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# OUT IN CULTURE

Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture

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In Memory of Marlon Riggs

soul of their work. The content of Hibiscus's art seems ephemeral: camp humor, secondhand glamour, and a child's perennial delight. He may be a trickster with a tacky mirror, but somehow it's impossible not to take a look.

I had planned to return for another visit after our first talk that April afternoon, but I never got the chance. A year later, in May 1982, George Harris was dead. He was among the first in a legion of angels to die from AIDS.

Jeffrey Hilbert

**T**he radical drag underground. The Wigstock generation. Drag postmodern. Whatever it's called, there is a new generation of drag performers who have no desire to coddle their audience with the unpretentious rendition of Marilyn. Spurred on by both homophobia and AIDS phobia, this drag is fresh, fierce, and fighting mad. These performers have fashioned their own personae and are often found at the forefront of AIDS fund-raisers, Queer Nation stings, public-access cable broadcasts, alternative-magazine manifestos, and live guerrilla theater.

But not all drag performers see false eyelash to false eyelash on the activist power of donning a dress. There are those performers, both male and female, who use cross-gender guise to bring attention to their political forum and those who do it strictly for entertainment value. The division clearly separates drag into two camps.

While Atlanta drag performer Lurleen and Los Angeles drag Vaginal Creme Davis are out on the front lines, involved in groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and giving benefit performances for the fight against AIDS, others, such as John Epperson as Lypsinka, see their roles simply as entertainers.

"AIDS has forced gay people to think about who we are and what our relationship with straight society really is," says the strawberry-blond Lurleen. "It's hard to be an apolitical person these days. I'm no strident Marxist, but when there is a reactionary government in power, it's kind of hard to get up onstage and lip-synch Barbra Streisand and then say, 'Drink up, everybody!'"

Lypsinka, who hopes to cross over from the stage into mainstream network

television, disagrees. "Some people opt to do that [be political]. I don't. I set out to entertain."

#### A Reemerging Past

The disagreements over style and form between Lypsinka, Lurleen, Vaginal Creme Davis, and legions of other drag queens—politics versus entertainment—are not new, having engaged during the tumultuous times of the late sixties, when gays and lesbians were beginning the fight for basic civil rights.

At the 1969 Stonewall riots, drag queens were the first to pitch stones and rip up parking meters in a battle against New York police over harassment of gay bar patrons. The riots and the ensuing gay liberation movement smashed preconceived notions of sexuality and behavioral conformity. While countless drag performers from coast to coast were still doing unthreatening impersonations of Judy Garland, a handful of cross-dressers were fighting the system.

The Judy Garlands of the drag queen world, however, became the unquenchable norm during the heady disco days of the seventies and eighties, when drag bars blossomed throughout the country. Although there were several drag troupes, such as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the Cockettes in San Francisco, who maintained a high profile at parades and demonstrations, it was not until the late eighties and the acceleration of the AIDS crisis that drag again embraced a political message.

"Basically, drag had to get hipper or else just be so square," says film director John Waters, who brought the world the late great drag diva Divine in movies like *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Hairspray*. "The old idea of what drag queens were is incredibly corny and square in the nineties. The ones who do Carol Channing are really like what Uncle Tom used to be."

Clearly, today's drag artists have a lot more on their minds than tight wigs. "Political drag is absolutely, unquestionably experiencing a comeback," claims Martin Worman, aka Philthee Ritz, one of the original members of the Cockettes. "The Cockettes didn't have a dogma. Now drag has an edge and a conscience because of AIDS."

Although most drag queens recognize the influence of their predecessors, they feel they've taken the movement a step further. "We've all been influenced by old-line drag," admits Lurleen, a self-described cross between Sandra Bernhard and Daisy Duke. "Traditionally drag has been a form of escapist entertainment, like the alternative version of TV—sitcoms for fags."

"The difference between old-line drag and new drag is that those performers take *themselves* seriously," continues Lurleen. "That's tedious in any form of self-

expression. What we do reflects the mentality of our generation. We approach serious causes with humor and react to what's going on in our culture and society."

#### Rebirth of Political Drag

The setting for this rebirth can probably be traced to the Pyramid Club in Manhattan's East Village, where acts like the band Now Explosion and performers such as Hapi Phace, Tabboo! and the late Ethyl Eichelberger honed their considerable talents in front of an audience that included New York's intellectual and social elite.

"The Pyramid was the center of it all," says New York drag figurehead Lady Bunny. "In the early eighties everyone wore black, and it was all gloom, doom, gothic punk sensibility. But we made it more upbeat, loud, colorful, and trashy, which reflected our outlook on life."

