

Actress, drag queen, and...

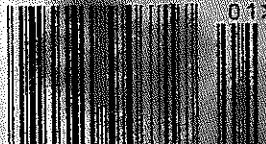
PLUS: "I'm not your China doll!"



BITCH

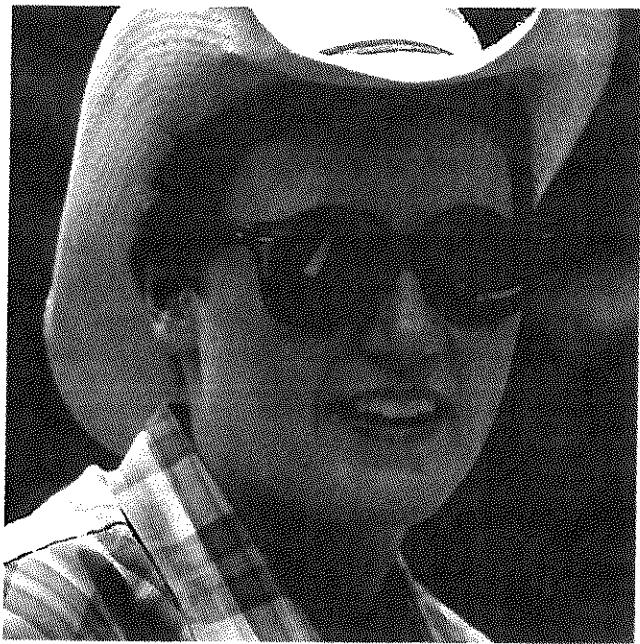
FEMINIST RESPONSE TO POP CULTURE

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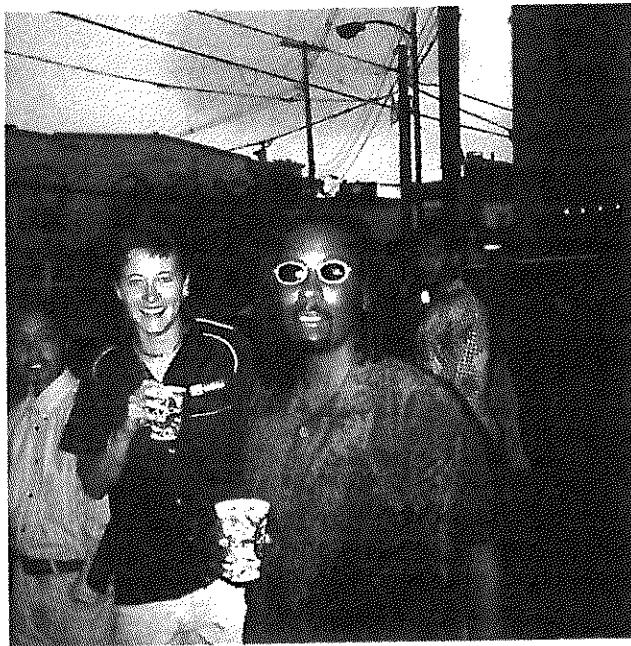
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JULIE APPLEGATE AS JAKE

WHEN WE WERE KINGS

ON BEING A MIDWESTERN DRAG KING BY DONNA JEAN TROKA



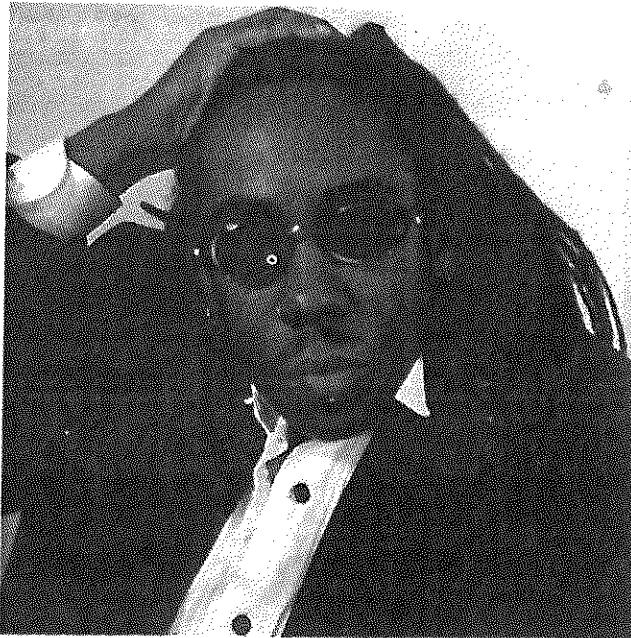
BABY T (DONNA BALADAD), JAKE, LUSTER (SILE SINGLETON)

