor calls for a reading of performance that engages with its subversive potential, arguing that because performance acts as 'a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities of these other words offered in its place' (2003: 15). In revisiting *Trash* and Holly Woodlawn's involvement in the film, I have attempted to reframe the queer Puerto Rican performer's legacy. In particular, I focus on the ways in which her performance has often been denied the transformative agency that Taylor describes while highlighting the subversive potential of performance to disrupt the colonial dynamics at the centre of the relationship between queer diasporic Puerto Rican subjects and white avant-garde artists who receive the sole credit for the politically charged performances that have turned a film like *Trash* into a revered artifact of 1960s and 1970s queer popular culture. Holly Woodlawn was an artist whose performance aesthetics should be, indeed, read as an intervention and an accomplishment. Woodlawn invites us to imagine the possibilities of locating and celebrating unconventional forms of authorship and artistry beyond limited, traditional perspectives. Perhaps it is time to accept this invitation and allow Holly Woodlawn's star to shine on its own without the burden of being anyone's muse or inspiration, just Holly Woodlawn and her fabulous self.

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11

Bibi is a Sissy: Drag, Death by Silence and the Journey to Self-Determination

Nando Messias

I am Bibi Bolkan and I am a drag queen. I am also dead. I have suffered a metaphysical death, a metaphorical death, a conceptual death but a death, nonetheless. This death curtailed a story of hope, dreams and happy endings. It was brought about by my own silence. My muteness belied a history of pain, fear, oppression and other sentiments that failed for some time to find expression through my words. Although language failed them, these feelings have nevertheless found expression in my body, limbs and muscles. My skin bears their scars. I am here to expose them.

'My silences had not protected me,' Audre Lorde has said (2017: 2). The plural – '*silences*' – is piercing. '*Your* silence,' she booms, 'will not protect *you*' (ibid., my emphasis). My own body taught me that particular lesson. Yet, refusing to remain silent seems always fraught with peril. My silence will not protect me, I repeat as a mantra. This gives me courage. 'We can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles,' Lorde continues, 'and we will still be no less afraid' (ibid.: 4).

So, let me tell you the story of Bibi's short-lived life. Bibi's story is my story. I struggle to find the right words to use. Bibi is me. I am she. I will switch between first and third person, masculine and feminine pronoun, present and past tense, until I find my voice. Bear with me as I speak out.

What's in a name?

I chose my drag name myself. Bibi Bolkan was not given to me by a drag mother as tradition would have it. 'The decision to define ourselves, name ourselves' is an important one for Lorde (2017: 4). Self-determination, she teaches us, is an act of empowerment. Naming ourselves allows us to 'speak for ourselves instead of being defined and spoken for by others' (ibid.). Here again, the plural – '*ourselves*' – resonates. *Ourselves* speaks of a collective of voices; it alludes to a multiplicity of selves. We name our selves – Bibi, Sissy, Nando – at different stages.

'Bibi', short for Bibiana, references the matriarch in Érico Verissimo's historical novel *O Tempo e o Vento*.[1] As a name, Bibi is therefore an attempt to connect with my roots, the world from which I come. The name also references the Swedish actress of Bergman films, Bibi Andersson – not to be confused with Bibí Andersen, Spanish trans actor and Almodóvar muse. 'Bibi', moreover, is a play on words. 'Bi', the prefix for 'two' can also be short for '*bicha*' (the derogatory word for faggot in my native Brazil). 'Bi' is indeed what effeminate gay men may call each other in jest. It is one of those words not to be uttered unless one identifies as belonging to that particular community lest it seem hate speech. 'Bi-bi' is therefore faggot twice and, like Sissy, a repetition of syllables.[2]

Bibi's alliterative surname, Bolkan, is an homage to Florinda Bolkan, Brazilian actress in Visconti's films such as *The Damned* (1969), which includes a drag performance of Marlene Dietrich's *Blue Angel* and a homosexual orgy. Bibi Bolkan is therefore a name of multi-layered meanings. It references kinship, nationality, aspiration and self-determination. It embodies the spirit of fabulous-becoming by citing three European film stars, thus reversing the negative effects of a pejorative name.

Brazil 1993

I was a teenager living in the city of Porto Alegre, the capital of the southern-most state of Brazil. This is an important detail. Despite its reputation as a sexually liberated, friendly and inclusive nation, Brazil has a strong conservative streak. According to a report by the watchdog group Gay da Bahia (2017), one LGBT Brazilian person died every nineteen hours of a violent homophobic murder that year.[3] The report, 'Brazil: World Champion of LGBT-related Crime', reveals this to be the largest number of recorded LGBT murders since records began in 1980. Brazil is one of the world's most violent countries, with a record of 62,000 homicides in 2016, 445 of which were directly related to homophobia.

My hometown, Porto Alegre ('Gay Port') is no provincial town. It is one of the largest cities in the country with approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. Yet, in 2017, an exhibition of queer art, 'Queermuseu', was cancelled following a campaign by right-wing protesters.[4] This was unprecedented in the history of Brazil, a country that endured 21 years of military dictatorship.[5]

Rio Grande do Sul (the 'Great Southern River') shares a border – as well as cultural affinity – with neighbouring Uruguay and Argentina. The climate is milder than the tropical heat commonly associated with Brazil. It is known as *gaucho* land.[6] It prides itself on its macho culture and is more conservative in

its mores than the rest of the country. The state was founded by Jesuits and couples from the Azores. The population is mostly white, European descendants; not European as a contemporary European would understand it but, rather, a more nineteenth-century version of the term. The power of the crowd seems stronger here as well as in the rest of Brazil, rendering the individual less solid. Toleration of difference is strongly discouraged.

So this is the backdrop to my story: a rising number of LGBT murders and the curtailment of freedom of speech. To be clear: this situation is nothing new. Repressive measures against queer people did not suddenly appear out of the blue in 2017 in Brazil. The threat and realization of daily violence had always been a reality for me. I never knew life in my native country without fear. Verbal abuse started the moment I stepped out of my front door. It happened every day and went on all day. It is still there to greet me every time I step off an aeroplane to visit. The overbearing homophobia was, indeed, the very reason why I chose to leave the country. The choice was between life and death. Had I stayed, I might have become one of those statistics by being more dangerously provocative, more confrontational in my gender presentation, more reckless in demonstrating my frustration. In leaving, I chose sanity in the face of living a life that threatened to efface me.

The reported number of deaths is a statistical reality, not coincidences or paranoid fantasy. Life is what was at stake back in 1993, the year Bibi's story takes place. It was at stake in 2003 when I left. It is still at stake today.

Back to 1993

RuPaul's 'Supermodel (You Better Work)' had just been released.[7] This anthem soundtracked many of my nights out back then. The success of this track proclaimed a new celebrity. All of a sudden, RuPaul was everywhere in Brazil: television, magazines and radio. Not only was a drag star born, a queer icon came into existence too. RuPaul's visibility brought mainstream recognition: a man dressed in women's clothes was seen to exist in a different light, away from the dark recesses of underground culture.

As a child, I was accustomed to watching transgender artists on television. *O Show de Calouros* was a variety show where *transformistas*[8] competed for the title of best performance. I recall my boyish fascination with the *transformistas*' glamorous beauty. I also recall being confused by the disparaging comments they elicited from my relatives. The derision clashed with my child's admiration, making it seem illicit, forbidden or somewhat wrong to aspire to be like these artists on television. So I tucked that desire away.

Rogéria and Roberta Close were part of a selected elite. They were household names, media royalty. They appeared in films and soap operas and on magazine covers. Yet, their journey to acceptance required displacement. They had lived in Paris and so were honorary Europeans. Their success stories were outlined by shadows too, dark rumours of sordid pasts in the underbelly of society. The mixed messages were too perplexing for my infantile mind. The *transformistas* broadcast into my family living room were beautiful freaks. I wanted to be like them – a forbidden desire.

RuPaul promised change. Or perhaps simply marked the arrival of my early adulthood when I no longer needed permission. I am aware that acceptance may not be a desired goal for all. Conversely, I am also conscious that underground culture should be measured according to a different set of values. A clandestine, subversive and alternative life can be a good thing, it can be desirable. It can even be romantic.

The problem arises when the conditions are created by external forces to keep queer subjects in the margins of society, where we can only exist under duress and the ominous shadow of violence. The trouble remains when we, as queer subjects, see no alternative, no way out of our precarious condition in larger society. Issue is taken when we are treated as outcasts. The real trouble begins when we are told by the powerful that we can *only* exist subterraneously, out of sight, in our place. This predicament is further distinguished by a sense of powerlessness, which often leads us to relinquish our efforts at dismantling the mechanisms that oppress us, resulting in a felt sense that any attempt we might make in the direction of freedom is futile.

RuPaul and drag offered me a role model I had been denied. Through RuPaul's promise of fabulous-becoming, a new future became possible and so I was reborn. Bibi was a creative act of re-invention, self-transformation, resistance against the turmoil surrounding me.

Her auburn *picumã*[9] was cut in an extreme bob, flicking dramatically upwards at the jawbone. Her face was framed by a hairband high across the forehead, fashioned out of a narrow silk scarf. The makeup was inspired by a young Twiggy: doll eyes, decorated with an enormous pair of fake lashes at the top and pencil-drawn ones at the bottom. Think Lady Miss Kier of Deee Lite. Bibi aspired to be a supermodel like the mononymous girls in RuPaul's song: Cindy, Naomi, Claudia, Linda, Nikki. In the documentary *Paris Is Burning* Octavia Saint Laurent expresses a similar aspiration. 'I think if I could be on TV or film or anything, I'd do that instead of the money,' she says. Fame is too alluring, it trumps financial stability. It promises release from the existential quagmire.

Octavia's bedroom wall is an altar, pinned with icons of supermodels, goddesses from fashion magazines, with Paulina as her main idol. 'Someday I

hope to be up there with her,' she confesses. 'If that could be me, I think I would be the happiest person in the world just knowing that I could compare to Paulina.' Octavia seems mesmerized by Paulina's ability to embody different facets of herself.

> I look at her there [pointing to a photo] and I'd say that she is seductive and alluring. I look at her there [another photo] and say that she is sexy and provocative. I look at her here [a third photo] and say that she is childish and little-girl type . . . and I look at her here [a final one] and I think of wicked beauty.

Paulina's powers of transformation bear testimony to escapism. Her ability to live out alternative lives is proof on glossy paper, that it is possible to live a different life. Paulina is Octavia's fairy princess.

Like Octavia, Bibi too dreamt of being famous. If only she had been discovered by a modelling scout, she too might have left her small-minded hometown behind. The ambiguity of idealizing the fashion industry is not lost here. Whereas fashion is built on the reinforcement of gender binaries, normalization and quasi-tyrannical notions of body image, it can also be the stuff of dreams, a construct around which marginalized communities can coalesce. In her response to the criticisms made of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler goes back to the drag act. 'Drag performers,' she suggests in *Undoing Gender*, 'tend to live in communities, and there are strong ritual bonds, such as those we see in the film *Paris Is Burning*, which make us aware of the resignification of social bonds that gender minorities within communities of color can and do forge' (Butler, 2004a: 216). It was not until I moved to Britain in 2003 that I came to understand what it meant to be perceived as a queer of colour. Although the identity handle 'latino' does not have as much currency in the United Kingdom as it does in the United States, my lived experience in my new home is still one of feeling tolerated rather than really accepted. In many ways, I feel I have experienced both sides of the privilege coin: white, middle class and European in Brazil; immigrant in Britain. My queer identity, nevertheless, has more often than not granted me a place on the outskirts of whichever society I have marginally inhabited.

In the light of all that, the desire to appear on the cover of a fashion magazine seems more than a trivial whim. 'We are talking about a cultural life of fantasy,' suggests Butler (2004a: 216). This cultural life of fantasy, continues Butler, 'not only organizes the material conditions of life, but . . . also produces sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible, and which works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia and transphobia' (ibid.). Fashion, it turns out, allows for an engagement of community,

recognition and protection at the same time as it oppresses. Fashion and the idealization of models usher in a paradox: it excludes precisely those it works to entice. The dynamic is more than mere identification with the oppressor, of course. It is about self-transformation, resignification, social bonds, rights of protection and life of fantasy.

José Esteban Muñoz has written extensively on queers of colour.[10] Like Butler, Muñoz has written against considering vogueing 'as simple appropriation of high fashion or other aspects of commodity culture' (2009: 80). Instead, he suggests it 'contains an articulate message for all to read, in this case a message of fabulousness and fantastical becoming' (ibid.).

Horizontal bonds and identity markers

Octavia was not a drag-queen. She identified as 'third gender'. 'Me being third gender,' she says, 'I am truly proud to be what I am. I wouldn't be female. I wouldn't be a man if I had the choice' (*How Do I Look*, 2006). Her self-defined status seems to provoke fear in others and a sense of power in herself. 'They are afraid of me,' she says, 'because I am much more extraordinary, I'm much more exciting, I'm much more beautiful, I'm much more enchanting. I have the powers of a man and the charm of a woman and that's dangerous' (ibid.). Like Octavia, I have also experienced the dynamic tension inherent in the danger of remaining misaligned in a third position.

Having allied myself to Octavia's trans-feminine politics, I am yet mindful not to conflate our identities. Octavia's lived experience as a 'third gender' is not the same as mine as an effeminate man. My reality is not the same as that lived by Muñoz either even if we are both Latin American queer males in English-speaking countries. In engaging with their words and legacies my intention is not to speak for them but, rather, to create horizontal communal bonds. In doing this, my aim is to allow their voices to be heard so that their struggles are acknowledged, even if posthumously. In paying heed to their demands for recognition, I hope to make sure they did not shout into a void. I profit from this attachment too. The risk of failing to create such 'coalitional exchanges' (Butler, 2009: 28) leaves us all exposed. 'What is necessary is that those engaged in such coalition efforts be actively involved in thinking through the category of the "minority"' (ibid.: 147).

I am also aware that the reality of Octavia's 'message of fabulousness and fantastical becoming', to use the words of Muñoz, is a much harsher one than the images which she left behind may lead us to believe. The promise of Butler's 'cultural life of fantasy', in other words, remained somewhat unfulfilled

for her. Many of the artists featured in Livingston's and Busch's documentaries (and many of the *transformistas* I saw on television as a child in Brazil) struggled with addiction, sex work and HIV. Despite her legendary beauty, Octavia died young. Her supermodel dreams failed to save her.

Bibi's life – like that of a mayfly – only lasted one day. Unlike the garments of the supermodels in her fantasy, Bibi's were borrowed and ill-fitting. The shoes were a size too small but that did not matter because their heels were high. She was, at last, going to the ball: a drag ball. As she drove there, the police stopped her. I was interrogated and searched. I cannot help but wonder if this stop-and-search was performed on a false pretext, nothing to do with suspicion of crime but a case of gender profiling, institutional intimidation. I had become too visible. The police worked. The humiliation was such that, filled with shame, I turned home. I never reached the ball.

I had grown used to public derision of my visible effeminacy. It is axiomatic of the lives of many marginalized people: whether we want it or not, we learn to survive, our skin becomes thicker so to speak. In stepping out in drag, I had become *too* visible, *too* loud, *too* confident. Someone had to put me back in my place. And so they did. I said nothing as my carriage became a pumpkin. My tight crystal slippers with their high heels were returned to their rightful owner. They did not fit me anyway. I did not speak out. My silence did not protect me.

Leaving Brazil

The stakes became too high. There I was in 1993, living a cultural moment (the rise of drag) amidst rising social and political struggle. Staying in Brazil would have meant not only a metaphorical death but probably a real one. I was quickly becoming more of a liability to myself, more careless in the fearlessness of my gender presentation, more ferocious, savage, fierce. I might have died. The subsequent statistics argue it. This fear of death is not born of mere suspicions or a generalized mistrust of others. It is based on verifiable numbers. I had no alternative but to leave. It took me another decade to do so. In the end, I gave up the fight. I had to save myself. I never had been capable of pretending, straight-acting, blending in to this increasingly violent society. The situation was ruthless and unavoidable.