"Now drag is about trying new things," explains Bunny. "It isn't limited to lip-synching. There is a new generation of queers whose icons aren't Barbra, Judy, and Bartha." Instead, blaxploitation films, seventies sitcoms, glitter-rock bands, or parodies of other drags are now de rigueur inspirations.

Lady Bunny went to New York in 1982 with fellow performers Lahoma, RuPaul, and Larry T. when their Atlanta-based band, Now Explosion, had a gig at the Pyramid. They decided to stay. Two years later, as a lark "to see the drags of the New York club world in the daylight," Bunny coorganized the first annual Wigstock.

The event, now in its seventh year, attracts thousands to Tompkins Square Park in New York's East Village on Labor Day as an end-of-the-summer gay love-in teeming with bouffants, bell-bottoms, platform shoes, and most important, media visibility. Even Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger declared 3 September 1990 as Wigstock Day.

Owing to Wigstock's success and the increasing visibility of drags, the Washington, D.C.-based media-watchdog group National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) plans to present a forum addressing the power of politics and cross-dressing at its next Creating Change Conference in November. NGLTF director Robert Bray's suggested title for the forum: "Drag Activism—Work It, Girl!"

"The camp and irony evoked by drag have carried our movement through some rough times," says Bray. "We're seeing more and more participation of drag queens on the front lines of the movement. Who could ever calculate how much money has been raised by queens for the AIDS epidemic?"

"Drag adds an element of fun to politics so that it's not all Maoist uniforms and being glum and gray," says the platform-headed Lurleen. "Hopefully it makes thinking about politics more palatable."

#### Confront or Coddle?

A division remains over whether the entertainers should confront or pamper their audiences.

Lypsinka, whose lightning-paced lip-synch revue *I Could Go on Lip-Synching!* has had tremendous financial success on both coasts, says that although he has performed at AIDS and gay-related fund-raisers, he sees himself as "not political at all. The closest I get to a political comment in my show is with Shirley Bassey singing 'This Is My Life' and suddenly cutting to Norma Zimmer singing 'This Is My Country' and then abruptly cutting into Tallulah Bankhead asking, 'What have you been doing? What have you been doing?'"

"A Lypsinka kind of performer will probably appeal to more people," says self-described "blacktress" Vaginal Creme Davis, who uses an aggressive, abrasive, in-your-face style to reach his audience.

"It's easier to digest Lypsinka's kind of performance," explains Vaginal. "It's safer, and people aren't challenged. But when people see an African American in this feminized role, they realize that there's a whole spectrum of being out there and that the black experience or the queer experience is not just limited to one aspect."

Unlike most drags, Vaginal and his heavy-metal thrash-parody band Pedro, Muriel, and Ester tend to confront, not cater to their audience. Their shows are often permeated with a sense of danger, with the audience becoming frenzied and involved in the sometimes dangerous practice of slam dancing.

"The whole controversy over using the term *queer* or *gay* and *fashion* is so heated right now," explains Vaginal, editor of *Fertile La Topsh Jackson Magazine*, a gay parody of supermarket tabloids, "because people who want to be identified as gay and lesbian want everyone to like them. Someone with a queer identification doesn't want that kind of acceptance."

Even those performers with an agenda have a hard time considering themselves political, much less agreeing on how their politics connect. For the most part, these performers see themselves as channels for the voice of an activist generation.

"Nobody puts on a dress just to be political, but once the motivation is there, a lot of people answer the call," says Los Angeles-based performer Gender, whose naughty, bawdy patter and ridiculous tap-dancing routines are combined with a

concern over the growing power of the Far Right and their attacks on the First Amendment.

"I mean, how political can a piece of clothing be?" Gender asks. "But then I suppose it can be. Drag queens were out there pitching rocks at Stonewall because they had the most to lose. Now there is this timely episode of activism, and since drag queens are so visual, they are out there *daring*. At least some of them are. In that way drag is political."

"The queens are better at PR than they were before," says Les Simpson, editor of *My Comrade/Sister*, an alternative publication chronicling the East Village scene. "It goes hand in hand with gay people building more confidence, being louder, and being more out there."

#### Hitting the Airwaves

"The Brenda and Glenda Show," hosted by Brenda Sexual and Glenda Orgasm, takes the queer cause over the airwaves on Manhattan Cable every Monday night.

"We take the talk-show format out of the studio and into unlikely places where you're never sure what will happen," Glenda continues. "We confront people on the street and don't care if they like us. We're not out there to make friends."

Brenda and Glenda met at Wigstock in 1989 and that December took part in the now-legendary ACT UP demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral, in which protesters interrupted Cardinal John O'Connor's mass.

