

What It Feels Like For A Girl

By Alan Ilagan

“Girls can wear jeans, cut their hair short, wear shirts and boots, cause it’s okay to dress like a boy. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, because you think that being a girl is degrading. But secretly you’d love to know what it’s like, wouldn’t you? What it feels like for a girl...” – The Cement Garden

The lights go down on the audience. A sense of heady anticipation pervades the atmosphere. Something spectacular is about to happen. A single spotlight slices brilliantly through the smoky air and the excited whispering comes to an abrupt stop. The striking visage of a beautiful lady strides flawlessly into view. Rays of light ricochet off rhinestones and sequins, catching and throwing off a dazzling rainbow of beams. Her beaded dress is tight, accentuating every curve of her body.

The orchestra swells and music fills the room as the performer moves her lips in perfect sync to the song. She shimmies, she shakes, she bumps and grinds ~ all to the adoring hoots and hollers of a mostly-male audience. Standing in the lonely limelight of the stage, this Diva commands supreme attention, delicately demanding all eyes of the spectators and seductively bringing them along on her brief musical sojourn.

Coming to its climactic conclusion, the final notes of the song float out over the incoming waves of rapturous applause. Amid the whistles and laudatory shouts, the lady takes her bows, both heartfelt and deeply. Yet for all her voluptuous assets and feminine wiles, this woman is no ordinary woman: she is a man. A guy who dresses up like a girl. A drag queen.

No other group conjures such a disparate reaction from society. Repulsive to some, resplendent to others, drag queens are both reviled and revered for what they are and what they represent. For years, drag queens have been a staple of big-city life ~ another ignored outlandish aspect of New York or Los Angeles ~ but they do exist in smaller towns, even in upstate New York. And for every out-there drag queen who performs for the public, there are three more married men who secretly try on their wives clothing, if only for a kinky kick. Drag doesn’t necessarily mean fag anymore, but men dressing up like women (unless done in a safely comical manner) is a sure-fire way to bring about social banishment.

Why is there such an intense and sometimes-violent hatred towards drag queens? It is very much a straight white-man’s world out there, and much of the prejudice against gay men, especially drag queens, is an extension of long-held sexist and patriarchal views. These views and beliefs have been instilled by hundreds of years of historical patterns ~ the systematic suppression of the female as an equal to the male. This presents the gay man, who, for the purposes of this article, represents all things “feminine”, and therefore perverted, for why would anyone want to be a woman?

Such tradition is not a natural or biological order. Witness the matriarchal organization of many members of the animal kingdom. If females were scientifically inferior, we would be seeing this across the board. There is a lengthy list of female animals and insects that are stronger, more powerful, and that often devour their male counterparts. Nature illustrates that females are equal, but different. The point is that in

the natural world, females are not inferior; only in human society do we attribute weakness and inferiority to women.

Anti-female bias, having been bred into our society, is what results in such vehement hatred of gay men – particularly the abhorrence of drag queens. It is cool and cutting-edge for Britney Spears to be dressed up in a suit like a man before doing a strip-tease, but who would applaud Bruce Springsteen for dressing like a woman? Men dressing as women is very much a taboo topic, one that divides all camps regardless of sexual orientation.

Are they beautiful or blasphemous? Fanciful fantasies or frumpish freaks? Do they contribute to the gay rights campaign, or are they setting the gay movement back twenty years? At the heart of the matter are the drag queens themselves. Little understood by both the heterosexual and the homosexual communities, they exist in a shady gray area of the entertainment world, and this is perhaps the key to the main entrance of understanding.

When most people think of drag queens, the outrageous hi-jinks of Nathan Lane in “The Birdcage” come to mind ~ harmless, dramatic, histrionic behavior coupled with a warm heart and easily wounded vulnerability. That was, and remains for the most part, Hollywood’s mellowed-out, melted-down version. It is the “comfortable and safe” way of dealing with the issue. By reducing them to the periphery of inoffensive trendy fun, Hollywood has devised a way to make the audience feel more cosmopolitan and open-minded while not exactly revealing the truth behind the drag.