BECOMING A DRAG KING WAS NOT PART OF MY PLAN. When I moved to Columbus, Ohio, it was to attend graduate school and become a feminist academic. Little did I know, that wasn't all I would become.

I met two fellow students who were starting up Fast Friday Productions, a production company that put on drag king shows and had formed H.I.S. Kings, a drag king troupe. In five short months, I was transformed from Donna Jean Troka, women's studies M.A. candidate, to d.j. love, dreamy drag king. My first performance was a group act we called "Executive Decision." I started out as a naive delivery boy, did the salsa with the "boss," and ended up on all fours, bedazzled with a collar and wrist restraints and being led off the stage by the boss's "assistant." The crowd went wild, dollar bills went flying, and I knew I was destined to be a drag king. By my third year of king-dom I had many acts behind me, and I had co-coordinated the First International Drag King Extravaganza. This event brought together kings and audience members from across the United States, Canada, and the U.K. for performances and discussions on the academic study of female-to-male (FTM) drag, political aspects of drag, its connections to the theater, and the joy it brings to so many. I've been a shaved-headed shy boy, dabbled in a little femme drag, and ended my active king career as a Backstreet Boy. And throughout it all I've found a way to work in a leather number or two.

Drag as a cultural production has risen to great popularity in the American mainstream in the last decade. Male-to-female (MTF) drag has gained a certain kind of acceptance due to performers like RuPaul and Divine, and movies like *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; *The Birdcage*; and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. These are by no means the only examples of MTF drag, of course—but they are the ones your mom and dad are most likely to be familiar with. While this "acceptance" of MTF drag shows that plenty has changed since Stonewall, it doesn't mean that mainstream gender-bending has led to substantial challenges to most folks' understanding of gender. Highly visible instances of MTF drag—like Patrick Swayze in a dress—are possible only because they have roots in the parody of femininity and branches in commercial culture. If it's funny to see the Budweiser dudes dress in drag to get ladies' night drink specials, then why not let RuPaul boost VH-1 ratings or M.A.C. cosmetic sales? If drag queens themselves are more accepted because of drag's newfound commercial viability—especially if said acceptance can lead to a reduction in violence against them—then that's a good thing. But to commodify a subculture is not necessarily to accept it; it's to accept that the subculture can make you money.

However, even as a growing number of people become familiar with MTF drag, only a lucky few are aware of the burgeoning FTM drag culture. With lip-synching, dancing, acting, hip-hop, rock 'n' roll, slow



MORE LUSTER



RICKI LAKE STAR DAVID, A.K.A. SUMIRA PRUITT

jams, country, and, of course, a little leather, H.I.S. Kings entertains deliciously diverse crowds—our audience has grown from queer women hungry for hot new dyke entertainment to include gay men, straight folks, people from the transgendered community, and everyone in between. At our all-ages shows, 16-year-olds sit next to 60-year-olds; young punk girls and homegirls sit next to middle-aged femmes. Similar troupes now exist all over the country, from Washington, D.C., and New York to Fort Wayne, Indiana; Olympia, Washington; and San Francisco.