Mercifully I had understanding parents so I had a home. My violations of gender norms had other costs. Most urgent, perhaps, was the fulfilment of a livable life. Butler reminds us that in some countries, 'still, imprisonment and incarceration are possible consequences' (2004a: 214) for sexual and

gender non-conformity. The police might have put me in a cell that night. Brazilian law fails to protect queer subjects. Homophobic speech is not a federal crime. Discrimination and lack of protection extend to medical discourse too. In 2017, a Brazilian judge approved gay 'conversion therapy', overruling a 1999 decision by the Federal Council of Psychology that forbade the widely discredited treatment. The notion that there is a cure for homosexuality is premised on the assumption that it is a disease. Even that battle has not been won in Brazil yet. I know the emotional sequelae of psychiatric treatment for gender dysphoria. Despite the love from my parents, they failed to predict the effect of the medical treatment they sought for the misalignment of my six-year-old body. Medical, legal and social discourses continue to contribute to the marginalization of the population of sexual and gender minorities in Brazil.

It won't do, therefore, to call Bibi's mayfly life of 1993 merely play or fun even if that constituted a significant part of the experience. Although gender can sometimes be a game of fun, it can also be a game of 'serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure one seeks, the fantasy one embodies, the gender one performs' (Butler, 2004a: 214). The price of living the fantasy of one's desired gender can come at the cost of the threat of violence, poverty and the struggle to survive.

Given the governmental and societal attempts in Brazil to subjugate my effeminate body into conformity, it is no wonder it has taken me twenty-five years to speak at a less emotional cost to myself. Fear prevented me from revealing myself in any of my drag glory. Fear, I have learnt, is my liability but also my asset. And so is anger.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have grappled with silence, life and death. I have explored the dynamic tensions in the act of drag by giving voice to a part of me that had hitherto been silenced. In exploring silence, I have gained a deeper understanding of the reasons why one might give in to coercion. Butler has claimed that 'it is precisely because one does not want to lose one's status as a viable speaking being that one does not say what one thinks' (2004b: xix–xx). One loses said status, as I have shown, in a country where one's gender continues to be pathologized, behaviour criminalized and freedom of expression censored. The status of a speaking subject is relinquished when one's ontological given is inherently, inescapably and forcibly tied up with precariousness, vulnerability and violence. The social stigma is fatal. Surviving comes only with the knowledge that one is not meant to survive.

In leaving Brazil, I felt I was silencing myself. In truth, I could *not* remain silent and therefore had to leave. In writing this chapter, the imperative for me has been to remember Bibi. I have pondered 'the question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence [. . .] Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grieavable life*?' (Butler, 2004b: 20, emphasis in original). The journey to finally grieve Bibi has had to pass through a reflection of what constitutes life first. 'Lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living' (Butler, 2009: 1). The premise of my investigation has been the social death of a fictional character. This potentially narrow and personal framework, nevertheless, has served as a window through which to contemplate and reflect on larger conditions of precarity.

Bibi is dead. Her life was ephemera.

Sissy is now also deceased. I buried her once I realized I am not a victim but a survivor.[11] 'I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior,' says Lorde (2017: 3).

Nando is still standing. He will mourn Bibi and Sissy, remembering their truth, beauty and valour.

I am sitting at my desk writing this conclusion as one-night only drag-queen, a lifetime Sissy, an immigrant, a queer effeminate émigré. Lorde's words ring loudly: 'I am still alive, and might not have been' (2017: 1). For now, I choose to cherish my anger. It is vulnerability and power and gives me strength to persevere.

I am furious. My rage is infinite.

I am angry at myself for being silent, for taking so long to speak out, for failing to protect Bibi, for giving into fear, for being such a Sissy.

I am angry at Bibi for not fighting or speaking out.

I am angry at Sissy for giving up and abandoning me.

I am angry at my motherland for leaving me no option but exile. It was a place that had no place for me.

My fury and pain are creative sources. The question I must now examine is this: how to react non-violently? (See Butler, 2020.) I am committed to being what I want to be rather than obeying 'those raucous, persuasive and threatening voices from the outside, pressuring [me] to be what the world wants [me] to be' (Lorde, 2017: 51).

To the Brazilian queens I never met, I say thank you for inspiring me to confront my own insecurities, fears and prejudices. Unlike you, I never had the courage to become the drag superstar I could have been. You were braver than I ever was. Your fabulousness and fierceness continue to inspire me.

Rogéria, Rebecca McDonald (both RIP), Roberta Close, Gloria Crystal, Márcia Pantera: this chapter is dedicated to you.

Notes

1 *O Tempo e o Vento* (*Time and the Wind*) is a trilogy of novels about a traditional family and societal change set in southern Brazil, between 1745 and 1944.
2 Sissy is an identity marker I adopted for ten years. Through the guise of Sissy, I developed performances exploring my place in the world as an effeminate man. Even though Sissy addresses the specific struggles faced by the effeminate man, drag tropes have strongly informed the performance work I developed during that period. For a critical reflection on my Sissy series, see Messias (2016, 2017, 2018).
3 I am using the acronym LGBT (rather than LGBTQ, which includes 'Queer') in accordance with the report.
4 'Queermuseu' was an exhibition at the Santander Bank Cultural Centre which included 263 works by artists such as Candido Portinari and Lygia Clark.
5 The military government ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Freedom of speech and political opposition were both stifled in a regime that favoured nationalism and anti-Communism.
6 *Gaucho* (in Portuguese, *gaúcho*) is a skilled horseman with a reputation for being manly and brave. He is the national symbol of Argentina, Uruguay and southern Brazil. He somewhat resembles the American cowboy in the tradition of rural, horse-based cultures, devoting himself to lassoing and raising cattle.
7 'Supermodel (You Better Work)' (1993): written by RuPaul, Jimmy Harry, Larry Tee. Produced by Eric Kupper. Released by Tommy Boy.
8 'Transformista' is a Brazilian term that encompasses drag queens, drag kings, cross-dressers, transvestites and transpersons. Translated literally it means 'transformer' and is linked in origin to the practice of quick-change.
9 *Picumã* is the word for hair in Brazilian gay slang. Created as a form of secret communication, Brazilian gay patois combines words from Portuguese, Tupi (native Indian language) and those derived from Afro-religions such as candomblé.
10 See J.E. Muñoz (1999, 2009).
11 Here I refer to the final performance of the Sissy series, *Death and the Sissy* (2017), where I staged a theatricalized funeral for this persona with which I had been working for the previous ten years. The performances under the Sissy umbrella consisted of a trilogy: *Sissy!* (2008), *The Sissy's Progress* (2015) and *Shoot the Sissy* (2016) as well as the previously mentioned epilogue *Death and the Sissy*. For more, including images and reviews, go to http://www.nandomessias.com

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12

Mother Sally and the Fig Leaf: Re/Productions of a Carnival Character in Barbados

Nick Ishmael-Perkins

This chapter begins a discussion of how drag performance and its study might be useful to read the development and traditions of carnival in Barbados. Starting with the relationship of female impersonation in some carnival traditions, the discussion moves to look at the relationship between colonialism, globalization and shifts in the understanding of identity in order to discuss how drag discourses might connect and augment extant readings. To trace one narrative of the usefulness of drag discourses for the analysis of carnival, this chapter focuses on the drag-like Mother Sally figure, tracing some of the influences of gender politics and globalized forms of Westernized drag on the character's development and its analysis.

Female impersonation and carnival

The history of drag in the Caribbean is, as it is in many other places, complex. However, significantly for a post/colonized region, it does not depend on the United States or Western Europe for its historical continuity, at least not in the way we might expect. It is true in Barbados, for instance, there have been occasional drag shows since the 1990s, which would be recognizable as fitting into a normative Western frame, such as contemporary international headliners like RuPaul. These kinds of shows and performers do not, however, demonstrate a place to look in order to understand the way a tradition of performance of female impersonation has been shaped by and comments on national identities.

To understand the story of drag in Barbados it helps to turn to a cultural institution central across the region – carnival, which is not without its own complicated history. Rosamond King (2016) explains that carnivals in the Caribbean are not only centres of economic activity but crucially have also

'turned into highly contested, representational sites of national and regional cultural identities' (48). King explores what she calls 'transvestite festival characters' (48), which are ubiquitous across the region. Mother Sally, the 'transvestite' character now associated with Barbadian carnival, or Crop-Over as it's known locally, has had a unique development and one which is particularly helpful for interrogating the drivers of female performativity in the Caribbean.[1]

Referring to these characters as somehow 'transvestite' is dated and highly contested (for a discussion of the complexity of the relation of transvestism and newly minted gender non-conforming identities, see Edward and Farrier, 2020). Certainly, 'transvestite' in this context also misses the point of the role as performance which is distinct from the performativity associated with everyday gender norms. As I note below, Mother Sally requires a style of performance so critical to playing the character that it transcends the gender of the player. Nonetheless King makes the point that we are bound to see performance and carnival and draw more accessible and contemporary meanings from it, particularly when we are uncertain about the origins. She also proposes a continuum for Caribbean 'transvestitism' which locates masquerade at one end of the spectrum (King, 2016: 45–50). Following this idea means reading a character like Mother Sally in relation to drag practice, as opposed to necessarily a definition of drag (should a satisfactory one exist). Indeed, to chart the history of this drag-like performance means being alive to nuance, particularly historically and geographically, and open to suggestion as much as an impulse to correct it and layer Mother Sally into a dominant Western norm of drag definition or history. In this way it is possible to see that these transvestite masquerades deliver a performance shaped by the psycho-drama of nations around their ideas of gender, class, nationality and race (King, 2016: 50).

In order to understand the specific role of Mother Sally, an examination of the structure of carnival and the cast of characters that surround her is useful. First, it is worth saying that Crop-Over in Barbados, as is the case with many carnivals in the Caribbean and Latin America, is more of a season than a single parade. The celebrations come to a climax with a parade or series of parades and the weeks preceding these is filled with parties (or fêtes as they are more known), musical competitions (featuring local genre, calypso) and associated bespoke events. In Barbados this provides the opportunity for a range of festive characters. These range from Kings and Queens of bands who are invariably dignified embodiments of a band's artistic interpretation of a theme on the day of the parade, to the edifice of Mr Harding, dressed in merchant class finery but impotent to the point of being literally wooden. In other countries the cast of characters grows larger;

Vejigantes in Puerto Rico are scary, *Calife* in the Dominican Republic and midnight robber in Trinidad and Tobago are erudite. There are also a number of 'transvestite' characters across the region. The clear shared feature of these transvestite characters is that all are mockeries of the women they are meant to portray (King, 2016: 50).

King describes Mother Sally in summary as 'simultaneously undersexed, hypersexual, and outside of the modern world' in behaviour and old time dress (2016: 50). The character is typically presented in the formal costume of the eighteenth century with exaggerated curves. Voluptuousness is reflected in breasts, hips and wigs. RuPaul, or one of her contemporaries, might describe the character as padded for the gods. Mother Sally is known less for her script – in fact it is not uncommon for the character to be mute – and more for her dance. She will typically, wantonly, attempt to seduce every man in sight with gyrations and physical comedy. Much of the comedy from the performance is derived from the tension between her attempts at propriety in dress and her clumsy efforts to express her oversized sex drive. In Barbados, the character is typically accompanied by a 'tuk band', a group of musicians playing apparently improvised percussive instruments with an unrelenting but deceptively complex rhythm. Interestingly, both Dame Lorraine in Trinidad and Tobago and the Dominican Republic's *roba la gallina* dress with the same exaggerated proportions but only Mother Sally has the signature bawdy persona and dance moves.

Mother Sally is not the same kind of bawdy character as might be seen in British Pantomime, a form known for family audiences; her character is rather more adult. To understand something of the spectacle of the character, when tuk bands would wander the streets at various Crop-Over related festivities in the mid-twentieth century, children would be sequestered in their houses or held behind relatives to avoid observing Mother Sally in action. Although the reason that Mother Sally would have been hidden from children two generations ago is not only because the character was sexualized but also she was genuinely scary with make-up or masks evoking demons or general revulsion, rather than Hollywood allure. To understand this presentation we must turn to the origins of the character – and her rowdy band of (male) musicians.

African and folklore context

Historically, carnival represents an opportunity to invert the status quo and can be seen as sites of resistance and reclamation because it 'uniquely allowed for bold expressions of dissidence and thus pointed to a "revolution of the

mind" in the form of a kind of alternative reality' (Crichlow, 2012: 2). This is a repeated and powerful narrative in the context of the Caribbean because it allows cultural identity to embrace two seemingly opposing claims at once. On one hand there is the Christian tradition of Lent, which requires sacrifice and subservience. In the last days before Lent a good congregant will ensure that they set themselves up for the period of abstinence to come by exhausting the pantry both literally and metaphorically. The carnival is associated with release. Behaviour is expected to be transgressive and around the world there are examples of carnivals drawing on pagan traditions (Crichlow, 2012: 2). On the other hand, in the context of the Caribbean, where the sexuality of the African descendants was simultaneously policed and feared, ignored and diminished by the colonial masters, carnival was a time to express oneself within the sanctions of European tradition. Carnival is of course a socially constructed institution and however it has evolved in this context, it usefully positions these post-colonial societies as both pious and self-determined. It is a narrative that is embraced and reproduced by national interests as it appeases divergent constituencies and, as we shall see, that effort to have it both ways has extended to the production of Mother Sally.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the origins of Mother Sally suggest that her genesis is a character called Bubalups (Atkinson, 2019).[2] This character was as sexualized as Mother Sally but, crucially, she was not as well presented. She would appear in a confrontational housedress with underwear and slip showing. Bubalups was also remarkably ugly. Performers would often opt for masks bearing no resemblance to the glamour of today's drag queens.[3] However, as Mother Sally evolved she adopted the dress of the Trinidadian Dame Lorraine and the pompous dimensions of that character. Tellingly, there is some speculation that Bubalups even acquired her new name through colonial ties, as there is a character called Sally in Ireland, which Irish indentured servants could easily have shared with domestic slaves (King, 2016).[4] The name itself may not have changed the conventions of the performance but it would certainly indicate something of the evolving self-consciousness of the performance. In effect, Mother Sally in her presentation at carnival was a gradual development of piety around the characterization.

The reference to Mother Sally's antecedents as literally masked characters speaks to another claim associated with Carnival. There is a long-held popular idealist notion that carnival and many of its accoutrements provided an opportunity for disguised rebellion – though this position has been refined, famously by Eagleton (1981) for instance, to be seen as activity licensed and permissible by the state. Nevertheless, carnival presents an opportunity for slaves to reclaim their heritage in a 'nexus of intensity'

(Burton, 1997: 157), an articulate expression of both the upset and re-stabilization of social structures. In Barbados the most potent example of this is the burning of Mr Harding, which is a special festival for the lighting of an effigy – Mr Harding being a representation of a slave master. But there were other more subtle points of resistance as well. The improvised instruments of the 'tuk band' presented a loud and celebratory recreation of the language of drums so central to ethnic groups across Africa. This narrative of reclamation through carnival extends to Mother Sally too.

Mother Sally can be seen as part of a long line of African transvestite masquerades, in which men honour the fertility of women with exaggerated performance of gender difference (King, 2016). For instance, the Nigerian Gelede is a Yoruba tradition where male performers don colourful masks and costumes (typically resembling skirts) in ritual dance to honour 'mothers'. The 'mother' can be an ancestor, deity or elderly member of the community. Their appearance in a crowd is a potent reminder of the special – specifically spiritual – power of women in sustaining African society (see Grillo's 2018 study of women in West Africa). It was typical in these ritual performances that women did not participate, so all female characters reflected a sort of transvestitism. This is the root that secures Mother Sally or Bubalups in an aesthetic of female impersonation more closely connected to African mythology than nightclub drag. Indeed, as Atkinson has observed, Mother Sally has always been more about 'masks than sunglasses' (Atkinson, 2019).