Drag queens are accepted as drag queens, but no more. They are not seen as fully-realized human beings, indeed as the men they truly are. And so we keep them at arm’s length, at a cozy distance where they remain misunderstood and, as a result, somewhat feared. Only when they have been safely desexualized and made palatable to the mainstream audience, as in movies like “The Birdcage” and “Victor/Victoria”, do we welcome them into our consciousness.

In truth, today’s drag queen requires a steely sense of strength and gumption: the ability to survive in an often-hostile world, all the while wearing a pretty smile and painted face. Drag queens are not technically transvestites or transsexuals. A drag queen is a man who dresses like a woman for the purpose of entertainment ~ his own and others. While the main purport is to entertain, drag queens also serve a more serious role: to raise questions and generate discussions pertaining to gender identity and sexual mores. As most drag queens are gay men, they also raise an enormous amount of money for AIDS research. In fact, most of the local drag queens in Albany work only for charity events.

Alexis Imani is the reigning Miss Albany Gay Pride 2000-2001. His real name is Hilary S. Napoleone-Williams. A self-described “large and in charge” African-American man, Hilary holds a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education.

“As a man, I live the typical life,” he explains. “I work three jobs, averaging 110 hours a week. I work, eat, sleep, and party whenever there is free time available.”

The “typical life” ends when he transforms himself into Alexis, his drag queen alter-ego. Alexis is a force of nature. As her beaded skirt shimmies and her ponytail swings, she takes to the stage and powerhouses her way through the musical-dance number, her hips and arms defying any and all anatomical laws as they grind and swirl to

the beat. At the conclusion of her performance, the audience applauds wildly and Alexis takes a well-deserved bow. It looks so easy, but Hilary begs to differ.

“When in drag, life is never typical,” she begins. “I spend time preparing for whatever show we are having because I want to make sure that I can give the audience a great number. As Miss Gay Albany, I feel I owe the fans of drag a little bit more.”

Proving once again that entertainment is the drag queen’s main reason for being, she continues, “The audience is the most important factor in a drag queen’s life... Our audience is very suave, and it would be a smack in the face to them, as well as me, if I performed unprepared. Basically, I look for songs that I can have fun with. Getting the proper song is the hardest part. After choosing a great song, I build my costume around the song, sewing or buying the outfit needed. After the outfit is situated, I then work on the dance-steps. I am not the type of queen who wants to just sit there and look pretty. Every once in a while I want to break a sweat during a number! Put those three together and you have the making of a show-stopping number.”

For Alexis, and many drag queens, it is simply that ~ a show. “Drag is not quite a profession for me... {Albany} is not at the point where a person could make their living off of drag.” She echoes the sentiment of all the drag queens interviewed for this article: “I actually prefer being a man. It is easier being a man! I would never want to be a woman. It is all just an illusion.”

Such an illusion is realized in Ms. Chi Chi Ray Colby. Like Ms. Imani, Ms. Colby stands tall in and out of drag, her blond bob and high heels command the stage as she belts out a song with dramatic gusto, quivering lips and all. It is a fitting image: Chi Chi is the current title-holder of Miss Two-Lips 2000, a drag spoof of Albany’s Tulip festival.

Ms. Colby stresses that though she is a drag queen, she is always a man, first and foremost: “I am never a woman, and when in drag I don’t feel like a woman. I am a man, so whether in drag or not, my feelings don’t change. I am the same person at all times.”

For Chi Chi, drag is a “fun hobby” which she manipulates in order to raise money for the AIDS foundation. In “regular” life as a man, he works as a general manager for a branch of the hospitality industry.

“I also dedicate time to the benefits,” he goes on to say. “Sometimes with both I can pull a thirteen to fourteen hours day, but most of the time I schedule well and balance both. Since I am a title-holder I am expected to be at certain things.”

Such dedication seems to be a thread throughout the drag world ~ a dedication to perform, and a dedication to each other.

“There definitely is a drag community here,” Ms. Imani states. “I feel we are one big family. We have good times, squabbles, and help each other out like any family. The nicest thing is we have no problem including anyone into our family. Some of us have come from different parts of the country where there was no cohesiveness, and have found Albany to be a breath of fresh air.”

