
King and Queens: The Gender Benders

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When you think of the phrase "drag queen," what's the first thing that pops into your mind? For me, it's the Saturday evening entertainment for a local gay club, or the MySpace celebrity, Jeffree Star.

I'd always thought of drag as something that happened in Vegas, on the internet, or at punk rock shows in Japan. The knowledge I'd assumed over the years turned out to be lacking, however, and it wasn't until I met some of UW's own kings and queens that I actually bothered to sit down and take a closer look at drag culture.

The first thing I looked at was where did drag begin? Where did it come from, and how did it start? When looking at a tradition as complex and controversial as drag, it's very difficult to discern an exact origin. When you think about it, there has been evidence of cross-dressing for entertainment throughout many different cultures and eras of the world. Before the time of female performers, all individuals on stage were male. From ancient Greek tragedy to the Elizabethan age of Shakespearean drama, men have been putting on dresses to entertain the crowd. There is however, a clear difference between male-only traditional theatre and modern day drag.

Drag today has become an identifiable subculture in various nations across the world. It has, since the era of Elizabethan theatre, emerged as an art form completely separate from the standard acting variety. Unlike the cross-dressing actors of old, the role a queen or king assumes on stage is not a written one, but a separate part of the actor. Both queens and kings develop a persona for the stage, a reflection of their inner identity that is free of the confines of gender.

There is, however, only so much you can learn about a culture through books and internet forums. To know about a culture, you have to take an inside look. When I first started exploring the idea of drag, I assumed that I would have to take a look to the Toronto queer culture, or maybe check out some local Pride safe zones outside of the school. As I'm sure many of you have noticed, this past week the University of Waterloo has been hosting Pride Week through our student-run organization, GLOW. I'd signed up as a volunteer for the club and, figuring that it wouldn't hurt, started to ask around about the idea of drag queens. I was almost immediately referred to one of GLOW's top dogs, Kevin Nixon, a grad student currently studying anthropology at the university. As it turned out, it was actually during his field work as a student in anthropology that Nixon first became involved in drag. He had been researching drag culture for his field of study, when he decided to give "queening" a try. "As part of the participant observation I was doing for school, I wanted to live a day in their heels," Nixon, or "as she's known in the drag world" — Roxy Cox, focused his studies on the complicated world of drag queens, and started into the culture himself about six months ago. He then turned to the third member of our booth sitting group, Sean Statyn, a physics grad at UW, and introduced him as yet another queen.

Statyn, who had just recently changed her drag name from Seaneequa to Gloria Whole, coincidentally also attributed his involvement in the drag queen world to anthropology. "For Kevin's studies we ended up going to drag shows every week. After a while, we thought it would be fun to put on an amateur show for GLOW and just stuck with it," Statyn and Nixon both referred themselves as "amateur" drag queens, aiming their attention close to home, at venues including our very own Bomber, which hosts various drag based shows and events. Rather than working shows professionally, they explained that their form of drag was more so for the fun, and the learning that arose from the experience.

"It really serves to challenge people's views on gender, and the role that gender plays in society"; Some of my friends who saw me in drag were immediately uncomfortable, despite the fact that they were at a drag show. "It's almost as if they were saying that yes, they could be entertained by this, but didn't want it to be too close," Said Statyn, when asked about the implications behind becoming a queen. "People just don't want to be faced with the reality that yes, there really is a man underneath all that," Nixon added.

There is, however, another component to drag culture. One that I myself was not even aware of until I began to work on this article: the drag king. Drag kings are the female equivalent of a drag queen; they are women who establish within themselves male personas, and then dress themselves as such to perform on stage. For the drag king interview I was sent to GLOW's Ally Network director, Sue Weare. "I think that kinging has not been quite as fast to catch on, in recent years. Drag queening has always been around, whereas kinging is a newer practice," Weare explained. "The drag I perform as is very similar to myself. Drag kinging is a way for me to express the more masculine aspect of my gender identity, in ways that I can't in everyday life." Some of the difficulties in drag kinging surround the notion of masculinity that is considered the norm by our modern day society. Drag king performances are often considered to be more subtle, because self expression has very much been tagged as "too feminine" for dragging. This is very much a reflection on our ideas of masculinity, and what it entails. "Our ideas of masculinity have been, and still are, changing," said Weare. "It's becoming a more broad definition, and maybe that's why drag kinging has been picking up."

Drag culture serves not only challenge the conventions of society, but also to push gender definitions that have become the norms of our culture. What is male, and what is female, are both subjects that have been quite strictly defined in our society. Men who are not the optimal image of masculinity are considered weak and weird, where woman who aren't feminine enough are ostracized for acting against the norm. However, drag questions these values, and brings all sorts of otherwise unnoticed biases to the surface. So if the next time you see a man in a dress and your reaction is that of discomfort, just take a moment, and ask yourself why.