It is instructive though to observe how transvestite characters have endured as part of carnival. The mocking idiocy of Mother Sally and her type, such as Dame Lorraine, are clearly evident in contemporary carnivals but others such as Trinidad's pis-en-lit and Jamette performers have largely disappeared. King suggests these other transvestite characters were too intimidating for the heteropatriarchy (King, 2016). Indeed, this patriarchy survived the end of slavery and the independence movements intact. The pis-en-lit, which translates as 'piss the bed' – featured men in flimsy women's nightgowns or naked apart from a menstrual cloth to hide their genitals, wandering around with chamber pots and associated props, dancing lasciviously. The spectacle of the character is made more potent by the context of its performance as part of the Jamette carnival, a masquerade of characters from the underworld: criminal, freakish and all around disreputable. As The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago (2016) report, *The Port of Spain Gazette of 1888* noted: 'Most of the bands of men dressed as women paraded the whole city from morning to night, repeating the same songs containing double ententes of the most obscene manner, meaning and dancing in the lewdest manner.' Europeans saw this as a crass effort to mock Victorian values and an indulgence of the debased morality of the African descendants.

The Barbados Dance Theatre, founded in 1968, provides a useful trajectory for Mother Sally. The character would first feature in the company's work as part of its volunteers' mandate to document and recreate folk tradition. In that context, Mother Sally was an authentic recreation but then it became a cultural artefact, packaged as part of the Barbadian cultural product, and as this happened the character seemed increasingly divorced from context and more self-consciously reproduced for a critical gaze, her unique blend of gender performance traditions increasingly lost in production. To be clear, this is not an observation that is unique to the dance company but it is interesting how Mother Sally has become cultural collateral in a process of globalization. In fact, it might be more productive to see Mother Sally herself as a site of tension between postcard representation and a dynamic power struggle engaging ideas of gender, race, neoliberalism and nationhood.

The route that plots the historical emergence of Mother Sally has profoundly shaped contemporary performance of her. This process of evolution however, as noted above in the tension between heritage and cultural tourism, reflects conflicted ideas about who is her audience. Mother Sally is now performed almost exclusively for tourists in Barbados. The anticipation of this foreigner gaze has shaped a number of features not only of the performance but also around the very story of the character's origins.

King acknowledges that while there is not much documented as fact about the origins of Mother Sally, it leaves the character particularly vulnerable to reinterpretation and appropriation by different movements within the national culture. For instance, there are some who argue that the African origins of Mother Sally are dubious but emphasized as a means to distinguish the performance and character from female impersonation and transvestites in the West (King, 2016). Similarly, Mother Sally was dressed up to be more palatable for the Christian patriarchy, proving again that the narrative of slave reclamation and devotional compliance is not as empirically incompatible as might first appear.

Commercialization and national identities

An unvarnished truth is that Crop-Over in Barbados was re-invented by economic globalization, not the Catholic or Anglican Church. It was in fact a harvest celebration revived and transformed for economic growth (King, 2016). Barbados, being unique in the Caribbean for only having ever had one colonial master – the British – was more Protestant than Catholic. So the traditional pre-Lentan carnival was never a major feature of the national consciousness. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Barbados Board of

Tourism needed something to generate marketing buzz at the height of the northern summer, which is typically a low season for tourists (King, 2016). It also wanted to tap in to the tropical carnival brand but with a bit of competitive edge. Crop-Over is the end of the sugar cane season in the region. This gave the festival an authentic link to its colonial past but ironically also served to emphasize overwhelmingly commercial drivers (although it should be noted that, as the carnival climaxes on the first weekend of August, there is a nominal link with August 1st, the day in 1834 when slaves were legally emancipated in the British empire). This is significant for the development of Mother Sally. By the 1980s she became part of a cultural site conceived for an external audience but drawing on some reproduction of authentic cultural artefacts. This led to certain modifications in the performance.

There is a well-rehearsed argument in the region, which King recites, that the greater a country's dependence on tourism, the more likely the festive characters are to be sanitized to avoid causing offence to tourists (2016: 49). In 2012, tourism was 39.4 per cent of Barbados' GDP, compared with 8.4 per cent for Trinidad and Tobago the same year. In fact there are few countries in the region as reliant on tourism as Barbados. Another consideration is that the island is 166 square miles and culturally very homogenous; there is not much space to 'hide' or tactfully neglect some festive accoutrement, unlike in the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico where 'transvestite' characters continue to be relatively 'transgressive'.

However, in the context of Barbados, Mother Sally could not be hidden and there is a collective anxiety that this might offend the tourist gaze or misrepresent the transvestite practice on the island. This awkwardness was managed in Barbados in two ways. First, the character was 'buried' in the publicity for the island's tourism industry (King, 2016: 46). The rationale being that tourists (presumably male and heterosexual) expect young women in bikinis, not drag artists in nineteenth-century fashion, perpetuating a heteronormative and anaemic idea of the island as a holiday destination; again revealing how the production of the performance was as much about the native's idea of the colonizer reading, as the colonizer's reading itself. Second, Mother Sally was played by a woman. It is now rare to find a man playing the character; although, notably, women play the character with the same bawdy physicality of the men and so the racial, gender and class stereotypes underpinning the performance are laid bare. Previously, it might be argued, they were masked by the spectacle of drag.

These received ideas of black working-class women were also made more potent by men who play the mocked woman and the mocking man without having their own masculinity called into question (King, 2016). Once, the performer's masculinity might have been called into question as a result of the

globalized notion of gay, 'transvestitism' was dropped but the narrative for the character remains intact; desperate for a man she debases herself but is ultimately easily satisfied by any man (King, 2016: 50). There is also a new representation for the national psyche in keeping with this normative Mother Sally; she reflects what Caribbean men like about big women. This is a narrative that nationals (again presumably men) are happy with, even if it reinforces stereotypes about the sexuality of black women, albeit now with a celebratory abandon.

The character seems so toxically sexist that it is difficult to imagine it thrives in a country that voted in a female prime minister with an ambitious socially progressive agenda in 2019. In Barbados, however, there is a small but vocal opposition to the current production of Mother Sally, much of it based on the misogyny around the character. There was not as much critique when men played the role, but it might be that there was less pervasive feminist critique in most cultural spaces before the 1980s anyway.

Observing this debate on the island, I am struck by two features. There are some critiques of drag performance elsewhere in the world, which extend beyond misogyny to racism and classism, but it seems to have little impact as unreconstructed drag performance flourishes on televisions and in bars. In that regard, this self-consciousness about Mother Sally might well be another expression of cultural cringe, as a socially progressive community expresses anxiety about how particular discourses will respond to a cultural artefact. In turn they seek, ironically, to (re)shape again, the production of Mother Sally.

The other feature is that if indeed the transvestitism of the character goes back to African traditions which privileged male performers, then this era of Mother Sally performed almost exclusively by female dancers and comediennes should be seen as a watershed for women's economic empowerment. Whatever the position, it is not the case that any of this contestation has undermined the success of the character. On the contrary, Mother Sally turns up not only at Crop-Over but also in hotel ballrooms and street fairs across the island, around the year. Mother Sally is kind of vaudevillian end-of-pier stuff now.

Current attitudes

Possibly the biggest driver of the current production of Mother Sally is the global LGBTQ movement. The shift from male to female performers happened in the mid-1990s. It coincided with the international emergence of RuPaul and the globalization of HIV/AIDS activism. It was as if there were a sudden awareness of the fig leaf that was 'festive' transvestism. The notion emerged that this could mean something else which was not about African reclamation, religious piety or the celebration of the heteronormative

patriarchy. So Mother Sally went from grotesque and carnivalesque to bawdy hilarity while carefully avoiding feminine realness. Mother Sally has evolved but this impersonation will stay carefully clear of fishnets and disco balls. Ironically, when, as reported by Martin (2019), RuPaul said real drag will never be mainstream he could have been speaking about this festive character.

The cultural transformation is so thorough that the last time female impersonation took centre stage at Crop-Over was during a performance of a calypso by the artiste Billboard, called 'Sex Change', which mocked transgenderism in 2018. Transmen and women across the Caribbean have a complex reaction to these 'transvestite' festival characters. The mocking intended for women is now easily extended to transphobia. King calls it a reflection of 'backhanded attitudes' towards transgendered citizens (2016: 46). The conflation of transvestitism, transgenderism and homosexuality indicates though how under-developed the discourse is around these issues, particularly in cultural contexts like Caribbean carnival.

Mother Sally's evolution is driven by a confluence of seduction and shame: to liberate the national population at one point and to attract a foreign audience at another with cultural artefacts all the while maintaining a distance from certain narratives of (homo)sexuality that are deemed problematic for construction of national identity. In reality the future of Mother Sally is at a crossroads. In one scenario, there is the road to further censorship and despair. Artist Ewan Atkinson noted that in 2014 he included a photo diptych in his graduation exhibition called *Bubalups, Mother Sally Private Audition*.[5] It featured Atkinson himself in a more 'authentic' grotesque rendering of the characters with sexual undertones. Some viewers found it distasteful and he was forced to remove it from the exhibition. The association with drag, homosexuality and transgenderism is unlikely to disappear and while the country has no history of persecuting anyone for sodomy, there is still powerful resistance to changing the law that makes it illegal, reflecting a profound and enduring distaste for LGBTQ rights in some quarters. In this scenario Mother Sally will be given new meanings; young people are already amazed to imagine that the character was ever played by men. Mother Sally will not be part of the struggle going forward.

There is another scenario, of course. This one imagines that the same global campaign that gave rise to this particular self-consciousness around Mother Sally will offer a way out. The truth is, drag is now practised in ways that are more associated with the kind of cultural expression expression associated with RuPaul and the balls of New York. A popular show which is intermittently resurrected in Barbados is *Mannequins in Motion*. Interestingly, this show inadvertently presented a major legislative breakthrough for LGBTQ rights in Barbados. One night a performer from the show was attacked on his way home.

Figure 12.1 *Bubalups/Mother Sally: Private Audition* by Ewan Atkinson. Featured in The Neighbourhood Project (http://www.theneighbourhoodproject.com/aboutewan)

The attackers were prosecuted and, when sentencing the perpetrators, the judge handed down the stiffest sentence allowable, explaining that this should be a clear disincentive for homophobic abuse on the island. Now that American film and TV has shifted its moral position and appetite for homosexuality, transgenderism and drag, this will invariably feed into the Bajan consciousness. In fact, pedestrian attitudes to homosexuality have always been more relaxed in practice than in most of the region and they have grown more progressive with the last generation. There are now LGBTQ pride marches in Barbados. The ever-vigilant tourist industry is also sensitive to rumbles of boycotts based on legislated homophobia. So there is a confluence of factors which could facilitate the rebirth of Mother Sally as an endogenous expression of something like drag.

Notes

1 The character is also known as Bam-Bam Sally in Guyana where she is more typically associated with Christmas festivities, and is not a fixture there in the way she features in Barbadian society.

2 Sometimes spelt Bubaloops.
3 Artist Ewan Atkinson, whose work features in King (2016) and whose expansive digital installation 'The Neighbourhood Project' features Mother Sally. This character was specifically designed and performed to be scary.
4 They would have been unlikely to have had contact with 'field slaves'.
5 The work can now be seen as part of his virtual instillation 'The Neighbourhood Project'.

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13

The Buttcracker: Dragging Ballet into Queer Places

Mark Edward and Helen Newall

Introduction

Mark Edward is a contemporary dancer and drag performer. Helen Newall is a writer and photographer. But while Mark has the courage of his convictions, Helen has always suffered from imposter syndrome: working together was thus a collaboration between drag performance and photography; and between knowing you can do it, and secretly believing someone will find out you cannot. *The Buttcracker* project advanced Mark's ongoing investigations into drag, queer and the ageing performer, and Helen's interrogation of the disturbances between photographic truth and pretence, photo-documentation and the performance being documented; and our concerns with mis(s)/identity and performance of self. Our first collaboration resulted in an exhibition of photographs, *Dying Swans & Dragged Up Dames* (*DS&DUD*), comprising modern reconstructions of iconic vintage dance images of Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev.[1] With much admiration, we parodied these icons, recreating the photographic scenes in each photograph, but replacing the lithe and ballet-ready bodies with that of an obese male drag artist posing as a ballerina or a principal male ballet dancer. In reconstructing these images we replaced the bodies and names of the original. But these parodies were fond:[2] we admire the ballet, the old photographs of it, and the dancers in them. We had fun[3] doing the performance research, and Helen is not sure that we totally knew why we were doing it to begin with, but along the way, one of Mark's aims became the desire to expose who is not usually visible in ballet, and Helen's aim was to investigate the photographic pose as a micro-performance, and another layer in photography's complex artifice. We decided to extend the investigation and the fun into a second phase.

The Buttcracker (*BC*) is this second phase, but this time the intention has been not to replicate extant images, but to create production photography for a performance that has never existed. This is somewhat analogous to Cindy

Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) in which she posed as various generic female characters in imaginary movies. Our stills, however, are from named works. The layers of drag, in what and whom we depict, and who we become – ballerinas and photographers – in depicting who we are not, grow increasingly complex.

But why? (Why not?)

Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) takes a bifurcated approach to investigate the question 'why do you like to dress up in drag?' (243). First, through interviews, Halberstam extrapolates subjective, individualized responses, such as 'just for fun' or 'it seemed like a crazy thing to do' (244), and this replicates our first instincts in our own project. Halberstam's second line of inquiry examines the representational effects of being involved in such subcultural productions. Following Halberstam, albeit in a very unstructured manner, we examine our own subjectivities in relation to queering elitist dance forms, such as ballet. Then, we explore issues in representing queer visual forms, in relation to the fancy queer theory that is usually the battlefield of choice for academics.

Mark's (2018) mixing of 'me' and 'method' as part of Practice-as-Research (PaR) demonstrates the opportunist blending of autoethnography, self and practice, so instead of Practice-as-Research, the PaR acronym could just as easily signify 'Person-as-Research', because the practice and the person are inextricable and there is the inevitable 'pollution' of subjectivity in the research practice. But post-structuralism asserts our inability to tell an accurate story of ourselves and our journey, and the same must be said for the process within PaR. Stacy Holman Jones and Tony Adams express their concern with issues of self and practice: 'autoethnography and queer theory are both also often criticized for being too much and too little – too much personal mess, too much theoretical jargon, too elitist, too sentimental' (2010: 197). But defiant in our PaR, we will begin with personal mess and a little sentimentality, in a *grand jeté* away from theoretical jargon to personal reflection.

Herstories and fairy stories

To cite a childhood favourite of Helen's, *The Princess Tina Ballet Book*, 'everyone loves dressing up, and one of the most exciting things in the world of ballet is the make-believe of assuming a strange character and then dressing up for

the part' (Davis, 1970: 45). Reclaiming one of the original synonyms for 'queer' as 'strange', the *Princess Tina Ballet Book* writers were thus already aware of ballet as a queer spectacle. Before Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, ballet was already a world where human heterosexuality could be ruptured, instanced in Siegfried's fascination with the swan-women he encounters (Stoneley, 2007). Strange characters and costumes are therefore sites for a visual queer interrogation. Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier state: 'Queer PaR is thus attracted to messiness as a methodology, where messiness is imbricated with queerness and where cleanliness in knowledge production is associated with knowledge forms that have routinely occluded the queer and the non-normative' (2015: 84).

