

DRAG

BY NIALL GARVIN

We're all born naked and the rest is drag.
- RuPaul

I would never pass. That is to say, I look awful in drag. I only do drag on Halloween. I lack all the hallmarks of a great Queen: my costumes are cheap, I don't do makeup, I don't shave, I don't tuck, and I don't have a cleverly pseudonymed persona. Instead, I teeter awkwardly in heels, a caricature of Adele. Why do I even bother? Not for the cheap laughs. Frankly, I feel guilty adoring the talent on RuPaul's Drag Race on TV while making a mockery of the art each October. Perhaps it isn't a mockery. It may be a bit oblique, but drag is my liberation.

Drag is, most simply, the performance of an identity. The term has been used since at least 1870, generally associated with effeminate gay men dressing and behaving like women. Today, drag encompasses increasingly diverse ideas of gender expression. It is a liberating force that intentionally defies strict definition, although distinct scenes and traditions of drag certainly exist. Framed as artifice or performance, it distinguishes itself from cross-dressing or transgenderism. The word most likely derives from Victorian theatrical tradition where men in dresses were acutely aware of the unfamiliar sensation of their gowns dragging on the stage. It survives today as an enduring art form and a powerful expression for people who reject false gender dichotomies.

The first time I can remember attempting anything like drag, juvenile curiosity impelled me. I am seven years old, seated at my mother's vanity, one eye vigilantly on the door. I pull out the slim, beige, plastic case with AVON in flaking gilt across the top. Reverently, silently, I lift the lid, revealing rows of tiny lipstick tubes, each with its own carefully selected hue spelled out on the

bottom. The whole thing smells waxy and musty like a tiny, forgotten museum of wax figurines. One by one, I try them all on (well, all except Cantaloupe), afterwards carefully wiping them all off with a little square of linty toilet paper. Aside from the little adrenaline rush from fear of being caught, I feel little afterwards. Sometimes, while my Grandma Garvin naps in the afternoon, I slink into her bedroom and rummage through her jewelry. I clamp tarnished clip-on earrings unevenly onto my ears and wrap miles of cold, heavy pearls around my skinny neck. She has some ancient powder in a ceramic jar with roses on the lid. If I apply it too heavily with the giant puff, I can taste it all afternoon, tickling and nagging at the back of my throat. In high school, I clumsily smear on eyeliner under each eye in jagged little strokes. I stare stiffly into the mirror and lip sync to La Cage aux Folles melodramatically. I forget about it later.

When I was seventeen, the Logo network appeared on television. It was the first network dedicated exclusively to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community as well as my first meaningful exposure to the community. I watched it voraciously as often as I could. There was plenty of cheap and obscure programming, but I found myself most fascinated with the drag queens. Varla Jean taught Schoolhouse Rock style about the drag queens who started the Stonewall riots and launched the gay rights movement into the public eye. Phillip Seymour Hoffman told Robert DeNiro he was more man than he will ever be, and more woman than he will ever get. Harvey Fierstein crooned bawdy torch songs and struggled with romance. Coco Peru performed her stand-up, hysterical and touching by turns. Nathan Lane negotiated family somewhere between two genders. For a long time I believed this captivation spoke to a similar need within me. I finally felt like the same confusion that gripped me so viscerally was lodged in others out there in the mysterious world I longed for but didn't have access to. By all accounts I was a sissy and a faggot.

It seemed a natural consequence to want to dress in drag. But I didn't, which was only all the more confounding.

One day, much later and quite surreptitiously, I realized what attracted me to the queens. Staring in the mirror at my reflection in a ramshackle wig, a secondhand blouse, I thought to myself why? I lacked respect for my beloved heroines. I felt as though I was trying to claim something I hadn't earned and didn't deserve. But I wasn't in it for the glitz; I wanted freedom. It was their courage I admired. Their absolute fearlessness to exist on their own terms. To demand recognition. To insist on equality. I decided they wouldn't begrudge me that. My identity was liberated once I could imagine myself with the same audacity. I was dressing up on Halloween to express some sort of roundabout homage. I usually portray strong-willed, successful women like Stevie Nicks or Julia Child because, in my limited expression, my drag represents my desire to live fully and authentically. Drag is entertainment, but entertainment is only the face of drag, just the sequins. It runs much deeper. Drag tells the world it isn't going to define you. I wanted that so badly when I was just a scared queer teenager. I'm still working my way there today. I experiment with drag not in mockery, but because it provides an immense source of strength. And I still need that courage. Nobody comes out once. You have to keep coming out your entire life. Every time I start a new class or get a new job or want to hold my husband's hand I have to tell the world all over again that I'm queer. Without drag I would still be cowering in some closet somewhere. Knowing that I wasn't the pioneer, that others had discovered how to express themselves and had survived, made it seem attainable for me to live truthfully. In performing drag and reviving in myself that spirit of audacity, I reinforce my strength to live on my own terms.

All gender expression is performance. It's all invention and drag plays with that cultural construction. It resists the concept of

gender identity as essential. For self-proclaimed Supermodel of the World RuPaul, this fluidity is really the definition of drag. "It's no wonder that I'm involved in drag," he says, "because drag is about mocking identity, mocking the facade. Drag is an extension of the realization that, 'You mean, the thing I think I am, I'm not really?'" Exactly. So have fun with it. Change it. That's why I think drag comes up against so much opposition from people, because the ego knows drag is a threat to the ego." Drag surrenders to the infinite complexities of human experience and recognizes that they cannot be expressed through rigidly observed social roles. I continue to negotiate my identity every day. Drawing on drag as an inspiration for this is important because it resonates deeply in me.

RuPaul's Drag Race continues to bring drag into the mainstream and spread tolerance. The show's eponymous host believes it "not only shows the tenacity of the human spirit, it shows the vulnerability of it. It's the common thread that we all want to be recognized for who we are, we all want to be loved, and we all want to be accepted. Even the toughest, most courageous queen who's fought the biggest battles, in their own family, in the neighborhood, with mother and father, to get on that show and say to the world, 'Here I am. And I'm gonna be proud of who I am, I'm not gonna apologize for who I am.' That's why [Drag Race] is so much more than men in pussycat wigs and cha-cha heels. That's what people connect with." Although drag is rooted in questioning gender roles and expectations, we should also reconsider other social expectations based on race, economic status, religion, nationality, just to begin. It seems rather grandiose to expect drag to fix problems of social injustice but, perhaps, it can spread the acceptance and bravery we all need so badly.