Gender Performance: From the Freak Show to Modern Drag

- Olivia Germann, *Ball State University*

Abstract

This paper explores how gender performance in the freak show grew into the modern drag scene as we know it today. By examining some of the modern elements of drag, it is possible to see how these performers circumvented the laws, prejudices, and discrimination aimed towards them to create a booming industry where drag queens appear on national television and are treated with the respect that they had previously been denied.

It is the season six finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the top three queens are waiting to see who will be crowned America's Next Drag Superstar. The finalists' bodies exceed our almost unattainable beauty standards, and their hair seems to defy gravity. Courtney Act, one of the finalists, is a singer from Australia; her normally blonde wig has been replaced with a bright pink one, and she's wearing a technicolor dress that looks like something out of a Bowie video. Next to her is Adore Delano, another singer, whose fire red wig hangs down to her ample bosom (thanks to a chest plate), while her black gown screams of sequins. And on the very end is Bianca Del Rio, a comedian queen who specializes in insult comedy and more traditional drag, wearing one of her typical wigs: large, black, and topped with a huge spray of colored fabric. Her eyes are made up in her typical fashion, with copious amounts of white eyeliner to feminize her eyes and make them pop. The queens entertain the audience with an opening number, the whole time "serving" face, body, and total drag realness as they try to convince Ru that they deserve the crown. In the end, it goes to Bianca Del Rio; as the crowd's deafening roars fill the award hall, the crown is placed on her head ("The Finale").

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, drag or being in drag is defined as "clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex, especially women's clothes worn by a man" ("Drag"). While drag has a long history that can be traced back to ancient civilizations, in America drag really got its start in the freak show. In the American freak shows of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, men would perform in

Digital Literature Review, vol. 3 (2016).

women's clothes to the accompaniment of jeers and laughter. Unlike drag today, which celebrates the men who wield gender as a form of costumed performance, the freak shows used drag as a way to separate the "normal" from the "abnormal" (Taylor, Rupp, Gamson 108). From the ashes of the traditional freak show arose the multi-billion dollar industry of modern American drag, replacing ragged performers with queens. Reclaiming the glory and respect that was denied to the drag queens of the freak show, the modern drag scene is a pertinent example of the aftermath of the freak shows as well as a story of reclamation and family for those who partake in it.

Gender performance formed the basis for many popular attractions in the freak show, drawing crowds full of curiosity and searching for entertainment. While other attractions based on gender roles, such as bearded ladies, called up similar issues, drag was specifically defined as men dressing and performing as women. For freakshow audiences, drag was seen as a form of ritual humiliation (Sears 177). It was meant to be so outlandish that the audience could not contain their laughter. Thus, when men dressed as women, the audience responded as if it were a farce. The audience's reaction created a space where the challenging of gendered stereotypes was mocked, therefore reaffirming and solidifying the "acceptable" beliefs of the time.

But the real fascination with drag came from the strict crossdressing laws that swept the nation from 1848-1900. These laws banned people from appearing in public wearing clothes not associated with their "natural" sex. The purpose of these laws was to suppress non-normative behavior, but it had the opposite effect. As author Claire Sears points out:

> such laws could also incite cultural fascination and the desire to see, which entrepreneurs could exploit. . . Another manifestation was the newspaper scandal, which splashed cross-dressing practices across the front page, as local editors ran sensational stories and interviews with those who broke the law. These scandals publicized normative gender boundaries and ridiculed transgressors, representing gender difference as a titillating private eccentricity or individual moral flaw. (177)

These laws started a conversation that was fueled by drag, a topic that previously was ignored and considered taboo. Drag performers and

other crossdressers finally had a voice. Even though the drag queens were not the only ones affected by these laws, Sears argues that "the starkest manifestation of this cultural fascination was the dime museum freak show, which displayed non-normative bodies and cross-gender performances in seeming conflict with the law" (Sears 177). But the freak show circumnavigated the law skillfully, taking advantage of a loophole in the law stating crossdressing was not allowed in public. As freak shows were held on private property, indoors, there was implicit consent in buying and attending the freak show (177). Drag then began its boom.

While these laws were meant to stamp out crossdressers and drag queens, this plan ultimately backfired. Yet, while this interest in drag may seem positive, drag queens still faced untold amounts of abuse, mockery, and violence due to the anti-crossdressing laws and the treatment that they faced in the freak shows. American freak shows were infamous for their terrible working conditions and pay. Not surprisingly, drag performers were also subjected to these conditions and often forced to live in squalor. According to scholar Heath Diehl, addictive substances were sometimes used as a way to keep performers effectively caught in the freak show. The owners were able to trap a performer in a low-paying contract by controlling their access to drugs and alcohol (31).