In his undergraduate dance training, Mark loathed the pomposity, structure and form of the ballet classes he endured. For a queer student, ballet represented another world of structure where he failed to fit: where heterosexual relations were compulsory in stage narratives,[4] and stifling hierarchies permeated systems of performance production. Prior to formal dance training, Mark had been part of the 1988 UK illegal acid house and ecstasy rave/club culture and also a performer on the drag circuit, mentored by older more experienced drag queens (often known as drag mothers). The worlds of ballet, raving and drag seemed totally at odds with one another: the former an elite art form for the upper classes; the latter a working-class club-job for queer outcasts and misfits.[5]

Helen's first encounter with ballet came at the age of 7 with the unexpected gift of *Princess Tina Ballet Book, No. 2* (Davis, 1969). She had hitherto shown no interest in ballet, so unwrapping this on Christmas morning was baffling. She was into ponies, but they were very expensive. Ballet probably seemed the better, cheaper option. The original book has long since gone but a copy lately sourced via eBay reveals colour photographs of ballet and ballerinas either in performance or posing for the camera next to crystal chandeliers, or classical plinths overflowing with flower arrangements. There is dramatic lighting, and plenty of tulle. Helen remembers these photographs now like old friends, but on that Christmas morning long ago, having previously shown no expression of interest in ballet, viewing them for the first time was akin to receiving new instructions: be interested in this strange world. These directions were less about how to *be* a ballerina, and more about how to be a little girl who wants to be a ballerina. She obeyed them by looking at all the pictures like an initiate into a different but strangely attractive world: tulle and tragedy, satin and sacrifice, chandeliers and flowers: what's not to love?

There is little text in the *Princess Tina Ballet Book* – this is a book about staring not reading, for here the female gaze is being trained, but there are brief articles: one describes Margot Fonteyn as 'beautifully built' (Davis, 1969:

5). Another looks at the pointe shoe, for this is ballet's fetish: the martyrdom of enduring unimaginable pain in exchange for the grace of being on pointe underpins the iconography of the ballerina. This is also the narrative of Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid (another little girl obsession) who sacrifices fishtail and voice for the love of a prince, but finds that walking, silently, on her new human feet is like stepping on knives. Tales for little girls are often about silence, sacrifice, and death.

Helen pored over pictures of tutus, satin ribbons and polished hair, and she was not sure why this was enchanting, but it was. Before long, she wanted a tutu, and ballet slippers, but much to parental relief she did not want to *do* ballet, and she was never taken to classes. Ballet was, after all, like ponies, expensive, but bearing in mind Mark's dislike of the strict codified nature of the form, this might have been just as well. But when a homemade tutu materialized, the satin bodice was green and a bit baggy, the tulle floppy, and the slippers disappointingly pudgy beige, of course they were not block shoes. In any case, Helen's body was dumpy and untrained, most definitely not 'beautifully built'. Here was the first lesson in visual marketing: dream on, sucker, for what the picture looks like is not who you will be. Perhaps this underscores her interest in Photoshop, which in *DS&DUD* and *BC* has facilitated both our ability to be whomever we wish. Nevertheless, back then, even Disney's hippo ballerinas in *Fantasia* were seemingly doing better, gracefully on pointe, but this was, ultimately, cartoon mockery; the comedy of the collision of inappropriate collaborations. For dumpy, elephantine people their injunction is to remember always this: if you are not beautifully built, you do not do ballet. In the end, the tutu, the slippers and the body were not ballet enough, and the interest waned, lying dormant until Mark pirouetted flamboyantly into the picture decades later, and we began to make our own still, visual ballets.

Long before the appearance of the *Princess Tina Ballet Book*, Helen's stated interest was to be an artist – and perhaps this underlies her initial location of ballet as a still, visual, photographic form to be looked at rather than the highly codified movement form in which one physically participates, as Mark did. A decade later this was such a horrifying admission to make to a grammar school careers department that she may as well have come out as a drag act, or gay, or worse: a failure of the British grammar school system. Being an artist was not permitted despite it being what her mind and body wanted to be. This is paralleled by Mark's awkward desire to be a dancer, for in Wigan, UK, boys ought to aspire to do rugby; only queer boys and fairies do dance. Only academic failures go to art school. For both of us, it was all such a long time ago.

So, this is a narrative of forms of ballet drag for both of us: we can now openly adore the costumery of ballerinas without having to actually be one

(and through such misbehaviour upset everyone) and, certainly for Helen, without ever having previously positioned this desire as an act of drag. While Mark wants to inhabit the costumes, Helen's desire is to drag herself up as a photographer and shoot them, perhaps to re-capture some of that nascent artist's interest in satin and tulle, inspired by the romantic images in the *Princess Tina Ballet Book*. This project has thus, for us both, been a way of not conforming to the rules of who we were supposed to be. We queer ballet by distilling a movement form into immobility to legitimize staring. Thus we mis(s)behave, and drag ourselves away from convention into queer territories.

Drag acts posing and acts of drag

Posing is a miniature performance and it is a professional business, as is being who you are not. Drag kings and queens relish this, and so the camera loves them. In the brochure for *DS&DUD* we wrote that: '[i]n drag men pose as women; women pose as men; in photographs dancers pose as eternal, and photographs pose as truth' (2016). We thus situate posing as the territory that intersects both drag and photography. Posing is, we assert, a theatrical micro-performance in which projections of self, identity and ability are fleetingly made for the camera, an audience of one, and one which can be unflatteringly cruel. Photoshop is the panacea, actively reconstructing, improving the body, the life, the world.

Photography has always been about oppositions: stillness and movement, truth and deception. Photographs freeze a performative moment and hold it in perpetual stillness, but they do not show what happened before or after, and they do not reveal what was outside the frame. It is because of these framings that it is wrong to say the camera never lies. The camera is always lying in its truthfulness, and Photoshop is not the villain; it is our own gullibility in thinking the camera never lies which trips us, and the camera was telling tales as soon as it was invented. Hippolyte Bayard, for example, posed in 1839 as a drowned man who has taken his own life to protest his erasure from the official announcement of photography's invention; and Louis Daguerre, who was partly the cause of Bayard's pique, took the first known photographic image of human subjects in a street scene in Paris in 1838. The people in his image, however, a man and a shoe-shine boy, only appear because they stayed in the same place and pose for the seven minutes required for the camera's exposure. Everyone else – the pedestrians, and the carriages – has been erased by not being in the same place for long enough for the light sensitive chemicals to capture them before they moved out of frame. This photograph thus does not represent the 'truth' of the street at the

time it was taken: the street looks deserted. Indeed, for some time, photography could only capture those who could hold a pose in front of the lens, often standing or sitting in braced contraptions in front of painted backcloths not dissimilar to those found in contemporary theatres and music halls. Thus photography, performance and theatre have a lot in common. Peggy Phelan states that '[a]ll portrait photography is fundamentally performative' (1993: 35). She cites the instance of Richard Avedon photographing a workman, in whom he found an uncanny likeness of Rembrandt, to replicate the artist's self-portraits, and suddenly appreciating the layers of the acts of performance unfolding before him: 'Rembrandt the carpenter acted Rembrandt the painter exactly. It seemed undeniable to me that Rembrandt must have been acting when he made his own self-portraits' (Avedon, in Phelan, ibid.). The carpenter and painter were adept at posing. When we are not, the result is awkward. Richard Shusterman notes that 'there is little doubt that people display a different demeanour when they know they are being photographed, and often there is something awkward, artificial, or false about it' (2012: 70). But perhaps the camera shy are now being pushed aside by the rise of selfie culture: this is now the *de rigeur* tourist or influencer shot, and people are posing themselves into worlds which do not exist: Instagram perfection.[6] The self-conscious formalized poses of people in front of tourist attractions are the disappearing performances of people who do not know what to do when they are looked at, either by an audience or the cold eye of a camera lens.

Helen encountered no such inadequacy in Mark, but capturing him off guard is difficult: he cannot be *himself* in front of the camera; he lights up for the lens. The physical performative discourse in all this invokes reference to Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) in which Goffman takes theatre and performance as a metaphor for life and its social interactions. *DS&DUD* and *BC* have both been opportunities to step outside what Goffman designates as everyday life, permitting us to pose as other people. In both *DS&DUD* and *BC* we have both been in drag for much of the time, for both projects have been a means of being who and what we are not, trying on identities like little kids with the dressing up box: we dragged ourselves out from one world and into another; one where Mark was a famous ballerina, and Helen was a famous ballet photographer.

The majority of the original photographs we reconstructed were, in any case, themselves constructed: although advances had been made since Daguerre's seven-minute exposure, such were the technical limitations of photography when Pavlova and Nijinsky were dancing that photographing performers in performance was still extremely difficult, if not impossible. Dance imagery is thus a beautiful lie capturing micro-performances for a camera rather than for an audience. Our images do not depict the performance

of a ballet but the sweaty repetitions of a move for the camera, and the airbrushed presence of personae, gender and glamour; in our images, the protagonists are dragged up versions of original fakes. As Shusterman has noted, there is a distinction between the photograph and photography: the former concerns the cardboard artefact; the latter, the relationship between photographer, and subject and context, or what he calls 'a photographic situation' (2012: 68). It is here that the first performative aspect of the photographic situation occurs, in the playing out of the relationship between photographer and subject. In our case, the relationship was always negotiated with a camp sense of what would be added to the photograph to create its end effect: sometimes this was digital makeup; sometimes digitally created costume that in reality we did not have. Helen thinks of the multiple studio shots that constitute the finished thing as 'information', and since so many shots go into the construction of the end result, perhaps it cannot be termed a photograph, but rather an image. The photographs in both projects have been through a long Photoshop process that can be compared to the careful assemblage of the drag persona: the performer applies a base to the skin; contours the face; applies eye and lip make up; then a wig and a costume; and ready at last to perform. The flamboyance of the drag queen persona is thus not achieved swiftly, but painstakingly and skilfully. So it was with Moira's

Figure 13.1 Mark Edward as Anna Packitin dancing *The Dying Swan*. Photo by Helen Newall.

arabesque in *DS&DUD*, and Markova's and Goodenuv's pas-de-deux in *BC*. What you see in the studio is very much not what you will get. The drag in these images is thus not merely embedded in the presentation of Mark posing as the ballerina, but in the subsequent artifice of the post-process of assembling and creating a finished image from many different messy shots.

Dismantling through drag

Using drag to queer the heteronormative, hegemonic hierarchy of ballet is an enlargement of the history of the form. It allows previous presumptions about the sexualities of male ballet performers to be examined. It moves high art performance into low art parody. Ballet has been a form which contrasts the deep, yet tragic, nature of heterosexual romance against a backdrop of glitter, campery and theatrics. Routinely collusive in establishing heterosexuality as the norm, the queer has been marginalized.

As an undergraduate, Mark's determination to let go of fixed things was resolute. This has translated into *DS&DUD* and *BC*, where the re-representation of ballet exposes its highly codified nature. The body, which must be 'beautifully built', must also conform to the rules of ballet: but if it is not beautifully built, and the technique is faulty, ballet leaves the dancer behind. Ultimately Mark found that embracing other forms of contemporary dance endorsed a more fluid movement of body and choreography, but the hegemonic gaze remains on the rigid forms, and somatic or creative performance is still regarded as the poor relation to rigid structured scripts and dance notation. So, deconstructing and disturbing the form, using the tropes of camp and parody, serve to interrogate the power structures and hetero-hegemony at play.

In an interview with Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed discussed how trouble becomes a technique: to queer is to cause trouble, but the queer agenda is not one which is entirely frivolous, as Butler's response makes clear:

> Dismantling forms of oppression, for instance, involves a certain way of destroying what has been built badly, built in ways that are consequential in the damage they cause. So to damage a damaging machine in the name of less damage, is that possible? And can we distinguish between affirmative modes of 'taking apart' the machinery that causes injury and the destructive modes of injury itself?
>
> Butler, cited in Ahmed, 2016: 484

The analogy of ballet as a machine is ironically apt. Rigid, codified, scripted forms performed commercially by commodity bodies all point to an art form

saturated with a capitalist agenda. As we are in the business of trouble making, rather than causing damage, we build on Butler's further suggestion that taking the machinery apart is different from damaging it. Taking apart the machinery relies on a queer methodology. Renate Lorenz would agree, stating 'what becomes visible in drag is not people, individuals, subjects or identities, but rather assemblages; indeed, those that do not work in any "doing gender/sexuality/race" but insist on "undoing"' (2012: 21). In respectfully disagreeing with Stephen Maddison, who observes how 'drag's status as a performance keeps it at a safe distance' (2002: 158), the visibility of drag, whether in photographic form or person, is always subjected to prejudiced-based responses. We have experience of having photographs on display vandalized with homophobic slurs: thus discrimination is never safe. Moreover, in agreement with Chris Greenough (2018), photographs offer sensory interactions with viewers, where viewers' own subjective responses interact on a silent level with the images they behold. Greenough states that 'the visual sensory experience of juxtaposing photographs and text can provoke a response from the reader/viewer, thereby limiting the comfort of such a "safe distance"' (2018: 1524).

Drag foraging and play as methodology

Aside from issues of what materials and props we could afford, in deconstructing ballet tradition we rejected an ordered approach to costume, makeup and design in preference for a process that involved child-like dressing up, and foraging raids into attics, store cupboards and second-hand stores. These were methods that allowed the playful in-roads promised in the *Princess Tina Ballet Book* (see Edward and Newall, 2013; Edward, 2018). Combining Campbell and Farrier's 'messy methodology' (2015: 84) with Halberstam's 'scavenger methodology' (1998: 13) we engaged in a process of literally scavenging, which flirted messily with the borderlines of success/failure.

Success is a term which denotes normativity. Those who have until lately been deemed sexually successful are heterosexual, reproductive couples, and, as Halberstam observes, 'feminine success is measured by male standards' (2011: 4). Success is built into institutional structures and systems of power. But a queer approach just cannot do with success. In our quest to embrace failure, we found good company in Halberstam, but also in Emilyn Claid. Both highlight the dynamic relationality between past and present subjectivities. Halberstam's notion of failure offers the reward of nostalgia: 'failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers (2011: 3). For Claid, failure is a release from structure:

> I know failure differently now: living life queerly and relationally; embracing failing in artistic process as a letting go of fixed things; where uncertainty, un-knowing, between-ness and here-and-now process breathe different energy into performance making. So I like a kind of then-and-not paradox of failure – as a shame-based paradigm *and* an inspirational creative source for change.
>
> 2016: 259

Failure therefore explores 'let's pretend', which in other contexts becomes fakery and hoaxing.

Hoaxes

Our photographs are at the extreme end of photography's tendency to 'drag' things up. They are explicit performances; they are parodies of performance photography; they are fakes. In poking fun at ballet, they expose its highly codified rules: that gender identity is strictly adhered to; that

Figure 13.2 Mark Edward as Markina Edvardova dancing as The Sugarbum Fairy. Photo by Helen Newall.

narratives are heteronormative; and the ladies are light and on pointe, and the gentlemen are *porteurs* who do much lifting and leaping. There have been several rejections of this: not least by Louise LaCavalier, of La La La Human Steps, performing bare breasted in a tatty tutu and boots, executing the barrel turn leaps more usually associated with male dancers. With much admiration, we parodied this in an image for *DS&DUD*, and in the process also exposed the ability of the obese body to leap and be airborne. But in dragging up Mark, we took the decision not to remove his beard. The same is true of our ballet ability: for the humour to work it must be obvious that we are not very good at ballet, as implied in our less than ideal body shapes, and our imperfect technique. The male ballet La Ballet Trockadero de Monte Carlo (known as The Trocks), who perform as comedic ballerinas, have strong technique and yet the humour is present: for

Figure 13.3 Helen Newall as Sergei Skirtoff dancing as Prince Cocklouche. Photo by Helen Newall.

