Drag Kings
Chicks with Dicks

by R. Best

L'auteure examine les camps lesbiens et le travestisme utilisé de façon parodique dans les pièces présentées par la troupe Greater Toronto Drag King Society.

The concept of a distinct lesbian "camp" has been a much debated, but ill-defined beast. Without the same extensive and established history as gay male camp, the lesbian equivalent is often dismissed as not existing in its own right, or more often confused with butch/femme role playing.

"Drag," in both its Queen and King forms, is the cornerstone of camp. While cross-dressing in a butch/femme dynamic does have an element of theatricality that one associates with high camp, it has rarely been taken to the same levels of performative spectacle as gay male drag—at least not outside of the bedroom. Theatrical groups like the Clichettes (a Toronto-based comedy troupe) have used male drag as a means of parodying gender, but until now there hasn’t been a lesbian equivalent to the full-out, over-the-top, ready-for-Vegas Donna Summer and Madonna lip-sync shows of various Toronto boy bars.

Until now that is.

Three years ago, housemates Perri and Joy Lachica began dressing up in funny clothes and performing impromptu drag numbers at house parties. They were later joined by enthusiastic friends. Joy went on to do solo shows at Strange Sisters and Tinsel and Trash events at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and had friends join her for the first performance of the Village People at Buddies Tea Dance. The positive responses led Joy and Rose to organize a group with some structure and thematic continuity and the Greater Toronto Drag King Society was born. Joy is the primary choreographer and female-to-male performer and Rose is the group’s administrator and female-to-female performer.

Confused? Recognizing that “drag” is different than cross-dressing in both its attitude and its aesthetic, the group does include performances by women parodiaing the feminine as well as the masculine. The trappings of femininity are exposed as “costume,” an outfit to be “put on” just as much as the fake dicks are strapped on. The aim is not to replicate, to “pass” as another gender, but instead to question the whole notion of gender itself by exposing its main weakness—its fluidity. While the Drag Kings stuff their pants with some impressive apparatus, they often leave their breasts unbound, creating a hilarious, and yet quite sexy image—the perfect androgynes perhaps? Similarly, some gay men perform a unique type of cross-dressing known as “Scag Drag,” whereby they do their best to dress as women with as little success as possible: dresses and pumps are worn, yes, but no penis tucks and chest shaves for these boys—their facial scruff and bulging crotches function to take cross-dressing one step further than the strive for “authenticity.”

What differentiates Drag King-ism from cross-dressing (and to a lesser extent gay male drag which is often reverential of the stars it copies) is the use of parody and kitsch to question and often ridicule the iconic status of 70s and 80s performers and sex symbols.

Much of lesbian-feminist theory in pop culture and cinema studies is based on re-vision, finding the hidden “queer” subtext in films, TV shows, etc. that we watched as kids and found resonance with, but just weren’t sure why at the time. For many of us who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, a film like Grease is our self-identifying version of The Wizard of Oz—
particularly appealing
given the rumored
sexual ambiguity of
both the leads. What
performers like the
Drag Kings do is make
the fantasy of theoreti-
cal re-vision into a tan-
gible reality. Seeing the
group open their pre-
Pride Day show at El
Covento Rico (a Latino
gay bar in Toronto)
with "You're the One
That I Want," I
couldn't help but won-
der just how many girls
in the audience first saw
Grease wishing they
were the one getting
down with Olivia New-
ton John in the "Shake
Shack" carnival ride.
Probably quite a few,
given the large number
that shimmied over to
the Drag King's sign up
sheet immediately
thereafter.

The concept of "Drag
King," or at least as it is
manifested by this
group, plays with the
gender-fuck concept in
more complex ways
than the simple girls-dressed-as-boys
notion of cross-dressing. At the El
Convento Rico show several of the
lesbians pantomiming the already
contrived hyper-masculinity of clone
boys the Village People drew many
ogles from my gay male counter-
parts. Meanwhile, the "masculine"
Anne Murray was given the full fairy
boy treatment with the drag king
skipping around the maypole while
singing "Snowbird." Axl Rose, re-
splendent in his infamous "Nobody
Knows I'm a Lesbian" outfit was
literally brought to his knees as he
gave simulated fellatio to the woman
dressed as his spritz-head sidekick,
Slash. But perhaps the funniest mo-
ment of the evening was watching a
boyish s/m dyke parody the effemi-
nate masculinity of '70s heterosexual
pop swish Andy Gibb—drag, camp,
nostalgia, and a fabulously bad satin
jump suit all rolled into a three minute
pop song. Now that's entertainment.

The only danger in the mad, mad
methods of the Drag Kings is that
they will fall victim to the "one trick
pony" syndrome. After their wildly
successful summer debut, where they
gathered a rather large following, suc-
cessive shows in the fall and winter
failed to produce any new
blood. Several of the acts
were repeats, but more
worrisome were the new
acts which seem to fall
more and more into the
"kitch" realm and became
increasingly asexual.
While performances by
women dressed up as
Barry Manilow, Donnie
and Marie Osmond, and
ABBA are incredibly funny
in an "oh yeah, I re-
member that bad song from
my childhood" kind of
way, the novelty tends to
wear off mid-way through
the song and let's be hon-
est, Barry Manilow just
isn't sexy, never was and
never will be, no matter
who is imitating him. I
couldn't help but think,
as I watched the Drag
Kings at their most recent
performance at the Opera
House, that in attempt-
ing to be as clever and
complex as possible, they
were beginning to miss
the point. Parodying gen-
der is about playing with
it, and playing it up. The
audience I was part of
didn't want cutey pie interaction
between a lesbian Donnie and Marie.
They wanted tight pants, hip thrusts,
and over the top Lotharios. At the
next show I fully expect to see Drag
King numbers by Tom Jones, James
Brown, and hello, how about Elvis?

Your audience is waiting Drag
Kings—are you "man" enough for
them?

After eight months of working for "the
man," R. Best still hasn't worn a skirt to
the office, but she is thrilled to finally be
putting her M.A. in photocopying to
good use.