With the new anti-crossdressing laws in place, queens finally had audiences that filled tents and sold-out shows, making queens some of the most valuable performers in the show; but outside the tent, in the real world, they were considered public enemies. Police would arrest queens out in public and often turned a blind eye to the violence that was afflicted upon them (Sears 180). This behavior was nothing new to drag queens. Many associated drag with prostitution, filth, and rampant sexual behavior, which went against the dominant religious and moral views. The fear that drag would somehow infect people with immoral thoughts and behaviors or ruin the American lifestyle was prevalent.

But the discrimination lasted long past the freak shows and the crossdressing laws. Negative attitudes towards drag queens, who were mostly gay men, continued long after the crossdressing laws came and went. Drag queens were very visible performers who exemplified queerness and challenged the gender norms on which society was rooted, even after so much "progress." Many queens tell stories upon stories of meeting

opponents of drag, whether they were morally opposed church groups, violent crowd members, or random perpetrators of violence (Sears 181). The AIDS crisis (which was originally called GRID, for gay related immune deficiency) had a hand in increasing the already excessive violence and hatred towards drag queens (Taylor, et al. 123). The "gay panic" that reigned from the 1980s through the early 2000s made drag appear dirty and diseased.

What is it about drag that creates such a strong backlash and incites such violence? And why does the majority of the violence and hate speech come from men? In a recent online study conducted by a group of researchers, it was found that men who agreed with hyper-masculine statements were more likely to have a negative attitude toward drag. What this suggests is that the uncomfortableness of being confronted with an alternate gender role makes men more likely to try to bolster their sense of masculinity, often resulting in bashing of the "feminine" men involved in drag. It is this fear of compromised manhood that seems to drive men to anger and hatred when confronted with drag, showing just how toxic hyper-masculinity can be (Bishop, et al. *557*).

According to Judith Butler, gender is defined by "the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair" (Butler 22). What drag does is confront the idea that manhood is defined by the absence of womanhood. Drag takes men and puts them in the costume of womanhood and femininity; this then confuses us as to where queens fit within the binary. Are they male because they are physically male? Are they female because they are in women's clothes? Or are they now something else, something unnamed and unknown?

Butler also speaks about drag as questioning the idea of a "real" or "natural" gender identity. By existing in this gray area, drag confuses and seems to challenge the very gender binary that many people hold as an integral part of their identity. The violence, then, is an expression of the fear that a spectator's identity might be in question, that if drag queens do not neatly fit into the gender binary, then maybe spectators do not either (Bishop et al. *557*). When queens get up on stage and complicate the gender binary, even though the audience is not actively partaking in the complication themselves, they are ultimately implicated and forced to

acknowledge and think about the confusion and how it could or could not apply to them.

This fear was clearly echoed around the country in the form of the anti-crossdressing laws and still affects attitudes towards drag queens today. But now with the success of mainstream television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the more accepting attitudes of the "millennial" generation, drag in America finally exists as a full-fledged art form that is beloved and widely accepted. While there may always be push-back against drag for religious reasons, homophobic reasons, and other factors, we are now entering a golden age of drag.

Drag today is an example of a group of people who were discriminated against and taken advantage of but who then turned the avenue of their suffering into stunning performance art. They are clearly visible, adopting names that emphasize gender and sexuality, such as "Detox Icunt" and "Alaska Thunderfuck 5000," while sporting wigs and fantastic costumes that rival anything on the runways of Paris. Although there are many different facets of drag and an incredibly diverse array of talents, there are some aspects of drag performance that still harken back to the days of the freak show. For example, performers have taken the words used to belittle and humiliate them and turned them into a part of the drag vocabulary. According to Stephen Mann, the language of drag queens is made up of the stereotypical insults the performers hear on a daily basis.

Words such as "ladyboy," "pussy," "sissy," and "faggot" have been reclaimed by the drag community. These words are now anthems, and the queens embrace them with pride where there once was shame (Mann). The term "queen" itself is one of these reclaimed words, one that was a derogatory slur towards gay men (LGBT News) but now is an identifier. Another term that the community has reclaimed, harkening directly back to their history in the freak show, is the word "freak" itself. The word "freak" has been applied negatively to drag queens since the beginning; it is meant to be a derogatory and humiliating insult. But what these queens have done is embrace it and claim it as a moniker of positivity and great ability. It is frequently used to describe a performer that is exemplary, and the title is considered a high honor ("Definition of Freak").