The Trocks, and *DS&DUD*, and *BC*, it lies in the failure of the hoax, and thus in knowing is a send-up of the original situated in the obvious visual discrepancies between genders and the 'usual' signifiers of the assumed gender.[7] There is no send-up, no hoax, however, in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* in which the swans that prove so alluring to Siegfried are powerfully, perfectly, gracefully, male, and far from the sugar-delicate female *corps de ballet* of more traditional presentations; in their power and absolute maleness Bourne's swans are far from comedic parody. But this is nevertheless a queer tale of homosexuality beyond the palace walls and beyond the heteronormative tradition of ballet narratives: in Kent Drummond's words: '[Bourne] forces a long-simmering relationship between homosexuality and dance out of the closet and into mainstream popular culture' (2008: 235). This is not drag, and there is parody to be also had here: perhaps we should reconstruct a scene from Bourne's *Swan Lake* and camp it up a little, for the drive in our hoaxing has always been the incongruous comedy of it.

In *The Changing Room* (2000), Laurence Senelick makes a convincing case for the comedy of drag being a lenitive measure against a folk loric fear of the post-menopausal woman, who in fairy tales manifests as a wicked witch or a powerful hag (2000: 228), and who is often played in performance by a male. The drag here, he writes, is 'mocking [the hag's] powers and pointing up the discrepancy between her lack of charms and her libidinous and overreaching ambitions' (2000: 229), and to do this imperfection is necessary, for fear cannot be alleviated if the copy is so perfect that the real thing and the copy are indistinguishable. In this latter instance, perfection would be tragedy, but imperfection is comedy. But perfection concerns essence, rather than actuality. In describing Garbo's face, for example, Roland Barthes calls it 'an admirable face-object' and a mask of the archetype of the human face (1982: 56). But this mask is not so much about female corporeal reality, but an alabaster flawlessness; for, as Barthes writes of Garbo, 'her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection' (1982: 57), but it is, according to him, 'sexually undefined' (ibid.) because, as Kalina Wojciechowska notes, androgyny and perfection are inextricably intertwined. She describes androgyny as referring to 'divine reality and, at the same time, to some kind of perfection, indivisibility and wholeness characteristic of a deity' (2016: 27). The drag we invoke in *DS&DUD* and *BC* is the flawed comic opposite of this: it pokes fun and invokes the irreverence of the carnivalesque in its topsy-turvy imperfections. We fail at fully interpreting the genders we profess to portray in these images, and we are clearly very bad ballet dancers. Ours is the comedy of failure and blatant imperfection. We are, to quote Senelick's description of Danny La Rue, 'flagrantly counterfeit' (2000: 247).

Collaboration

In a truly collaborative project, we also embraced the failure of individual subjectivities and success. Arguably there is some inevitable success in our documentation of this project in this chapter, as well as in the product of the images, but this is success that is collaborative, and therefore undoing individual claims to authorship and success. Claid states how 'to give up on an individual "I", is to fail at authorship and ownership within Western cultural ideology yet is welcomed by many artists working collaboratively' (2016: 271). Each failure is both jointly shared and individual, as there is no accurate, scientific history of the process experiences of the collaboration between us, and PaR research must move away from attempting to document performance as if it were scientific experiments, or baking recipes. Thus, following Campbell and Farrier, the documentation is as messy as the process, but as collaborators and creators we share a collective mess. For the documentation of the work in this chapter, piles of narrative mess have been tidied up, edited, omitted and redrafted in light of each other's positionalities. Collaboration celebrates the merging of subjectivities, birthing new failures, which dismantle the damaging machines of hetero-hegemony. We have each rewritten, re-imaged ourselves, in our own eyes, and in how we see each other.

As queer studies have presented a new wave of challenges to the academy, course syllabi are being rewritten with an agenda which appeals to inclusivity and non-identity (see Edward, 2020). For PaR work, photographs form part of contemporary culture: they are abundant on social media, and in this project the medium of photography offers accessibility to academic and non-academic audiences alike. PaR should never lose sight of the importance of universal engagement as integral to its agenda (see Edward, 2018: 37), and drag must always fail to convince us: we must go off the (clothes) rails messily, and joyfully.

Notes

1 As part of *Dying Swans and Dragged Up Dames*, modern dancers such as Martha Graham (who became Arthur Graham in this project) also formed part of the research process.

2 The contemporary/modern dancer Richard Move is another artist who fondly reconstructs and embodies the 'essense' of historical dancers such as Martha Graham. Move toured his work *Martha@*, garnering recognition through praise and also criticism for the dragging up of this iconic

modernist dance artist. Move explored and performed Graham's core dance principles (contraction and release) becoming Grahamesque whereas Mark became balletesque or Fonteynesque.

3 Although we had fun working on this creative research process there was serious intent behind the doing.

4 Mark hated the heteronormative partnering work of ballet and also the rigidity and old 'skool' performance aesthetic of many of the traditional contemporary/modern dance techniques such as Graham and Humphrey-Limón.

5 Although Mark was educated in a range of contemporary dance techniques such as Graham, Cunningham, Humphrey-Limon and also post-modern dance practices such as contact improvisation, released based techniques, improvisation, threading and Euro-crash performance practices he relished being part of the UK acid house and rave phenomena of 1988. He would often have to play a game of cat and mouse with the police (and his parents) so he could attend the illegal pop up dance raves without being caught. During this period Mark was also part of the drag scene in his home town of Wigan, in the UK. His doing drag and illegal raving gave him a sense of an emerging queer and anarchistic identity.

6 Instagram account 'Celebface' shames celebrity insta posts that retouch physical reality into impossible perfection, while the subreddit 'instagram reality' offers examples of badly edited insta-images (often quite cruelly) which have been posted as candid or 'off the cuff', and thus demonstrates how difficult it is for ordinary mortals to achieve perfection without digital expertise. See: https://www.reddit.com/r/Instagramreality/

7 Our work is not dissimilar to that of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo in their playful execution of ballet and parodying renowned works yet they also present race in classical dance. Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo also highlight the male ballet dancer as not needing to be the muse for the female dancer, which is conformist practice in ballet.

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14

Oh Wow! He's Queer! Queering Panto in Belfast: An Interview with Ross Anderson-Doherty

Alyson Campbell and Trish McTighe[1]

Ross Anderson-Doherty is a queer singer-actor-cabaret artist and performance-maker based in Belfast, where he runs and regularly performs at the Cabaret Supper Club, as well as other gay bars and clubs in the city. His most recent project is a show called *Cake Daddy*, a work about the intersection of queerness and fatness emerging from his own experience and his commitment to fat activism.[2] His performance ethos is driven by his feminism and immersion in both feminist and queer theories, which can be seen in his alter ego as a 'sonic lesbian bear'. Although not within the academy formally, his practice is very much interwoven with research and theoretical questions around queer performance and, specifically, queer voice.[3] He played the panto dame in Belfast from 2013–2016.

In the following interview, Anderson-Doherty addresses the ways in which the panto form might be queered – an especially charged project in the particular locality of Belfast, North of Ireland.[4] The interview focuses on how Anderson-Doherty works to queer panto, largely in the role of the dame, through casting, rehearsal processes and in performance. In the Cabaret Supper Club and in panto, Anderson-Doherty is performing to largely heterosexual audiences, and he highlights below some of the challenges he has faced, but also the sorts of queer interventions he has been able to make through performance. His approach to gender and his lived experience, coupled with the range of his work, have often clashed with the culture he works within, leading him to identify and adopt a set of strategies we might see as queering the spaces and artforms he engages with.

It is worth noting that the North of Ireland/Northern Ireland remains the least hospitable and most homophobic region in the UK and Ireland (with a high rate of suicide and publicly sanctioned homophobic statements from the highest levels of government, including a determined resistance to equal marriage).[5]

AC/TM: Given your background and experience in academic work theorizing gender, was there something in the figure of the dame that interested you from the start?

RAD: When I was a child being taken to panto I always enjoyed the dame, but actually loved the principal boy role so much more. That was, until they started casting men in those roles instead of women; then I lost interest. I loved the fabulously feminine figure singing great tunes and getting to be adventurous, even if they were dressed as 'a boy'. The dame wasn't something I had really thought about in years, other than to be vaguely dismissive of the role as misogynist and often racist. I ended up playing the dame for the first time in The Waterfront [Belfast] by accident, in fact. I was cast as the Big Bad Wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* because the producer heard me sing a Jackie Wilson song at the launch of a festival. I took that role, frankly, because I needed the money. Then the more famous guy they had playing the dame got sick and I was recast. So, I started my relationship with panto and the dame in Christmas 2013, playing Nanny No Hood.[6] There wasn't much time to think about it, but I was pretty anxious given all my assumptions about the problematic nature of the figure. It was alarmingly stressful, both in terms of workload and trying to identify the parts of the form that made me uncomfortable, and then translating that discomfort into thought and then into action.

AC/TM: As part of this conversation with Anderson-Doherty, we began to reflect that, as adults, none of us had been attending pantos and that we considered the form to be inherently heteronormative, 'unqueer', and conservative.[7] *And, yet, in our conversation we noted that for all three of us our first experience of theatre/live performance was panto and that it still functions as such for huge numbers of people in Ireland, North and South. Indeed, it may remain the only form of live performance experience for many people. As such, we know that to dismiss it is to undermine its cultural significance and the potential capacity it has to create carnivalesque spaces for identity expression, even if that does not always manifest in critical ways. This manifestation is, of course, very reliant on the creative personnel involved, although, as a perceived low-brow form etc. of performance, this aspect has had limited critical attention.*

RAD: When I started doing my performance as the dame, people expected something akin to what John Linehan as his alter ego May McFettridge has been doing at the Grand Opera House for the last thirty-odd years. This is because it's become the tradition *here*, in Belfast, one that John has established.

Linehan's dame is different to any other I've seen, which is down to his career as a stand-up and his 'being' May McFettridge, and to the fact that this is a panto show that has been taking place within forty-odd years of conflict and contestation. This has meant that panto here in Belfast has always been dealing with a particular sociopolitical climate, and Linehan's standup routine is very Belfast-focused, with all the politics that this encompasses. Whereas other big budget pantos produced by this company (Qdos) would tend to shy away from that sort of political comment and local specificity, Linehan has done a lot of material about the Troubles and, via the figure of McFettridge, would make fun of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) or of Sinn Féin – although less so since the peace process. I don't think you'd find a panto in England talking about terrorism in the way that we did here.

AC/TM: Linehan created the character of May McFettridge in the late 1980s and both he and McFettridge were household names in the North of Ireland well before he began to work in panto. Life began for McFettridge on a radio show hosted by well-known Northern Irish presenter Eamonn Holmes, with whom Linehan has a family connection.[8] *Linehan's performance of McFettridge is categorically in the realm of female impersonation, a tradition that is quite different from drag and, certainly, queer performance. Linehan is on record as denying that May is anything other than a 'wee woman from North Belfast' who will have 'nothing to do with any talk of transvestites and transsexuals'.*[9] *While the non-threatening 'wee' woman was possibly a means to speak openly in ways that many in Northern Irish society could not at the time, and be openly critical of the establishment, what this means is that the cross-dressing becomes a tool, a safety valve for social tensions, but at the same time its gender politics are purposefully occluded.*

RAD: In a way, I also expected to be like Linehan, but I'm not sure I am. Those sort of conflict or so-called post-conflict politics are not really where my own humour lies when I play the dame. Above all, what Linehan/McFettridge has meant for me is that my control over what I am doing as the dame could get stronger and stronger.

AC/TM: What does that mean for you 'taking control' and making the dame stronger?

RAD: I hate what panto is communicating very often, especially when it comes to gender politics and race also. Some lines make me retch while I'm saying them – that is if I can't change them. Or someone else's lines if I can't

get them to change. Some of that makes me ill. If it were more responsible, ethical maybe, as I was trying and failing miserably to achieve, it would be so much more craic! That said, editing single lines here and there is never too much of a problem. There were things in the script of our production of *Aladdin* (2016), for example, that I was not prepared to say. If the joke is reliant on me making fun of how an Asian person speaks, then I am not going to do that. I am not prepared to start punching down. When people are no longer being harassed or attacked or feeling threatened just leaving their place of work, then maybe we can consider making that joke, but certainly not before. One of the issues, for example, is that, more often than not, white actors play Asian characters, in, for example, *Aladdin*. However, it's when the 'princess' character's whole sense of ambition is dropped as soon as she meets the 'prince' and she becomes trapped in a cage or something awaiting a man to rescue her that I feel the need to crawl under a rock. Or it is when the laughs come at the expense the dame figure based on her ugliness or lack of intelligence.

The rehearsal time is so quick and everyone so stressed to learn their lines, blocking, dances, and songs that any pause for discussion about how we renegotiate these tropes isn't really welcomed. It's not that other cast members haven't cared; there's just so little time to take on new information that I'm often the grumpy one talking about the importance of representation and the responsibility we have as a company to not set the kids' ideas of how gender works back to pre-1990s Disney. I recall having a very genuine conversation with a great actor about how the treatment of marginalized people in fairy tales isn't great, especially their treatment of women. This came as a total shock to him. He was very prepared to listen but this was in the dressing room after the show had been running for a few weeks – only then did we have time to reflect. I guess the things I want to achieve are a fundamental shift in how the narrative and character arcs and interactions function. That's a lot to try to get done in a short rehearsal process, especially when you're the only engine driving it. This year (2017) I'm hopeful that, with a new creative team with whom I have a working relationship from other, more radical projects, I will have more input before rehearsals and can effect more change.

AC/TM: Panto does seem from the outside like a last bastion of resistance to standards that would be decried elsewhere in the industry, with its resistance to recognizing and refusing cultural impersonation, yellowface and brownface, for example.[10] Do the claims that these modes are acceptable because of deeply held attachments to tradition rely on what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call an 'alibi': because there are a certain set of

expectations attached to the form, this somehow overrides the racism and, indeed, sexism?[11]

RAD: I would answer this question by talking about panto form in general and its changes over time. It's my experience that what you say is true: that the form of the 'art' takes prevalence over any responsibility it may have to its audience and the world at large. The stick used to beat any opposition to racist or sexist elements of the form is 'this is just how it's done'. I get the impression from a lot of producers and directors that they think because the actors playing Chinese characters are wearing literal yellow face that everything is somehow fine. There's a very real sense in some quarters that the loss, or dilution, of these facets of the form is weakening to the very fibre of pantomime. I'm constantly reminded that the loss of privilege usually feels like oppression. In the Waterfront pantomimes there was never any suggestion that I play the character as anything other than Irish. The team at The Waterfront seemed pretty attuned to issues of race and ethnicity compared to gender or sex. There were no attempts to ask any of the actors to use yellow-face or voice. I don't think The Waterfront team are unique in this but it's a small step in the right direction.

Furthermore, the panto form itself has changed radically over the last one hundred years alone. For instance, the girl playing the lead boy role has almost disappeared – we almost never have a girl playing Aladdin. For some reason, me as a dame in a frock is perfectly acceptable but not that, because it's too queer: it would present a girl on girl scenario.[12] Also, there's less 'comedy potential' there, in having a woman play a man. It's always been my thought that a lot of the humour that the dame creates is based on how degrading it is for a man to be seen as anything less than aligned with whatever the hegemonic masculinity is in that time or place. It's very simple but very real in my experience. I always think of the television comedy sketch show *Little Britain*'s 'We're ladies' skit as an example of how it is still regarded as acceptable in our cultural consciousness.[13] There is a longstanding tradition of male comedians dressing as women to show how far they will degrade themselves to make the audience laugh.

AC/TM: Are there strategies that you have developed to call out the sexism and misogyny from within the industry? Do these happen in rehearsal or in the creative process and/or in performance?

