

Drag Kings

Chicks with Dicks

by R. Best

L'auteure examine les camps lesbiens et le travestissement 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/femmerole 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 Rose

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

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-



Photo: Heather Cameron

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 parodying 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

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 theoretical re-vision into a tangible reality. Seeing the group open their pre-Pride Day show at El Convento Rico (a Latino gay bar in Toronto) with "You're the One That I Want," I couldn't help but wonder just how many girls in the audience first saw *Grease* wishing they were the one getting down with Olivia Newton 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 counterparts. 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, resplendent in his infamous "Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian" outfit was literally brought to his knees as he gave simulated fellatio to the woman



Photo: Heather Cameron

dressed as his spritz-head sidekick, Slash. But perhaps the funniest moment of the evening was watching a boyish s/m dyke parody the effeminate masculinity of '70s heterosexual pop swish Andy Gibb—drag, camp, nostalgia, and a fabulously bad satin jumpsuit 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, successive 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 remember that bad song from my childhood" kind of way, the novelty tends to wear off mid-way through the song and let's be honest, 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 attempting to be as clever and complex as possible, they were beginning to miss the point. Parodying gender is about playing with it, and playing it up. The audience I was part of

didn't want cutesy 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.