Ms. Colby resonates those sentiments. “We all support each other,” she says of her “sisters”, and continues, “My new extended family has been the best.”

Most drag queens get into performing through their friends. Such was the case with Ms. Colby: “I got introduced to drag in November of 1999 by Amanda Love, and it’s been history from there.”

Amanda Love (as in ‘A Man to Love’) wears a curly blond wig in the tradition of Marilyn Monroe for this evening’s performance. Her assets held firmly in place by a tight

black-and-white sequined mini-dress, she struts across the stage and into the audience, gleefully gathering dollar bills to the music and flaunting herself as if to the manner born.

She too feels that there is a distinct drag community in Albany, citing matriarchs “such as Hazel, Sherri, Alexis, and Iodine” as well as newcomers “such as myself, Chi Chi Ray Colby, Carmi, Miss Demeanor, etc.”

“Support-wise everyone is great,” she resumes, “Whenever we need advice everyone is willing to help. Competition-wise we are like any other family ~ we all want to be Marcia not Jan... We can get catty with one another, and we fight, but we always make up.”

Like her aforementioned “sisters”, Ms. Love does not make drag a career. “Drag for me is a part time thing... A hobby. I don’t want to be a woman,” she explains. “I enjoy doing drag, but couldn’t do it every day. Unfortunately, drag in Albany is nothing like in other areas. To get paid for drag, you have to be in an area where it is taken seriously. Here it is okay for benefits, but the market doesn’t call for it on a weekly basis. So to supplement my expenses, I work as an administrative assistant.”

Describing her life as a man as “average”, Ms. Love claims to enter “a whole new state of mind when I put the make-up on. As a man, my day is average – as a drag queen it is pure drama. Making sure everything is there, and getting ready and then running your pantyhose... or forgetting to buy lashes ~ you either have to brave going out in half-drag or pray you have a good husband who will go and get them.”

Ms. Love gives a brief recitation on the painstakingly-detailed process of transforming into a drag queen: “You have to make sure you have the right music, not love songs or anything like that – you need to get in drag mode ~ Dance, techno, Cher... my personal favorite. You need the right lighting, and the right space ~ to spread out. You have to make sure all your stuff is laid out for you. If you run around looking for something to wear, you will run your make-up and possibly your pantyhose. Depending on what I am doing, i.e. a show, or just making an appearance, my make-up can take from 45 minutes to one and a half hours. Clothes are as important as make-up. You need to be extreme, sometimes slutty, but glamour is the name of the game, so showing a little class is good. Your shoes have to be comfortable, high heels are good for a show, if you know how to work them, but to walk around looking flawless... not good. You also have to make sure that you are lined, tucked, padded, and cinched. It can be very time-consuming, but it is worth it.”

For all the effort, care, time, money, and emotion that goes into drag, one would think drag queens would be better appreciated, especially among the gay community, but it is the gay community which is often most stridently opposed to drag. Conveniently forgetting that it was the drag queens who first incited the gay rights movement at Stonewall, today’s “straight-acting” gays feel anything less than manly behavior is setting their movement back. They consider drag queens a public disgrace, a constant reminder to society that gays are indeed perverted. Yet they miss the very point of the drag queen ~ everyone has the right to be who they want to be, and everyone deserves acceptance for their choices.

“Drag queens are viewed in multi-faceted ways in the gay community,” says Ms. Imani. “There is one group who thinks we are the greatest thing on earth, another group who thinks we are setting gay rights back a hundred years, and a third group who couldn’t care less one way or another. The first group makes sure they are at every

performance whenever possible, the second group wishes we would just become invisible because we are not setting the right image for the mainstream. This group always comments on why we are the ones on TV or in the newspaper, and why can't we just go away. The third group will watch a show only if they happen to be in the bar when there is a show."

Amanda Love also sees a disparity in the views of drag queens by the gay community. "When a benefit is needed, everyone knows the drag queens will bring in the most money. Yet there are some that despise us, some feel that we are an insult to both gay men and women."