"We dressed up as clowns—the religious right—and were arrested," Glenda recalls. "That's when I realized that street theater and AIDS and gay activism were what I wanted to do."

Using their video camera as a weapon, Brenda, Glenda, and entourage take to the streets, recording homophobia, AIDS phobia, and drag phobia in the general public. A show filmed aboard a Buffalo, N.Y., rail line profiled a group of fellow train passengers—"black Baptist Bible thumpers," according to Glenda, who were chanting, "Adam and Evel Not Adam and Steve!" A road trip to Donald Trump's Atlantic City, N.J., casino, the Tai Mahal, focused on the alleged discrimination Brenda and Glenda faced there. They were barred entrance to the gambling floor by security. The reason given: too much makeup.

"People need to be educated about gay issues and gay politics and about AIDS and activism," Glenda says. "The way to reach people is to make them laugh and, at the same time, make them think about more serious issues. The people I see at our shows are not the people I see at ACT UP or Queer Nation meetings, but they do listen to what we're talking about because we are entertaining."

"We try to incorporate AIDS activism with our show to make people aware that all issues are connected," continues Glenda. "The AIDS crisis, gay visibility, antigay violence, women's issues, reproductive issues—they're all connected. They're all about what we do with our bodies. And drag is just another choice of what we do with our bodies."

Like Brenda and Glenda and the Cockettes before them, Gregg Deborah Taylor (his legal name) and his pal Jerome of San Francisco perform what Taylor calls "drag outreach to fight gay invisibility." Taylor and company take their outreach on the road and into mainstream America.

When the group descended on the Serramonte shopping mall in northern California for a Hello Kitty coloring contest last winter, mall security was not amused and called in the police, who saw nothing wrong, leaving the gang to color to their hearts' content. The event was reported in the *San Francisco Examiner* under the headline HELLO KITTY CORNERED: DRAG QUEENS, PUNKS JOIN IN THE FUN.

### Drag Kings

Of course, drag performance is not strictly the domain of men. San Francisco is also home to Leigh Crow, whose character, Elvis Hetselvis, puts an ironic spin on Elvis impersonators, discussing the King's drug problem and making copious references to "little girls in white cotton panties." Hetselvis, a hit among both the city's gay and lesbian communities, performs at ACT UP benefits and joins in on Taylor's outings.

Shelly Mars's male characters have a somewhat harder edge. The New York performer's best-known character is Martin, a leering, cigar-chomping man in a baggy suit who performs a striptease, fondles his dick (a beer bottle, which she shakes up), and ejaculates over the audience. By the end of the performance, Martin transforms into a woman, and the idea comes full circle.

Mars's newest male character, Peter, is a person with AIDS who is slightly psychotic from medication and dementia. Modeled after people she met through ACT UP and friends who have died of the disease, Mars's Peter elicits very powerful reactions from her audience.

"It's a scary character to do," says Mars. "You never know what kind of response you are going to get. Some people think that since I am portraying an insane character, I am making fun of him or saying all people with AIDS are this way. That narrow-mindedness comes from their own denial.

"AIDS dementia is kind of cloistered and not really talked about much," Mars

continues. "We don't talk about how someone lost his mind, and it happens a lot. AIDS is a very fucked-up disease.

"It's very heavy for people to see their friends go through dementia and then die," she explains. "Hopefully my performance brings up a voice to talk about this. To get people talking is the most important thing."

### The Pride and the Prejudice

Beyond politics and the divisions it engenders, there is a common thread running through the drag community: the desire to get audiences thinking about their own sexuality.

"We challenge gender roles," explains Glenda of "The Brenda and Glenda Show." "And even though it's a campy parody, it goes beyond that. A lot of gay men are bothered by their own femininity. Like 'I'm gay, but I'm not feminine, I'm not a fag. I'm a man, even though I like to suck cock.' Seeing a drag queen confronts all those fears. That's why we do drag."

"There is a certain amount of prejudice within the gay community," says Los Angeles's Gender. "A form of denial—that whole straight-acting/straight-appearing complex. Some of these gays are more effeminate than the drag queens I know. Of course, they would never dream of putting on a dress. Not that they should! But it makes me wonder where their heads are."

"I understand the objection to drag from gays within the system who are working on gay and lesbian issues that way," says Lutelen, "and yet I think that's wrong. The issue is diversity and tolerance for people who are different and not just people who are different 'our way.' All oppressed people have something in common and need to work together."

Still, drags continue to don their wigs, apply their makeup, and take to the stage in support of a community that, more often than not, tends to reject rather than embrace them.

Perhaps the message this new drag best reflects is one of SILENCE=DEATH.