There is also a great deal of academic work being done on FTM drag. In 1998, Jennifer Robertson published *Takarazuka*, an analysis of an all-female revue in Japan that has been doing FTM drag for over 50 years. That same year, Judith Halberstam published *Female Masculinity*, which dedicates a chapter to drag kings in San Francisco, New York, and London. In 1999, Halberstam and Del La Grace Volcano released *The Drag King Book*, paying photographic and textual tribute to kings from these three cities. There is a drag king listserv that focuses solely on FTM drag (subscribe at www.queernet.org/lists/dragkings.html). And, in October 1999, H.I.S. Kings and Fast Friday hosted the First International Drag King Extravaganza, bringing together kings from all over and those who watch, love, and/or study them (find out more about the extravaganza at www.rascalnut.com/dragkings).

While all this is very exciting for those of us who are longing for fabulous queer entertainment fronted by women, it's worth asking why FTM drag has gained MTF's acceptance in neither mainstream popular culture nor queer communities. If MTF drag is so titillating and hilarious because of how it queers gender lines and interrogates rigid gender roles, then why hasn't FTM drag gotten the same attention?

Hmm, let's see. MTF drag is about performing, and often ridiculing, femininity—a state that, in its exaggerated drag form, is fake, plastic, shallow, and lacking in power. FTM drag is about performing and poking fun at masculinity, a privileged, powerful state that is impossible to "perform" anyway because it's so darn natural and normal. Many drag kings can pass as male, and that means both questioning male privilege and calling attention to it—unacceptable in a patriarchal society that depends on the naturalness and invisibility of such privilege. Could FTM's lack of acceptance be due to the fact that it presents a much greater threat to gender roles than MTF?

My experiences as a member of H.I.S. Kings bear this theory out. Female-to-male drag performers are slow to be included in "all-community" (that is, coed) queer events; when we are included, we are often considered secondary to drag queens. In our second year of existence, H.I.S. Kings was invited to perform at a local "gay awards" ceremony that recognizes local businesses,



ALYSON MANN AS ANDY



AS SEEN ON RICKI, MAXWELL, A.K.A. SHANI SCOTT

events, and people who have done good work for the queer community. We were given the time to perform one act; drag queens took up the rest of the evening. They were recognized with a Best Drag Queen award; none was given for Best Drag King.

The following year brought a few positive changes: We were allowed to do two acts, and our emcee, Lustivious (Lusty, for short) took part in a group number with three other drag queens. (I should note here that Lusty is not actually a drag king—she is a woman who performs the role of a drag queen [i.e., a woman performing a man performing a strong femininity].) An award was given for Best Drag King. I went to the event with a less cynical attitude than I had the first time around—but we were still treated as guests, not an equal and integral part of the evening.

Capping it all off was the way we were put in our “proper” female place by the emcee, who undercut our performance by highlighting anatomical femaleness. After our lovely rendition of Wyclef Jean’s “Staying Alive,” he reminded the gay male audience members that even if they were attracted to us kings and wanted to get our phone numbers, they should forget it—we “d[id]n’t have the plumbing to please [them].” Not only is this a bold-faced lie—my plumbing always stays hard and is dishwasher-safe to boot—it was absolutely disrespectful and condescending. Instead of letting the audience simply enjoy our performance, the emcee had to

remind everyone that we were not “real” men, just pretenders, and therefore undeserving of their admiration. Without actual penises, he might as well have been saying, we should never even try to get access to the power they represent.