RAD: I tend to insert a rant at least once during each show, commenting on the gendering at work, and on the misogyny. The joyous thing about being a panto dame is that you are the one person in the show who doesn't have

to give a shit about taking it seriously at any point – you become a joker figure. And because I am that lynchpin with the audience, I can do that commentary too, so that's positive. But actually, when we started, the director was quite keen for me to be a more traditional dame, as in less of an outside eye, doing less commenting on the action but rather staying within the fictional frame.

Other creatives, though, like producer Martin Lynch, love that I do that and he encourages it. He likes the fact that I make fun of it. He likes that I pick on the men and never the women, and he likes that I poke fun using local references. But in my first year I was very much discouraged from doing any of that; I was asked to stick with the script. And that year I tried my best to do so, but in my second year I decided I couldn't cooperate because it was my only way of dealing with the horror of what we were peddling to these kids. I think in every single production I have pointed out my co-performer Jolene O'Hara's academic achievements, saying: 'She has eleven GCSEs and a degree in engineering and you've just reduced her to a shoe!'

In terms of strategies, I think that's also why my beard is so important to me. Well actually, there are two separate things: the beard and the make-up. It is the fact that my make-up is not used to make me look ugly, or take the piss out of make-up itself, or the desire to wear it. My make-up is good. It's over the top but it's good make-up. It's nothing maybe that anyone would ever choose to wear outside of a performance context (or maybe they would!), but it's well applied, over the top glamorous. In essence, I am not a man taking the piss out of femininity. I absolutely refuse to do that at any point and if I ever do it's entirely by accident – and I hope I never have.

AC/TM: In terms of this sort of critical perspective on gender that you deploy, do you see what you do as related to drag in any way? How would you describe this?

RAD: That's something I wrestle with a lot. It depends on how one conceptualizes drag, I suppose. What I do in my cabaret work certainly doesn't gel with mainstream forms of drag, especially those made popular by *RuPaul's Drag Race* or the more theatrical and cabaret-based forms of drag that the UK and Ireland have produced. Those sorts of drag tend toward a consistent and convincing image of femininity. I do think that I sit somewhere, probably a few places, in the wider drag matrix. Really, that means that how I do my genders aligns with other performers who don't really fit within the parameters of drag as it's narrowly defined. I paint my face in ways that don't try to diminish the masculine features, like my brow bone or smaller eye space, and use techniques more associated with how women use makeup. I

don't pad or change my body shape and I wear a mixture of male and female clothes and shoes. When asked, I usually say that I do drag but I am not a drag queen. That's not to say that one can't be a drag queen and do what I do, but it's a useful, quick distinction in the moment. A useful analogy might be how I think of opera singing vs pop singing. An opera singer's job is to create and keep consistent a singular vocal quality that can then move and change and bend to the needs of the music and text. A pop singer's job is often to change their voice quality to suit the music. I see myself as more in line with the kind of vocalic mutability that you find in pop singing – that's both to do with the way I approach singing and the way I approach gender.

The dame figure is seen more and more within the drag matrix/spectrum, I think because drag has become so much more mainstream. British drag has traditionally been closer to the theatre and cabaret scenes and its edges rougher than its American counterpart. I get the sense that the dame and the drag queen probably went to the same school and, while they were in different classes, they played together in the playground at lunch time – probably avoiding playing football and talking about the old movie stars they both loved. Lily Savage and Myra Dubois are both very successful drag performers in the UK who have played both dame and villain roles in versions of their already established drag personas. Like McFettridge, they are both comics but are members of the LGBTQIA+ community whose drag crosses over from the drag scene into mainstream comedy, television, theatre and cabaret. I experience it as outside of mainstream drag, again because mainstream drag performers work to create a consistent image of femininity – whatever that means to them. I, as the dame, don't make that attempt.

AC/TM: Anderson-Doherty's approach to his image, especially his makeup, is in stark contrast to Linehan's McFettridge, whose makeup appears to be deliberately crude: there are blacked-out teeth, a badly drawn beauty spot and poorly applied block-colour eye shadow. Taken as a whole this look reflects the grotesque or failed femininity which tends to be put onto middle-aged women. As Caroline Quentin queried in 2016: 'Is it appropriate, in this age of inclusion, for middle-age[d] women to be ridiculed by blokes in skirts and too much make-up, be it in panto or a TV sitcom?'[14] *May McFettridge may go in and out of the fictional world of the panto, but Linehan does not seem to comment critically on the form itself. We suggest that Anderson-Doherty takes panto performance to a metatheatrical level by calling out the tropes of the form and simultaneously staging a commentary on the problematic gendering that is at work within those tropes. He does this by foregrounding the tension between his performed gender identity and his lived gender identity, embodying on stage the same critical approach to gender he deploys in his everyday life.*

Figure 14.1 John Linehan as May McFettridge. Courtesy of Qdos Entertainment, @Qdos Entertainment.

AC/TM: Would you agree that you try to avoid trading on a failed masculinity or failed femininity? Rather, that you try to embody both at the same time, in a way that is never reductive or diminishing of femininity?

RAD: I would say I confidently embody my failure; that might be the best way to put it. At least, that's what it feels like. I quite like that. Neither end of the binary construct seems like something I want to achieve.

The beard is an attempt to leave my masculinity visible. The first year I didn't have my beard because it was the first time and I just went along with it; it was a job after all and I didn't know what I was doing as I hadn't seen a panto in years. The second year there was a fight, and I lost my beard because I had signed the contract before even thinking about these things. Without my beard some people thought that I was a woman, so my masculinity got lost somewhat.

Figure 14.2 Ross Anderson-Doherty in *Jack and the Beanstalk* (2014). Courtesy of GBL Entertainment, @GBL Entertainment.

As the years go by, my own personal ways of doing gender have become more known to some people in Belfast. I'm often called 'that big fella with the beard that wears the make-up and sings'. This local familiarity has allowed me to insert more of myself into the proceedings in the rehearsal room and onstage. I'm always reminded of listening to Judith Butler in interview, many years ago,[15] and her saying that all gender is a failure, so I very much enjoy failing to do my masculinity in my everyday life, then bringing that to the stage in my cabaret work and then extending that further to a form where I am a man failing to be (being) a man who is also failing to be (being) a woman. Having the joy of that wriggle room with how I'm doing my gender means I can be much more fluid in how I interact with the other performers, the narrative, the audience and the form in general. I can be very much 'Rossy' at some points, decrying the ridiculousness of the form, or the dame at some points, decrying the ridiculous nature of her place in the form, or just the dame in the scene driving the narrative. I don't feel like I'm achieving either. I feel like I'm reveling in my failure to do either well, hopefully without diminishing the femininity. That said, I'm perfectly happy to diminish masculinity. Perhaps this is where the audience get a little tickle of queerness: seeing someone revel joyously in their failure to do their gender well and maintain a position of relative power in the space while doing so. Dancing about in the spaces created by my gender-wriggling is a lot of fun.

AC/TM: What was the argument against your beard?

RAD: The producers argued that a beard cannot work for a panto dame. Yet when I asked what was meant by 'worked' I got nothing back, no clarification. So, in the third year I said I would do the show, but I had to keep the beard – which they questioned – but I basically said that I was keeping the beard or not doing it at all.

My argument was that I think it helps me preserve that element of masculinity even if everything around it is glitzy and glamorous, hyperbolic and heightened femininity. I still have these masculine markers. I want the kids to leave asking questions. Sometimes it works: some of the kids will ask 'why does that woman have a beard?' And I would often talk to some of the other women in the audience and ask them when they were going to grow their beards, and suggest they would look lovely should they decide to do so. Of course, some women were a bit offended, as if me implying they were going to grow facial hair was the worst thing that could ever happen! Not all of them took it well. Some kids were even asking their mummies when they were going to grow their beards . . .

AC/TM: Whereas hair on a woman is culturally associated with grotesqueness and failure and ugliness, Ross is queerly refusing to make that equation. By doing it in a hyperbolic manner he is gently arguing for a more expanded understanding of the multiplicities of gendered bodies.

RAD: The point is that some women have beards, you just have to get over it! This is something I say quite a lot in everyday life. I think it made the overall enjoyment of the whole thing a bit greater – for me anyway! And maybe for the audience too. We can have endless comedy about my beard. But it functions neither as a mockery of hairy women nor feminine men: we can come in and out of moments where people observe it and ignore it and it's fine. In short, the beard helped me not take the piss out of femininity, or out of what it is to be a woman. This is me, a man who is obviously failing at making you think he is a woman because he's got this beard, but everything else he's doing is pretty cool so let's enjoy it all. And then it became a selling point: 'the dame with the beard', which could be marketed in some places as the hipster dame, because I also have tattoos. Interestingly, that is another thing that came up around assumptions about gender: the notion that I couldn't possibly be a girl because I have tattoos. I get that a lot.

AC/TM: Does the beard then do something in terms of sexuality too – does it contribute to queering in a specifically sexual sense?

RAD: The beard also helps to queer things onstage. In the year we did *Aladdin*, for example, the relationship between Abenazer and I was made much gayer by the fact that I have a beard. As I said, we are one of the few commercial pantos that don't have celebrities; we're all just local actors, so we can avoid having the show become about showing off the celebrity, which seems to be the way with most pantos these days. In ours, we can just be silly and gay it up a bit, and, most importantly, I can stop and have a feminist rant at a guy who is a local actor, something I could not do if he were a celebrity. I would have been told, for example, not to call the celebrity a misogynist and tell him to get off the stage; that's something I've done every year. Except in the first year, actually. But I rimmed a wolf that year . . .

Obscenity and double entendre are pretty standard parts of the panto form. The year where I landed from a slow-motion fall face first between the wolf's buttocks would have been pretty standard had I not been well known locally as a gay man. The kids just laughed at the ridiculous base humour of it and the adults either laughed or recoiled in horror at the allusion to a sex act associated with gay men. A friend of mine who came to see the show said, 'ever since I've seen you in a wig rimming a wolf, panto has changed for the better'. Traditionally, the dame's affections are spurned by everyone to whom they are directed. I've been lucky enough to build relationships with other actors who enjoy the small queering strategies we use to tackle the conservative elements of the form. So we've built in little moments where I've been making romantic advances towards a male character and the direction has been for him to push me away – which he does – however, as soon as there's an audience we have a small lingering moment of sexual attraction before he goes back into character and the show continues as directed. I mean, it's a complete lack of professionalism and utterly disruptive but no one ever got anywhere by following the rules or being 'directable'. Anyway, for a fleeting moment the audience can see, if they choose to, two male bodies showing genuine sexual attraction to each other. There are some more traditional pantomimes where the dame would maybe find a husband but usually that husband is a harangued and bewildered ex-villain. We like to keep it sexy. The guy with whom I had those moments as a performer is actually directing the show this year at The Waterfront (2017/18) so that should be an interesting process.

Essentially, in theatre, people will accept whatever convention they're presented with, so they accept that there is the woman with pretty makeup and a silly costume who flirts with the men, even when that woman sings like a man.

AC: And speaks like a man?

RAD: Actually, my panto dame voice is slightly higher than my speaking voice. Not so much higher as 'twangier'. By that I mean I engage the aryepiglottic sphincter more during phonation; these are the muscles used to bring the epiglottis down to cover the larynx during swallowing. When engaged, they create a smaller space above the larynx which creates a sound whose harmonics are between 2 and 4 kilohertz making it appear louder to the human ear. It's that sound that in isolation sounds like an evil but very happy sheep. It's often associated with working-class people from industrial cities, like Belfast, where it is a defining feature of what is known as the 'millie' accent.[16]

In essence, I do an impression of every matriarch of every family I grew up with, putting localized working-class femininity into the heart of the performance. My dame is a mixture of my ma and my mate Lyndsey's ma, Jean. I have to be loud at all times, but without shouting, so the Northern Irish matriarch twang gives me that. I essentially imagine how my ma or Jean would say this or do this. Jean, in particular, is a woman who takes no shit from anybody. While the panto dame figure is made fun of for being stupid – and she is indeed stupid, in that she does and says stupid things – at no point do I ever play her as such. I can't bring myself to, for a start, but also the comedy comes from the fact that I refuse to believe that I am either ugly or stupid. And the rest of the cast can make fun of me but I am one hundred per cent confident in the fact that I am remarkably clever and remarkably beautiful. And everyone else can bugger off. In that regard, by Jonathan Harvey, and Burke plays Linda Hughes from *Gimme Gimme Gimme* is another inspiration for my 'daminess'. It's a UK show from the late 1990s written by Jonathan Harvey, and Burke plays what is essentially a fabulous gay character. She is amazing, even if now the show might be bit dated. It was done at a time when gay masculinity was so fragile. I was not allowed to see camp faggotry on TV: Julian Clarey was banned for most of my adolescence so I missed him; *Queer as Folk* I had to find ways of watching so I wouldn't get caught; *Ab Fab* had a few faggy characters but nothing like *Gimme Gimme Gimme's* Tom and Linda, who provided my first experience of unpolished, scrappy, male femininity. James Dreyfus did that very well. As a 16- or 17-year-old I was very happy to see that on the TV. It gave me permission to act in certain ways.

It is a point of difference from most other panto dames that I sing. Usually in panto, the dame does not sing for the sake of showing off their voice. She'd often sing a clap-along patter song but rarely an emotional ballad or high-octane soul-tinged dance number. However, when I have a solo, the show stops. My solo is not there to facilitate the narrative or bolster the love interest; these moments are literally just there for me to show off for five minutes,

usually with a big party song. It's so weird, and does make things interesting in terms of voice. Especially in the early days I'd go from talking in quite feminine tones to singing in a deep and resonant masculine voice. I still do this actually. I enjoy lowering my larynx in the vocal tract when singing at lower pitches. This has the effect of keeping the pitch consistent with the demands of the melody but making it sound deeper, richer, and perhaps lower, to the listener. I sort of feel a wee jolt from the audience again who, despite the beard, might have forgotten my physical manliness for a moment. Suddenly there's this unmistakable masculine voice coming at them: another little gap in which to wriggle about with queer abandon.

AC/TM: This discussion makes us think about Ross and the notion of queer voice, in both a material and metaphorical sense. This is to do with how Ross vocalizes a Northern Irish dialect and vocabulary to make it sound queer. When we think of how Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland is and has been 'heard', we think of the voice of zealous masculine sectarianism. We hear the extreme religious and unionist voice of Ian Paisley and we hear the voice-overs that were imposed on those associated with the IRA and Sinn Féin during the 1980s, Gerry Adams among them.[17] *History seems to have associated the Northern Irish voice with conflict and violence, as a site of danger, of threat, of fear – at least in the public media channels through which Northern Ireland has been heard. Yet, we in the North know that there are other voices to be heard. Anderson-Doherty's vocal virtuosity offers a glimpse of an alternative vocalic landscape, through which Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland might be heard differently. We suggest that he manages to both love and expose 'Norn Irish' simultaneously; this comes via strategies that we might understand as a form of disidentification in José Esteban Muñoz's term; that is, he takes forms of speech that sit comfortably in the mainstream and, rather than rejecting them outright, playfully subverts them and opens them up to the queer minoritarian subject. This includes techniques such as a joyful embrace and reimagining of certain grammatical 'errors', specific local terms and, particularly, working-class forms of speech.*[18]

AC/TM: How do you understand this as queering through voice? And how does it work when you are doing panto?