In many ways it is another simple case of misunderstanding breeding fear and contempt. Drag queens represent several difficult dichotomies: the image of the powerful, brash, in-control drag queen, banishing hecklers and disapproving on-lookers with a clever comeback – an image at odds with the general dismissal of drag queens by the majority of society. Their mile-high hair and blood-red nails form a coat of armor, backed up by a viciously witty tongue ready for a lashing at a moment's provocation, and miles away from the image of weak, sissified men with which much of heterosexual society associates with drag.

Drag queens represent the straight man's worst nightmare come to frightening fruition ~ finding out an attractive woman is actually a man. It threatens the very sensitive and delicately delineated definitions of sexual and gender identities which most heterosexual men hold.

Somewhat surprisingly, the three drag queens interviewed for this article did not find sex to be an issue of particular relevance in their world. Each recounts tales of flirtation from all walks of life. Ms. Love finds "a lot of straight guys" hitting on her, as well as "some bi guys because it is the best of both worlds."

Ms. Colby hastens to agree, "All sexes love us drag queens." But she is also quick to point out that, "I am a vital SINGLE gay male, and I have never been with a person in drag. Of course I have flirted and kissed here and there, but I am a man and I make love like a man."

Currently single, Ms. Imani also finds a wide array of admirers. "I get hit on by various types of men and women... Surprised?" she asks with an insinuating wink. "For me, the men tend to be bisexual, who love the aspect of having a chick with a d**k. The women {lesbians} on the other hand, see us as women, so it is very natural for them to ask us out."

After seeing a drag queen's show, it is hard to imagine them any other way. To the audience they are larger than life performers ~ illusory to be sure, but incontrovertibly real, not to mention ribald. The drag shows are neither for the faint-of-heart nor the easily-offended; like the performers, the audience must have a thick skin and a willingness to poke fun at themselves. And though a drag queen may pick on her patrons, it is always, *always*, done out of love: the audience is a drag queen's life-blood.

"I love to perform and I love to see the audience getting into it," says Ms. Colby. "As long as they are smiling, so am I. It all comes within your heart. Of course fabulous outfits and great make-up add to the package, but you really need to be you and enjoy it."

It is a self-empowering mantra, one that harkens back to the days of Stonewall, when the drag queens were the first to demand acceptance. Tired of being degraded and

suppressed, they fought back hard and won. It's a tradition that carries through to today's performers.

"I enjoy doing it," Ms. Love repeats. "I love the attention. I really don't have any bad experiences. All have been good to great. If anyone sees us, come up and say Hello... ask questions. We don't bite. And please do not judge us on the few that are pretentious. We are fun-loving people who will do anything for anyone. All you have to do is ask."

Ms. Imani shares such generosity of spirit: "When the show is over I like to greet the people who came to see us and let them know I do appreciate them, because without them I am nothing. In simplest terms, being onstage for me is a rush. I crave the attention of having all eyes on me, and onstage I get it! I have a symbiotic relationship with my audience. They give me attention; I give them my all. There have been times when I know I should not have performed, such as after three weeks after I had knee and arm surgery, but I felt I owed it to my audience to get out there and raise a little money. I think the audience appreciated the dedication I put into drag when I danced through a fast number with a brace on my knee and cast on the arm. My philosophy has always been to do whatever it takes to raise a little money for charity."

That being said, these ladies are only ladies for show: when the lights go down at the end of the evening, the make-up comes off, the dresses fall to the floor, and the men emerge. They get up and go to work in the morning and no one is the wiser. In a sense, we all do drag ~ whether it's by donning business attire (office drag), workout gear (gym-bunny drag), or a T-shirt and jeans (weekend drag). For someone who has never worked in a business office environment, a suit and tie is as foreign as a sequined gown and heels is to a construction worker.

Above all else, drag queens are performers, the best of whom hold an audience rapt and mesmerized in a cacophony of splendiferous sights and sounds ~ creating that magical moment of suspended belief and imagined fantasy that takes us away from the mundane mediocrity of insipid reality ~ a world where anything is possible, and everyone is beautiful.