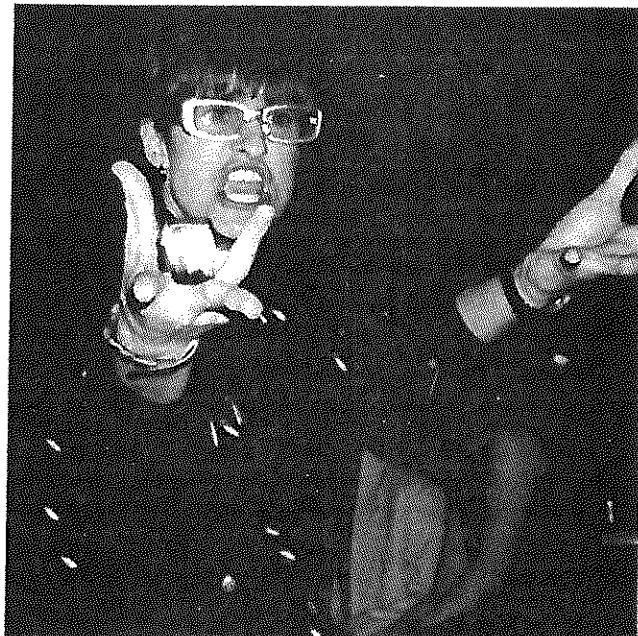
Another disturbing factor is the unwillingness of drag audiences to consider overtly political aspects of a performance. One of our acts at that second awards ceremony was created by Lusty in response to being attacked by two men at NOW’s Lesbian Rights Conference in Washington, D.C. While most folks were mesmerized and throwing dollar bills at the Barbie-like queen in hot pink dancing to some techno song, they talked among themselves during our act and paid no attention.

Unfortunately, this disregard for politics is not confined to MTF events. On the opening night of the Drag King Extravaganza, the Olympia, Washington-based Drag Attack Cabaret performed a 15-minute skit, based on a Lynda Barry comic strip, about being taunted as children for being “freaks” and “fags.” Like Lusty’s performance, the Drag Attack Cabaret skit placed all-too-common events in a political context, addressing how racism, sexism, and homophobia translate into painful lived experience. And, as was true during Lusty’s skit, most people talked and shouted and paid more attention to their beer than they did to the actors.

In spring 1999, H.I.S. Kings traveled to a liberal Midwestern college to perform at their rather famous



JAKE, YET AGAIN



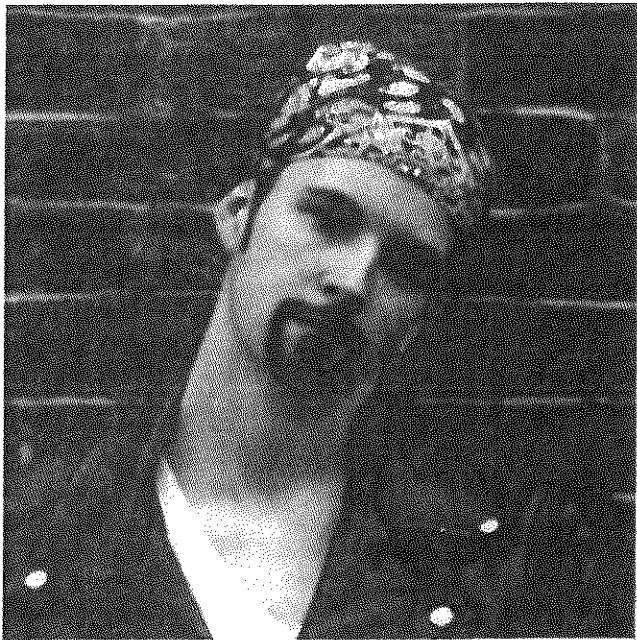
HEIDI MADSEN AS TOE B AS ELTON JOHN

drag ball, an event large enough to host Kate Bornstein, transform the entire student union into a drag mecca, and attract people from all over the region. The majority of people were in MTF or female-to-superfemme drag, but some women were dressed as men. We were very well-received by this small minority of FTM folks, who rushed the stage in excitement, but others in the audience—a group of white anatomical men—found it necessary to heckle us, shouting and interrupting Lusty as she addressed the audience. I believe they behaved this way because they felt threatened by us. Their hairy bodies stuffed into their girlfriends' slip dresses with socks as breasts were very obviously not "feminine" according to societal standards, while our questionably gendered bodies—which often pass as male during performances (and at other times)—were not so easily categorizable. Not only did H.I.S. Kings destabilize their very stable heterosexual white male space, but between Lusty and me, a white dyke performing a strong Latina straight woman, the categories of race and gender were exploded. Such explosions are scary for those not used to them.

