



## Drag Shows: Drag Kings and Male Impersonators

by Elizabeth Ashburn

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A drag king is anyone, regardless of gender or sexual preference or orientation, who consciously makes a performance of masculinity. Drag king theater can be raw, raunchy, and confrontational, as well as slick, funny, and entertaining. A recent arrival in the drag arena, drag kings are part of an international drag movement that emerged in London and San Francisco in the mid 1980s.

Del LaGrace Volcano describes seeing her first drag king act in 1985 as part of a strip show for lesbians. Much of the foundational work for drag king culture occurred first in San Francisco, and then in New York and London. There are now drag king performances and competitions in Europe and Australia, as well as in most major cities in North America.

The shifting status of transgender practices within the queer subculture has resulted in a renaissance of drag that has taken it into the mainstream culture of mass media, fine arts, and high fashion. Thus, Demi Moore has been featured in a suit and facial hair in an *Arena* magazine drag spread. Drag kings have also appeared prominently in such varied mainstream publications as *Marie Claire*, the *New York Post*, the *London Times*, *Penthouse Magazine*, and *The Face*.

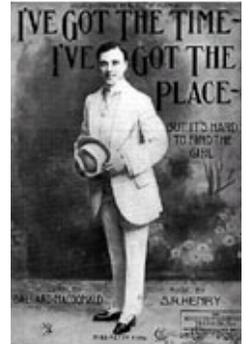
The difference between a male impersonator and a drag king is the latter's ability to make an entertaining show out of male impersonation. Drag kings are also different from other male impersonators who cross-dress in that male clothing is merely a part of their performance of masculinity. They generally do not fetishize male clothing.

### The Theatrical Tradition

Although the drag king movement is part of the recent renaissance of drag, it must be seen in the context of the history of cross-dressing and male impersonation. In the simplest terms, cross-dressing occurs when one sex wears the clothes of the other for any reason. The term "drag" is thought to be a colloquialism from the Elizabethan and Jacobean period of English history, when male actors performed female parts in a transvestite theater.

Although this practice ceased after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, when female actresses were introduced to the English stage, the inversion of roles continued but with a twist. Instead of boys or men playing female roles, women often impersonated men on stage in the "roaring girl" roles that featured the actress in breeches.

Male drag is a staple of theatrical and cinematic tradition. Examples range from the famous stage performances of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet and (more recently) Pat Carroll as Falstaff, to the operatic convention of *travesti* or "trouser roles" in which mezzosopranos sing male roles, to the memorable



**Top:** Pirate Anne Bonney dressed as a man throughout her adult life.

**Above:** The cover of a music sheet with an image of male impersonator Hetty King (1910).

presences in male attire of movie actresses as varied as Clara Bow, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, and Julie Andrews.

Some entertainers, such as blues singer Gladys Bentley, who sang about "bulldaggers," while dressed in tails and tuxedo, sexualize the cross-dressing.

Although cross-dressing always has a potential to destabilize assumptions about gender and sexuality, the impersonation of men, even by black lesbians, has usually not been seen as threatening when presented as entertainment. Consequently, drag kings are usually greeted with enthusiasm even by predominantly heterosexual audiences.

### **Cross-dressing in Real Life**

Cross-dressing in real life is not usually accepted with such aplomb, however. Some women, such as the writer George Sand or the painter Rosa Bonheur, successfully created a masculine persona or dressed in male clothes in order to be taken seriously for professional reasons; their performance of masculinity seems to have had few negative consequences.

Other women have cross-dressed as men throughout their adult lives; and these women (such as the soldier James Taylor [b. 1667], the pirates Anne Bonney and Mary Read [executed in 1720], and the physician James Barry [1799-1865]) have generally found their masquerade stressful. They seem to have spent a great deal of their lives fearful of the ridicule and punishment that they would face were their biological sex revealed.

The horrific example of Brandon Teena, whose life and murder was depicted in Kimberly Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), is instructive as evidence that gender deception is still considered punishable. Because ambiguous gender and sexual identity can incite violent reactions, cross-dressing in real life can be dangerous. Drag kings often report incidents of aggression directed towards them when they are on the streets in their male personas.

### **Butch/Femme Relationships**

Another aspect of the performance of masculinity is that within "butch/femme" lesbian relationships. The subject of butch/femme relationships is very complex and cannot be easily summarized. Some lesbians may adopt butch roles in the belief that they are phallic women or men trapped in women's bodies.

Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), for example, seems to have adopted this belief, which is now sometimes attacked as essentialist. Hall's ideas not only reflected the theories of early sexologists, but they are also held today by some transsexuals.

Butch roles are also sometimes adopted as a means of exploring an androgynous ideal, often conceived of as a third sex. This ideal may be best expressed in Virginia Woolf's fictional "biography," *Orlando* (1928), inspired by her notably androgynous lover Vita Sackville-West.

Most women who identify as butch maintain their self-perception continuously and cross-dress in varying degrees because of their belief that many so-called masculine characteristics constitute their core identity.

### **Drag Kings**

Drag kings are mostly lesbians, but they also include female-to-male transsexuals, as well as androgynous and straight women. Even males may perform as drag kings. However, there are important differences between performing masculinity as a drag king and performing "butchness." The butch lesbians of the 1950s did not dress up as men but as masculine women.

Because of their varied sexual positions and orientations, drag kings exhibit a variety of characteristics, both on and off-stage. Transgender drag kings tend to maintain a male gender identification off-stage, while butch lesbians frequently elaborate in their acts their off-stage female masculinity.

In contrast, female-identified drag kings, regardless of their sexual orientations, understand themselves to be involved in a parody of masculinity and leave behind their masculine personas after they depart the stage. The many layers of identification and orientation provide some of the richness in drag king performances.

Since drag kings are late comers to the drag scene, they lack much of the quasi-institutionalized and community tradition that drag queens enjoy as a result of their long connection with gay bar culture. Drag queens have been performing glamorous femininity as part of gay culture since at least the period between the two world wars and probably longer.

### **Comedy of Cross-dressing**

Peter Ackroyd points out that drag performances partake of an anarchic and festive role associated with the old English tradition of mumming, where husband and wife swapped roles when visiting friends during the Christmas season. The comedy is part of a vicarious pleasure in the inversion of the sexual and social worlds. Many drag kings return to this practice when they parody masculinity in an overtly comic way and emphasize their enjoyment and sense of fun.

However, there are other explanations for the pleasure of cross-dressing besides those of inverting and destabilizing gender and sexual conventions. The practice of women dressing as men may provide symbolic compensation for women for the loss or suppression of "male" aspects of their personalities; cross-dressing may satisfy a longing for asexuality; the exhibitionistic and fetishistic elements of illusion and fantasy in such performances may give explicit and dramatic form to subversive instincts. Ackroyd notes that while transvestism is often a sexual obsession, during its long history it has also been associated with sacred ritual and social or political dissent.

### **Cross-dressing as Parody and Homage**

Some lesbians criticize the drag performance phenomenon on the grounds that drag kings and queens epitomize only the worst aspects of masculinity and femininity in making fun of the opposite sex. However, the performance of drag kings and queens can be more variable than such criticisms acknowledge.

Judith (Jack) Halberstam observes that in drag king theater it is always interesting to see what part of maleness a king might select to perform. For traditional drag queen acts there are many possible models such as Marilyn Monroe or Cher or Diana Ross to imitate; the flamboyance and artificiality of these stars immediately make them available for performance. But comparable male stars such as Paul Newman or Tom Cruise or Mel Gibson strive for an apparent naturalness that makes them difficult to imitate or parody.

The sexist pig or macho figure is much more available for the king to imitate and, in the process, to ridicule exaggerated masculinity. However, not all drag kings ridicule masculinity. Many have moved beyond the simple exposure of male violence and gross sexuality to make their acts tributes to male talent and charm and, thus, an expression of their own abilities. Some kings, such as Dred, the Dodge Brothers band, and Elvis Herselvis, enact a range of masculine traits, including some qualities that stem from sincere admiration and respect.

Storme Delaverié, an African-American male impersonator from the 1940s, suggested that it is harder to impersonate men than women since the impersonation of femininity entails the addition of things while the impersonation of masculinity can only be achieved by paring down. This may be why male impersonation

might seem less dramatic than drag queen shows.

But contemporary drag kings insist that their masculine personas require both addition and subtraction. The questions remain, however, whether drag king theater depends on parody or imitation or realness, and whether it can continue to provide the element of excess and camp characteristic of drag queen performances.

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