Of course the mother of drag queens, RuPaul, is a shining example of reclaiming language, especially in her wildly popular music video from

2014, "Sissy That Walk." In the title alone, Ru tackles reclaimed language, and flaunts such terms throughout the song. Some examples include: "[a]in't no T, ain't no Shade," "I'm a femme queen," and "my pussy game is on fire" (RuPaul). This video is an internet sensation with over five million views. The video was created on *RuPaul's Drag Race* season six and became an anthem for drag queens everywhere.

Along with reclaimed language, there is also an original drag vocabulary used by queens. It varies by region but has a core vocabulary and stylization that is found nationwide, tying queens of different walks of life together. Much like Ebonics functions as a means of subcultural communication in urban black communities, this created language binds queens together (Mann 797). Looking at *RuPaul's Drag Race*, many people scratch their heads at the frequent use of the terms "girl" and "mamma," in addition to the liberal use of well-known drag phrases such as "no T no shade," which means that a queen is telling the "T" (or truth) straight up. Or "beating my face," which refers to how heavily drag queens apply their makeup. Within the community, these terms create a sense of belonging and a common language, a way to mark oneself as a drag queen. RuPaul, as the originator of many of these terms, not only celebrates this language but also works them into the competition on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

On the show, Ru always says that the four talents needed to be America's next drag superstar are charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. According to scholar Nathaniel Simmons, these factors (abbreviated as CUNT, a joke that never gets old on the show) also include nailing the speech and language of drag. And that, along with the CUNT factors, are what make a true winner, or ideal drag queen. Focusing specifically on season four of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Simmons says,

> Throughout RPDR Season four, contestants' talk revealed appropriate patterns of behavior which are acceptable and unacceptable for ANDS (America's Next Drag Superstar). These culturally specific codes revealed not only what is appropriate for the winner of RPDR, but also what it means to speak, and act, like a drag queen. (Simmons 635-636)

Not only is this reclaimed language a way to find common ground, but it is deemed a necessary part of participation in the drag community for all queens.

Language is only part of someone's identity as a drag queen. Returning back to our working definition of drag, which is wearing "clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex, especially women's clothes worn by a man" ("Drag"), the biggest aspect of drag is the look of it, especially since it is primarily a visual art. While there are many different types of queens with different styles, subtlety is not in any drag queen's vocabulary. From plus-sized queens, pageant queens, comedy queens, fishy queens, and butch queens to all the other personas and aesthetics employed, drag is "screaming vulgarity" (63), as Daniel Harris puts it. While some queens, such as Courtney Act, have made their careers on their more "natural" drag looks, much of drag is more concerned with highlighting the illusion of femininity in the extreme. Queens pad and cinch their bodies in order to create the ideal feminine shape, tuck their genitalia tightly so no bulges can be seen, and don incredibly realistic breast plates and other breast substitutes.

Makeup is also a part of the illusion, one that comes with specific expectations. Drag queen Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 famously said in her song "Nails," "If you're not wearing nails, you're not doing drag!" (Thunderfuck) Queens are expected to enter fully into the illusion in order to do "proper drag," which includes nails, wigs, fake lashes, and pounds upon pounds of makeup. The goal of drag is not to appear like a "real" woman but rather to inflate femininity far beyond what we conceive as normal. This is the power of theatre at work, twisting the perspective of our "normal" world. In the words of scholars Verta Taylor, Leila J. Rupp, and Joshua Gamson, drag is "performing protest" (105) by engaging specifically in "contestation, intentionality, and collective identity." (105) When queens get up on stage, it may not seem inherently obvious since the performance is so fantastic and over the top, but, by refusing to be demure and quiet, their performance serves as a rallying cry, queens will not let you ignore them and their dresses.

Yet, the idea that drag is about men "passing" as women is a toxic one. In fact, in July of 2015, the popular gay pride parade in Glasgow—Free Pride Glasgow—banned drag queens from participating, claiming not only that drag was offensive to transwomen but that the concept of drag itself holds up strict ideals of femininity and reaffirms the age-old belief that it is only a woman's job to be pretty (Gremore). While this angle on drag can

certainly bring up some valid points, especially since it is an art obsessed with and focused on beauty, it is an oversimplification. Beauty is a concept that we as humans have been obsessed with in multiple forms, from fashion to sculpture, and drag is a modern art form expressing new ideals of beauty while breaking open perceived gender barriers.