RAD: The voice, for me, has always had a lot of queer potential. So much identity is carried in the voice. It's made in our bodies, leaves, takes up all the space surrounding the bodies and penetrates the listener with a tiny imprint of the vocalizer's musculature. So much store is set by whether someone is using their 'real' voice or not. It's assumed that there is a single identity that is

projected sonically into the world from the body. The voice is supposed to be the sonic embodiment of the 'authentic' self. As a voice teacher I often think that we hear a voice as 'inauthentic' when we hear any evidence of muscular instability in the vocal mechanism, whether we're aware of that or not. A bit like when we see someone complete a physical task they have just learned compared to when they have practised it over and over. We see them complete the same action but we notice, perhaps unconsciously, that it isn't secure and thus isn't part of the 'real' them. As a performer with my particular history of voice training, I am lucky have access to lots of places of vocal stability and the ability to move between them quickly and fluidly. I like to use this to create as many 'authentic' selves as possible in performance. That's not to say I like to play lots of different characters, more that I like to suggest the possibilities of lots of selves all scrambling about at once. Whilst I often feel like I'm performing myself failing to do gender well, I do try to do the performance well. The twang of the 'millie' accent, for example, is a sound often made in a derisive way. I have a genuine love for that sound and that way of making sound – I think that shows on stage. I suppose it's an extension of the type of camp comedy I grew up loving where the campness both exposes the marginal but also upholds it, usually with a commitment to the marginal – perhaps even more commitment than is really required. When singing, I use techniques usually attributed to divas; long sustained belted notes; little embellishments like riffs or runs; using a wide range; moving between voice qualities; large leaps in pitch and so on. Whilst these are things that male singers do all the time too, they're much more associated with female singers.

And of course, I endeavour to do this with the utmost respect for the singers I'm referencing. All this allows me to play in the spaces between the visually masculine markers of the beard and body hair, the hyper-feminine costume and makeup, the movement between feminine and masculine sounds when singing and speaking, and then the linguistic features from the North of Ireland that I love. An audience member once told me that they'd never heard someone embody a whole province of Ireland with such relish. That delighted me no end 'cause I love all the little linguistic curiosities I grew up hearing the women around me use. I have a ball using a variety of them when I go off script and I even enjoy adding a few to the script, to be honest. I'm lucky to have the opportunity to perform and celebrate the fabulously feminine aspects of the working-class background I spent my childhood absorbing, but as a child or adolescent never felt safe to participate in. I suppose for me that's where I feel the queerness most: when the voice, the speech and language and the visual are all working together to create a joyous, oscillating ball of gender and class failure.

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Notes

1 Main interview took place Belfast, 21 June 2017. Follow up questions and answers were communicated by email. Ethics approval from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne.
2 See https://wreckedallprods.com/
3 Anderson-Doherty has a BA and MA in Drama and Performance Studies from Queen's University Belfast and is an Estill Voice Training Master teacher.
4 There are some scholars and practitioners who see panto as already queer (see Lipton, 2008), but in our opinion the potential for queering that panto indubitably possesses is most often not invoked – indeed, may be studiously avoided by changes such as the removal of the female Principal Boy, which erases that potentially queer pairing.
5 The mental health cost of homophobic attitudes, and in some cases violence, is traced in a number of publications, for instance: Jarman and Tennant (2003); McNamee (2006). For a broader contextualization of gender and sexuality within the frame of Northern Irish ethnosectarian conflict, see Duggan (2012).
6 *Little Red Riding Hood*, Waterfront Studio, Belfast. GBL Productions. Writer P.J. O'Reilly. Director Lisa May. 21 November 2013–4 January 2014.
7 Campbell and McTighe have added context and critical commentary in italics after the interview.
8 Linehan created May's voice for Holmes' radio show, later creating the image by 'raiding' Holmes's aunt May's wardrobe for a dress, an old cardigan and a wool hat that resembles a tea-cosy; some blacked out teeth 'completed the picture' in Holmes's account (2008: 109). What 'started as a joke' between Holmes and Linehan produced this grotesque-feminine panto icon. As Holmes (2008: 108) describes her: 'May is not only our funniest and most famous housewife, she is also not the best looking by far.'
9 'Who Is May McFettridge' (2000).
10 See, for example, Hastings and Plentl (2007); Stevens (2013).
11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in conversation with S. Gunew. See Gunew and Spivak (1990).

12 In his article 'The Death of the Dame? Tales from the National Database of Pantomime Performance', Simon Sladen (2015: 84) cites Jon Conway of Qdos as arguing that 'lesbianism featured so frequently on television that audiences would automatically reach the wrong conclusion about a romance involving the Principal Boy [played by a female actor]'.
13 *Little Britain,* David Walliams and Matt Lucas (writers/performers) for BBC radio (2000–2002) and BBC Television (2003–2005).
14 Quentin, in Moodie (2016).
15 *Judith Butler* Part 3/6, dir. Paule Zajdermann (2006), Artes France & Associés https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALx1MEW2P3U (accessed 31 May, 2019).
16 'Millie' originated as (and remains) a derogatory Irish, but particularly Northern Irish, slang term for low-income female industrial workers in the mills of industrializing Dublin and Belfast of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Anderson-Doherty comments further below about the class implications of performing this voice with queerness in mind.
17 There was a UK-wide ban applied to the IRA, INLA, UVF, UDA and others in addition to Sinn Féin politicians which was in place from 1988–1994. It applied to television and radio interviews on UK TV and radio. Ireland's national broadcaster, RTÉ, applied the restrictions in similar ways.
18 See Muñoz (1999).

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15

Wicked Queens of Pantoland

Simon Sladen

In 2017, drag villains could be seen in a wide range of pantomimes, from small-scale regional productions to commercial ventures with budgets of over £1 million. Not only were drag villains present in Christmas pantomimes, but they could also be found in Easter and summer versions of the form and were present in professional productions staged in Canada and South Africa. Played by men, the drag villain has diversified cross-dressed practices in pantomime and is the most significant change to the genre's stock characters since the widespread demise of the female principal boy in the 1990s.

With its foundations laid in the late nineteenth century, contemporary British pantomime still borrows heavily from fairy and folktale narratives and utilizes aspects of musical theatre, music hall and variety in its execution. Cross-dressing is most frequently employed in the role of the dame, with approaches described by Peter Holland as varying from 'believable' and 'camp drag' to 'over-the-top' (1997: 201). Much has already been written about these different interpretations and the convention of cross-dressing in pantomime, but in opposition to reports that the female principal boy's presence had declined to around 16 per cent of performances by 2014 (National Database of Pantomime Performance 2014), the drag villain has experienced a sharp increase.

This chapter seeks to establish the roots and formation of the contemporary drag villain – an often glamorous and powerful female malevolent agent played by a man – and analyse the now-stock character's journey to prominence, paying attention to pantomime's era of mass commercialization in the 1980s and queering of the genre, which has ultimately led to the rapid escalation of practice post-2000.

From hags to witches

Edwin M. Eigner (1989: 69) states that by 1814 benevolent and malevolent agents in the form of dames existed, but while the cross-dressed practice was

evident upon the pantomime stage at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kate Newey (2016) argues that it was not until the 1860s that dames started 'taking over' as a result of Queen Victoria's reign. The dame, she argues, was a way for male writers and performers to seek 'revenge [on the recently widowed monarch] by featuring the incontinent and stupid Widow Twankey on stage'. However, male to female cross-dressed practices prior to the 1880s were varied.

What we today understand as the pantomime dame, a motherly comic figure, has overshadowed and ignored other male to female cross-dressed roles, which were also widely practised. Female villains played by male actors were an accepted feature of pantomime dating back to the 1860s, with 1861's *Harlequin and the Sleeping Beauty* at the Theatre Royal Birmingham engaging Mr H. Leigh in the role of Malevolence the baneful fairy. Performers such as Frank Attree, who played Hook o' Crook the Witch in the Lyceum Theatre, London's *Beauty and the Beast* in 1928, and Fred Moule, who played the Wicked Witch in successive seasons for producers The Melville Brothers, specialized in villains, which in female-led narratives were always hags, crones and witches.

Unlike the dame, the cross-dressed malevolent agent was in no way comedic, its roots closer to the practice of men playing the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. But, as David Mayer (1974: 61) observes in reference to pantomime dames, such characters were 'created by male pantomime arrangers as a

Figure 15.1 Left: Mark Turner as Maligna in *Sleeping Beauty*, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London, 1929. Source: *The Sketch*, 1 January 1930, p. 38 (photo by Stage Photo. Co.). Right: Illustration of George Belmore as Witch in *Sleeping Beauty*, Lyceum Theatre, London, 1932. Source: *Sleeping Beauty Book of Words*, Lyceum Pantomime 1932, London: Wightman Mountain Ltd, p. 27 (Illustration by 'Kin'). From author's own collection.

means of coming to terms with women – more precisely – with men's assumptions about women'. These villains derided ageing women and were jealous of young princesses' youthfulness and beauty, using transformation and magic to control, trick and profit. Devoid of femininity, these characters acted as a warning against single, elderly women and depicted them as grotesque, diametrically opposed to the young, attractive benevolent agents such as fairies played by younger women. With reviews focusing on the comedic antics of the cross-dressed dame or the aesthetic 'qualities' of the thigh-slapping female to male cross-dressed principal boy, the cross-dressed villain was perhaps not even regarded as cross-dressed due to her quasi-asexual nature.

Producer Tom Arnold (1897–1969) strongly believed 'The star must never be booed' (La Rue, 1987: 143) and indeed twentieth-century pantomime's favouring of the dame and principal boy for star casting further supressed the role. Requiring thick make-up, unflattering costumes and receiving no positive reward from the audience aside from loud boos, prominent performers were reluctant to take on the part and there are few examples of the approach between the 1940s and 1980s.

Wicked old fairies

In the 1980s, comedy programming on UK television fully embraced cross-dressing. Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett could often be seen parodying dinner ladies, cheerleaders and Women's Institute members in their prime time BBC sketch show *The Two Ronnies* (1971–1987), with Les Dawson and Roy Barraclough's gossiping Lancastrian housewives Cissie and Ada popular recurring characters in ITV series *Sez Lez* (1972–1976). Friendly, yet slightly grotesque figures who resembled kind and portly aunts, these cross-dressed characters followed the trajectory of the pantomime dame, with Dawson citing Norman Evans's 'over the garden wall' act as a significant influence. Indeed Barraclough, Dawson and Corbett, like Evans, played such a role in many a pantomime, transporting their much loved television acts to the stage, which acted as a preservation device for a bygone era.

Another programme that celebrated cross-dressing was the BBC's light entertainment programme *The Good Old Days*,which ran from 1953–1983. A televised music hall broadcast during the decline of variety, the programme revived many Victorian and Edwardian acts and featured performers who appeared regularly in pantomime as dame, including John Inman, Barry Howard, Danny La Rue and, important for the trajectory of the drag villain, Dr Evadne Hinge and Dame Hilda Bracket.

The personas of George Logan and Patrick Fyffe, Hinge and Bracket premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1974 and, according to Roger Baker (1995: 2015), 'were at the forefront of a new development in drag [. . .] based in the creation of completely convincing characters'. Best friends and bickering enemies, Hinge and Bracket enjoyed success with *The Enchanting World of Hinge and Bracket* (BBC Radio 4, 1977–1979), *The Random Jottings of Hinge and Bracket* (BBC Radio 2, 1982–1989), *At Home With Hinge and Bracket* (BBC Radio 2, 1990) and *Dear Ladies* (BBC Two, 1983–1985).

During the 1980s, the commercial pantomime industry became reliant upon casting celebrities from the diverse field of television and popular music to ensure box office success. Casting well-known double acts with a strong television presence to headline a pantomime was not unheard of. Comics Cannon and Ball, for example, enjoyed top of the bill in many productions, including starring as the Robbers in the London Palladium's 1987 production of *Babes in the Wood*. Two dames in one pantomime, however, was rare, with producers constantly keen to mediate celebrity through an existing stock character role. With Hinge's dour nature and Bracket's jolly eccentricity, the two were cast by the E & B / Triumph Pantomime Company as Toadflax the Wicked Fairy and Meadowsweet the Good Fairy in their pantomime debut *Sleeping Beauty* at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, 1989.

Interpreted as traditional by critics, their succession of pantomimes eschewed conventional casting patterns, not only in the increased presence of male to female cross-dressing on stage, but that aside from in their inaugural pantomime, subsequent productions embraced the female dame. The cross-dressed nature of their act meant agents representing other performers and performers themselves were unwilling to share the stage, perceiving that audience members would be unable to differentiate between the roles or negotiate the different cross-dressed bodies and stock character classifications. Nevertheless, billing the act as 'Hinge and Bracket' further enforced the illusion that they were women, additionally supported by the programme in which they shared an entry that avoided referencing them as male performers. Millie Taylor (2007: 112) observes that a 'male presence was almost entirely absent' in their pantomime appearances with this pretence extending to how the two performers were written about in reviews and marketing material.

Writing in 1985, Gerald Frow remarked, 'it is, perhaps, significant that the most popular characters these days are the "baddies"' (185). Eight years later, pantomime writer John Morley observed that villains were now receiving more stage time and higher billing, concluding that this was a result of the trend of casting pop stars as principal boys. Their inexperience in the genre and inability to deliver the narrative led to writers redistributing it to the

villain, who, in his view, constituted one of the real 'strengths of contemporary pantomime' (Morley, 1993: xvii). A character often on stage alone, who is afforded large amounts of text and the delivery of key narrative points, had become attractive to irregular stage performers. The ability to rehearse alone was advantageous in among other commitments and as the villain does not usually partake in any audience participation, apart from receiving boos, they did not require any pre-knowledge or experience of the genre.

Savage queens

Much has been written about Danny La Rue's impact and legacy on the pantomime industry, introducing an aesthetic that draws heavily on what Laurence Senelick (2000: 80) terms 'glamour drag'. La Rue's dame, defined by Senelick as 'a ventriqual media for his own persona' replaced the customary slapstick of the role with showbiz pizzazz' (2000: 247). Replicating his cabaret-wear, female impersonator La Rue rejected the convention of the grotesque, misogynistic dame and embraced femininity, glitter and sequins, previously reserved for the costuming of the immortals to signify a magical otherworldly status or the dame's finale costume to signify wealth and success. La Rue's dame caused cultural commentators to search for a new vocabulary to describe his approach to the role, a result of his celebrity casting and pantomime's survival strategy of embracing, adopting and integrating other popular forms of performance to remain contemporary. The engagement of La Rue's act on account of his celebrity status led to a popularization of the glamour dame and drag. But while La Rue only played drag villain towards the end of his life (La Rue 1987: 143), another drag queen helped cement the role: Lily Savage.

Having coined a new term for La Rue, Senelick describes Savage as 'assimilating the Dame to the world of comic flats and Thatcheristic meanness' (2000: 252). First breaking into the club scene in the 1980s, by the 1990s Savage had graduated to presenting mainstream media television programmes such as *The Big Breakfast* (1995–1996) and *Blankety Blank* (1997–2002), echoing what Roger Baker (1995: 206) observes of La Rue's career – that a heterosexualization of his act occurred as O'Grady 'moved further and further into the spotlight of popular approbation'.

Uniting the aesthetic of the glamour dame with the villain archetype, the drag villain was frequently confused with the dame due to the cross-dressed nature of the role and lack of terminology. Writing in 2004 in response to O'Grady's pantomime debut, Peter Lathan noted: 'It is too early to say whether this more-earthy type of Dame will last. It may well be a one-off. We shall see.

But that's what's so good about pantomime and about the Dame character in particular: it adapts and changes according to the times' (2004: 77).

But O'Grady was not interested in playing a 'moaning, aggressive, sarcastic' Widow Twankey (Elliott, 2018: 131) at that point in his career; he wanted to play the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*, a role that matched Savage's personality. Having previously played villain Miss Hannigan in the musical *Annie* for Elliot, O'Grady was aware that audiences and critics alike had accepted Savage in the role 'as a person, not a character' (Shuttleworth, 1998).

As per a speciality act who replicates their performance, O'Grady's drag villain was afforded a sense of agency and ownership, imported from another genre to perform as part of the pantomime whole. Credited as a co-writer, O'Grady constituted a member of the creative team, separate from Savage, whose appearance, much like Hinge and Bracket's, never referenced her creator. Complicit in the creation of the cultural product, O'Grady was afforded the opportunity to include material for a queer audience, reclaiming the term queen and integrating what was once a marginalized act and artform into arguably the most popular performance genre in the UK.