Fear of gender fluidity is evident not only at local community events, queer and otherwise, but nationally throughout pop culture. A pair of *Ricki Lake Show* episodes perfectly illustrates this disgust and disagreement with our destruction/deconstruction of gender traits. As part of a show on masculine women who need to "stop looking like dudes," H.I.S. Kings members

Shani Scott and Sumira Pruitt (Maxwell and David, when they're performing) were first introduced looking as they do most days—butch, or, to some, "unfeminine"—and spoke about how comfortable they feel with who they are and how they look. In spite of Shani and Sumira's positive comments and those of some audience members, Ricki focused the show on refeminizing them, emphasizing the need for makeovers and highlighting the more negative audience comments rather than giving the microphone to those who liked Shani and Sumira's look. "For the most part," says Shani, "the audience members were accepting of our baggy jeans, baseball caps, and wallet chains, but the tone of the show was that we needed to change our look." For the finale, Ricki gave her guests makeovers that reinstated their "natural femininity." The crowd cheered when Sumira and Shani emerged from backstage dressed in evening gowns with weaves glued to their heads, but those of us who know them could see how much more unnatural they looked after the makeover than before. Ricki and her vast audience (in the studio and at home) could not admit that Shani and Sumira's butchness is as natural to them as traditional femininity is to some women—because if they did, they would have to face the fact that the gender roles we see as natural are anything but. The only way to contain that potential disruption is to make sure that women like Shani and Sumira "stop looking like dudes."

This enforcement of traditional femininity also took



NICK, A.K.A. NICOLE KRAMER



SILE AS LUSTY, LUSTER'S SISTER

place on a *Ricki* episode that was billed as a "showcase of drag kings." H.I.S. Kings members Sile Singleton, Helen Harris, and Jacci Morrison (drag names Luster, Billy, and Reardon, respectively) agreed to do the show with the belief that they would be performing choreographed lip-synching acts from their own shows. However, when they arrived, they and other kings from around the country found that they were to be paraded on stage in a talent show planned by the *Ricki* staff. Instead of letting the kings do the performances they had prepared, Ricki had them recite poems or rhymes that her staff had written, or simply strut up and down the runway. Then, a panel of audience members had to guess their "real" gender identities. Just like on the previous show, the kings were given makeovers and turned back into the femme girls they "should" be. (Adding insult to injury, Ricki threw in two MTF drag performers along with the newly made-over drag kings to "confuse" the audience.) The subversive nature of FTM drag was completely erased—instead it became another opportunity to reinstate social norms. And again, most of the kings looked like they were more in drag in the gowns and heels.

All these events—the drag ball, the awards ceremonies, and the *Ricki Lake Show* episodes—presented themselves as forums for the celebration of drag, when in reality they were all more invested in maintaining male privilege for anatomical men. At the drag ball we were reminded that women should not highlight the

performativity of masculinity or of racial identities—such performativity is reserved only for shallow, constructed femininity. The awards shows gave us an opportunity to perform, but quickly reminded us that our masculinity is a mere put-on and should never be mistaken for the "real" thing. *Ricki* demonstrated that drag kings can get attention only when it highlights our supposed freakishness (and thus the "normalcy" of the viewers), and only when our "natural femininity"—even when it's shown to be distinctly *unnatural* by the way we look and feel in gowns—is reinstated.

The continuing emergence of FTM drag is inspiring and exciting even in the face of such hostility to its transformative potential. As cultural production fronted by women and made for women—with a built-in examination of gender roles that can be extended to interrogate matters of race, class, and body size as well—FTM drag presents a formidable challenge to the prevailing social order. But in order for drag to live up to this promise, kings and audience members alike need to embrace the complexity of our performances and the meanings behind them. ♦

Donna Jean Troka is a Midwestern gal pursuing her doctoral degree at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She performed as d.j. love for three years and is currently editing a drag king anthology. For more information, e-mail her at donnatroka@hotmail.com.