The idea that drag is offensive to transwomen exposes again how much backlash drag performers receive from people perceived to be part of their "community." Mann brings up the point that drag queens are aware of their status as men and are consciously pushing against it as a means of satire and humor; this is completely different from being a transwoman, which is a matter of being rather than choice. Drag queens choose to be drag queens, and, while some drag queens, like Carmen Carrera and Kenya Michaels, have come out as trans, drag does not disqualify the existence of transpeople; rather, drag queens offer their voices and support for those fighting against gender stereotypes for men, women, non-binary, and transpeople everywhere. Drag scholar Daniel Harris tackles the argument between drag queens and the trans community in his article, "The Aesthetic of Drag," by saying,

> While many people believe that the primary purpose of drag is to enable men to 'pass' as women, verisimilitude has never been the guiding aesthetic principle at work when gay men dress up as bearded nuns on roller skates, topless baton twirlers with rhinestone pasties, or whorish prom queens" (62)

Again, this scholar emphasizes that drag is not concerned with passing but rather with performance, making the line between being a transperson and a drag queen very clear.

The community aspect of drag is just as important as the art form itself. Because drag often attracts gay performers, it serves as a haven of support and expression for people that have often been rejected by their families or ostracized by their communities. This connects back to the freakshow roots of drag, as the freak show also provided a form of family to performers when they had none. One way drag creates community is through the time honored tradition of drag families. When entering into drag and joining the community, an older queen who has been in the business takes the new queen under their wing and becomes their "drag mom." This queen then helps them navigate the world of drag and helps

introduce the queen to other queens to broaden their own family (for more information on drag families, I recommend looking at the piece "Drag Orphan" by Tom Bartolomei). A notable example is famous drag queen Alyssa Edwards and her drag daughter, LaGanja Estranja, both of who appeared on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. By forming these families, queens make their community their home. Many queens have been kicked out of their homes, rejected by their families, and suddenly thrown into a world that is both exciting and frightening. These drag families take new queens in and train them, so that, when they retire, their drag daughters are ready to become drag mothers themselves and continue the cycle of love and support.

Uniting sexuality and theatre, drag queens are the phoenixes that have risen from the ashes. From a long history of suffering comes this bright age where drag performance is prominently featured as a viable and respectable form of both entertainment and performance. While the ties to the freak show can still be seen in multiple aspects of the drag community, it is now a form of art that helps include members of society who have often been shunned. Just as the freak show functioned as a safe place for those unwanted by the world, drag works as a modern haven and land of honey for those who dare to live and perform outside the norms of gender and sexuality.

WORKS CITED

Bishop, CJ, Mark Kiss, Todd Morrison, Damien Rushe, and Jaqueline Specht. "The Association Between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs about Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 61.4 (2014): 554-567. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

"Definition of Freak." The Online Slang Dictionary. 21 Apr. 2013. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Diehl, Heath. *Wasted: Performing Addiction in America*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2016. Print.

"Drag." *Merriam Webster*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Jan. 2016.

Etkin, Jaimie. "RuPaul's Drag Race Dictionary." *The Daily Beast*. 24 Apr. 2011. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

Gremore, Graham. "Drag Queens Officially Banned From Gay Pride Event For Being 'Offensive'" *Dragoholic*. Queer TV, 1 July 2015. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Harris, Daniel. "The Aesthetic of Drag." *Salamangundi* 108 (1995): 62-74. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Oct. 2015.

LGBT News. "10 Historical Photos and Stories of Drag Queens." *Huffpost Queer Voices*. 10 Feb. 2015. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

Mann, Stephen L. "Drag Queens' Use of Language and the Performance of Blurred Gendered and Racial Identities." *Journal of Homosexuality* 58.6/7 (2011): 793-811. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

RuPaul. "Sissy That Walk." *Youtube*. WOW Presents, 12 May 2014. Web. 19

Oct. 2015.

Sears, Clare. "Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.3/4 (2008): 170-187. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Simmons, Nathaniel. "Speaking Like a Queen in RuPaul's Drag Race: Towards a Speech Code of American Drag Queens." *Sexuality & Culture* 18.3 (2014): 630-648. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Taylor, Verta, Leila J. Rupp, and Joshua Gamson. " Performing Protest: Drag Shows as Tactical Repertoire of the Gay and Lesbian Movement." *Authority in Contention* 25 (2004): 105-137. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

"The Finale." *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6*. Dir. Nick Murray. Logo. 14 May 2014. Television.

Thunderfuck, Alaska. "Nails." *Youtube*. 8 Dec. 2013. Web. 11 Dec. 2015.