The Stage's review commended the 'outstanding' pantomime and questioned whether it was 'far too good for children?' (Cooper, 2000: 9), welcoming the production's 'trenchant' decision to cast Savage. As Martina Lipton reminds us: 'Pantomime is charged with a multiplicity of meaning, celebrating the text's polysemic openness, where images and text carry a queer charge to queer spectators while carrying different pleasures for straight audiences' (2008: 475). The role of Wicked Queen provides many opportunities for knowing comedic interplay between the drag villain and male principal boy, particularly in *Snow White*, where she attempts to woo the Prince, inviting a queer reading as the two male performers engage in courtship. That royal princes are often portrayed as more effeminate and camp than their working-class counterparts Jack or Aladdin further enforces such a reading as the slim, boyish twink flirts with the elderly, lusty queen.

New queens on the block

Casting practices in contemporary pantomime comprise two models: audiences exposed to new casts each year or venues that have resident performers. In contemporary pantomime, the most frequent resident roles are the dame and comic, with dames often writing and directing too.

The Theatre Royal York and King's Theatre, Edinburgh are home to two of the longest serving dame-comic-villain tripartites. At the time of writing, David Leonard has played twenty-nine Villains alongside York Theatre Royal

regular dame Berwick Kaler and comic Martin Barrass, while in Edinburgh, Grant Stott has performed villain twelve times with dame Alan Stewart and comic Andy Gray. Unlike the youthful principal boy or principal girl however, the comic, dame and villain are somewhat ageless and enable performers to remain at a venue year after year. Moreover, what sets the villain apart is that, unlike the comic and the dame, the villain performs a narrative function, drives the plot and is male or female depending on the pantomime title, ranging from *Aladdin*'s despotic wizard Abanazar to *Sleeping Beauty*'s wicked fairy Carabosse.

Writing in 1993, pantomime scriptwriter John Morley cited *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Dick Whittington* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* as the industry's top six titles, with *Snow White* 'less safe at the box office' and *Sleeping Beauty* not featuring at all (1993: xvi). Data from the 2018 season revealed the following breakdown of titles based on 238 productions listed on the National Database of Pantomime Performance:

1 *Aladdin* (18%)
2 *Cinderella* (14%)
3 *Jack & Beanstalk* (12%)
3 *Peter Pan* = *Snow White* (11%)
4 *Sleeping Beauty* = *Dick Whittington* (10%)

The popularity of Disney animations *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, released on VHS in 1994, and *Sleeping Beauty*, re-released on VHS in 1996, is partly responsible for this. Due to the villain constituting the Wicked Queen and with no immediate role for either dame or male villain, *Snow White* remained unproduced at venues with resident performers.

When Stott learnt that Qdos Entertainment producer Michael Harrison was considering staging *Snow White* for the first time in Edinburgh, he 'begged' for the opportunity to play the 'greatest villain in Pantoland', having seen O'Grady in the role. Stott (2018) explains that regular dame Alan Stewart and others involved annually with the production expressed nervousness at two cross-dressed bodies on stage as such casting would eschew the theatre's regular pattern. Incidentally, this may also be the reason why *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* had never previously been considered for the venue as they both require female villains. Part of this anxiety was down to the impact the dame has on the show in term of aesthetic, costume changes and comic material, but also fears that the audience may reject such a formation of the usual tripartite. No reservations, however, were had regarding Stott's inexperience in drag.

Early casting experiments, such as resident dame Paul Laidlaw as the Wicked Queen at the Gordon Craig Theatre, Stevenage in 2005, were deemed

to have failed by the pantomime's producer Paul Hendy due to the audience's perception of the dame as a maternal, friendly being and resistance from the performer to shatter the illusion. During the 1990s, *Snow White*'s dame role of the nurse had not yet become widely practised with resident dames usually cast as a male comedy Henchman to enable a continuation of their partnership with the comic.

Dressed to kill

Regardless of producer and performer anxiety, audiences and critics did embrace such roles, and in some productions the drag villain constituted the only cross-dressed role on stage. Indeed, consultation with the *Encyclopedia of Pantomime* (Pickering, 1993) reveals no entry for 'drag', supporting reports that the industry was anti-drag, with the form seen as a threat to what was perceived as the 'traditional' cross-dressed role of the dame with its roots in variety and music hall. *The Stage*'s critic Mike Martin (2005) described Laidlaw as 'a class act with his finger firmly on the pulse of entertainment. Reminding me of a blend of Dr Evadne Hinge and Danny La Rue at their best', placing the performance in the lineage of Logan and La Rue; glamour drag with a comedic bite.

While most of contemporary pantomime's stock characters evolved slowly throughout the twentieth century, the drag villain's contemporary form is unrecognizable from the nineteenth-century practice of male actors playing female villains, often overlooked when discussing cross-dressed practices. While this archaic practice is now absent in twenty-first-century productions, it is important to recognize that society's notions of beauty, ugliness and vulgarity have greatly changed. Some might argue that contemporary drag aesthetics echo plastic surgery patients who undergo transformations to appear younger, but in doing so expose their treatment due to the incongruity of age and appearance. The drag villain satirizes this, as well as reflexively parodying pantomime's casting practices given the similarity in aesthetic between drag queens and celebrities playing female villains such as Joan Collins and Priscilla Presley. Indeed, when Joan Collins was taken ill as Queen Rat in the Birmingham Hippodrome's 2010 pantomime of *Dick Whittington*, her understudy was male dance captain Wayne Fitzsimmons, who performed the role in her costumes.

This notion of an elderly female trying to retain her looks is further enforced by the drag villain's costuming, which embraces the seductive nature of contemporary female villains. As Katie R. Horowitz (2013: 309) writes, 'queens draw on a visual lexicon of sexual desire (skimpy costumes,

explicit banter, suggestive dance moves)'. The drag villain assumes the cross-dressed voyeurism of the female principal boy and transposes the anxiety present in heterosexual male audience members to the villain. She is not 'sexually unattractive, and will consequently inhibit guilty thoughts of incest', as Mayer describes the pantomime dame, but dressed in similar attire to female performers playing the villain, leading heterosexual male audience members to, as Caroline Radcliffe describes of Dan Leno's transformed Mother Goose, 'question their sexuality' (2010: 122). Concurrently, the drag villain also constitutes the convention of cross-dressing absent in productions that dispense with the dame and engage male principal boys. This is most evident in the female principal boy's and the drag villain's shared exposure of legs and upper thighs with the structured tunics of Victorian pantomime, mirroring the contemporary drag villain's corsets. While one attempts to contain the natural body and disguise the female form, the other enables a feminine silhouette. Breeches draw attention to exposed legs, while thigh-high slit dresses enable momentary glances at the illusion of a woman.

Figure 15.2 Left: Joan Collins as Queen Rat in *Dick Whittington*, Birmingham Hippodrome, 2010. Courtesy Qdos Entertainment. Right: Craig Revel Horwood as Queen Lucretia in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Mayflower Theatre, Southampton, 2017.

Lipton describes Savage's Wicked Queen as 'a smorgasbord of constructed female archetypes, such as the girl-next-door, the vampire siren and the iconic sex kitten Marilyn Monroe' (2008: 476) and in almost all cases, drag villain costuming draws heavily on the Walt Disney Company's character designs for Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*), Lady Tremaine (*Cinderella*) and Wicked Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), whose 'faces, body shapes and behaviour lend mannish traits to their characters' (Putnam, 2013: 151). These animated cartoons are often the first interaction children have with the fairytale narratives, dominating iconography due to the company's vast merchandise, memorabilia and experience empire. Indeed, through a series of costume changes, drag villains often resemble all three Disney villains: crowned, horned and coiffured in an exaggerated Lady-Tremaine-cum-Bride-of-Frankenstein wig. A result of expensive stock costumes being re-used for subsequent productions, this leads to standardization through repetition and replication of practice. But whereas horns are usually reserved for evil fairy Carabosse, drag villains as Wicked Queens and Evil Stepmothers also appear in such attire, further enforcing the phallic mother and referencing the role's quasi-immortal status via the devil. The use of Bride of Frankenstein-esque wigs, and the changing of appearance through costuming further enforces the drag villain's sense of otherness with cross-species characters such as Queen Rat adding additional layers that she is a construction of female, a sum of parts.

Putnam argues that the Disney villains suggest 'real transgendered people are extremely dangerous and to be avoided at all costs' (2013: 151–52). Similar to criticism of the pantomime dame being laughed at on account of the role's crossed-dressed nature, the drag villain has been condemned by some members of the trans community for further alienating and demonizing, particularly as the drag villain's conclusion is either death, banishment or transformation in order to integrate and be accepted. In addition, much like Marjorie Garber (1993: 183) argues that Peter Pan's portrayal by a woman ensures he can never grow up a man, if interpreted in this way, a drag villain's resentment of the principal girl or boy, which in female-led narratives often constitutes their inherited step/god children, becomes even more significant as she cannot bear a child. However, this ignores the fictional frame of performance and conflates drag queens, the pantomime dame, transvestitism and transsexuals as the same. As Pierre Lienard and Michael Moncrieffe note, referencing the work of Stephen P. Schacht (2000): 'Drag queens, or female impersonators, differ from transsexuals [. . .] in that they are [often] gay individuals who don female clothing with the explicit goal of performing in front of audiences' (Lienard and Moncrieffe, 2017: 2).

New drag for old

Between 2012 and 2017, drag villains in pantomime significantly increased in number, a positive correlation to the exposure of performers such as Paul O'Grady as Lily Savage and casting of celebrities such as TV's *Strictly Come Dancing*'s self-appointed nasty judge Craig Revel Horwood, who, with a background in drag, somewhat inherited Savage's roles, playing both Miss Hannigan and Wicked Queen. With practices at large-scale theatres emulated and replicated, producers could rely on the success already achieved by other venues. But the increase is also due to another factor: the formation of new companies, and new writers and directors at regional theatres.

A survey of companies most frequently casting drag villains in the 2010s reveals they are on average five years old and produced by individuals born in the 1990s. This millennial generation grew up with the animated Disney musical and has no direct experience of music hall or variety, neither have they experienced stage censorship or a society in which homosexuality is illegal. The key dames linked to the 'bloke in a frock' archetype, namely Arthur Askey (1900–1982), Billy Dainty (1927–1986), Terry Scott (1927–1994) and Les Dawson (1931–1993), were dead before they saw their first pantomime. The softer, more believable dames, to use Holland's terminology, however, were headlining productions into the 2000s, including Jack Tripp (1922–2005), Danny La Rue (1944–2006), John Inman (1935–2007) and Christopher Biggins (1948–). These dames revelled in camp, and an arguably conscious queering of the role occurred in these performers' presentations, not only in that La Rue was a widely acknowledged gay icon, but in that during the 1990s, performers such as Biggins were openly gay, with Inman entering into a civil partnership in 2005 having shot to fame as the camp sales assistant Mr Humphries on BBC sitcom *Are You Being Served?*

Daniel William Bell of KD Theatre Productions and Joseph Purdy Productions, both openly gay, list their main influences as Danny La Rue, Ceri Dupree and Chris Hayward, the latter two quasi-inheritors of the first (Bell, 2018; Purdy, 2018). Favouring the glamour dames, these producers demonstrate a new lineage stemming from Danny La Rue rather than Dan Leno, with glamour drag embraced rather than rejected.

Having trained in musical theatre, Bell (2018) cites stage shows such as *Kinky Boots* (2012) and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (2006) as influences and examples of how the musical theatre landscape has embraced drag, most recently seen in *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017). This cross-dressing is different from the characters of Edna Turnblad and Miss Trunchball in *Hairspray* (2002) and *Matilda* (2010), but nevertheless female impersonation is a key component of contemporary musical theatre and an industry in

which many new pantomime producers, performers, writers and directors now receive their training.

Another key area of influence is *RuPaul's Drag Race*, frequently referenced as significantly bringing drag into the mainstream and attracting younger, diverse audiences with a positive queer agenda. The exposure to drag in the UK transcends performance frames, with drag queen Conchita Wurst winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014 and acts such as La Voix and Ruby Murry appearing on prime-time television shows *Britain's Got Talent* and *The Voice*; both now frequently cast as dames. No longer must one be a member of the queer community and gain entrance to a private club, pub or bar to experience drag performance.

Eric Hobsbawn reminds us that the 'process of formalization, ritualization, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition' (1983: 4) leads to the invention of new traditions, with Marie Kruger's reflections on South African pantomime supporting Edward Shils' assertion that 'most human beings do not have enough imagination to think up an alternative to what is given, nor do they feel an urgent need to think up something new when there is already a pattern ready at hand' (Kruger, 2000: 169). Not tied to existing scripts and stock, millennial producers staging pantomimes for the first time are open to new interpretations of existing roles and narratives and keen to cement their mark on the industry with new practices. Indeed, it is this reason that secures creatives new contracts at venues. It is no coincidence that all bar one professional pantomime production of *The Little Mermaid* since 2009 has cast a drag villain – not only a new title, but also the inclusion of a new stock character referencing Divine-inspired Ursula the Sea Witch in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. In the case of Steve Marmion's pantomime appointment at the Oxford Playhouse, it was precisely because he breaks with the form often seen as imperialist and misogynistic. Marmion's 2017 production of *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the theatre featured drag villain Judy Hench played by Amrou Al-Kadhi, who described the experience as 'empowering':

> Rather than the quiet, maddening isolation that comes from the silent boos of being a minority in the West, I get to strut on stage, and exercise agency in my being vilified. [. . .] It allows me to show the audience that I am in charge of this social position [. . .] it might hopefully recode how they socially imagine the Arab 'other'. For the villain is, as I'm discovering, truly loved; it is a role onto which audiences can exorcise all their social rage and prejudices, but ultimately escape them and renegotiate them.
>
> Al-Kadhi, 2017

Conclusion

In a review of the London Palladium's 1953 production of *Cinderella*, Beverley Baxter (1953) referred to the casting of Cyril Wells as Baroness Pastry as a 'blunder', but over sixty years later, Paul O'Grady's Baroness at the Palladium was described by Paul Vale (2016) as 'command[ing] practically every scene [. . .] and consistently raising the roof'.

In twenty-first-century Britain, diversity is widely celebrated by many sectors of society with drag queens appearing in contemporary marketing campaigns, television programmes, films, art, music and literature. As a result, drag villains are now an accepted stock character of pantomime and ever increasing in musical theatre prominence. No longer ugly witches and reclusive old hags, but powerful queens and glamorous enchantresses, the diversification of cross-dressed roles has been embraced by the pantomime industry, whose very survival is down to its willingness to evolve.

But while this diversity is celebrated, pantomime's wide audience constituency means that some members may interpret the drag villain as offensive to women and the trans community, supporting negative stereotypes and enforcing otherness. In addition, the near extinction of the female principal boy and rapid increase in drag villains has resulted in the erasure of female performers from the stage, reducing the available roles for women and decreasing their exposure. In some productions, the principal cast now only features one female performer.

However, for many audience members, the misunderstood villain constitutes their favourite character, an outsider wronged by society as they attempt to gain access to a community. Chiming closely with young people's experience of queerness, anecdotal evidence from producers Bell and Purdy suggests that, above all other characters, it is the drag villain who receives the most hug and photo requests from children and adults alike during post-show meet and greets.

With the drag villain's increased exposure, other cross-dressed and queer characters, including drag dames, dame godmothers and male fairies are also being explored. New generations of writers, directors, performers and producers are constantly re-appraising the genre in response to new artforms, training grounds, narratives and audiences in a competitive marketplace to keep pantomime alive, relevant and successful.

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