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BORN NAKED

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Well girls will be boys and boys will be girls

It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world...

- The Kinks

Jacque's Cabaret advertises its ten-dollar cover charge on a piece of printer paper, encased in a paper-protector, and fastened to one of its double metal black doors. The show starts in five minutes and the bouncer is busy checking an ID, taking his time with the license as an older man sitting near the door collects the money. The club actually consists of two bars, one in the left corner, a straight counter with five or six stools and a flat-screen playing the Celtic's game. From there, the bar extends to the middle of the space and branches out into a rectangular station, a peninsula that acts as a divider between the long countertop and the cabaret in the back. Small round tables are scattered in front of a modest stage with a short runway, outlined by shimmering wallpaper and strings of Christmas lights. Looking around at the steadily filling seats on this Friday night, the bartender brags a bit about the club's current prosperity. "You should see it on Saturdays," he yells, leaning in a bit so his voice isn't overpowered by the opening act of the show just visible past his right shoulder. Long layers of bleached blond hair bounce and swing as a performer in sequined drag belts out Destiny Child's "Bootylicious."

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Jacque's Cabaret opened in 1938 and has evolved as an establishment in the seventy-one years since, always making itself a home for nightlife in Boston, but never transforming into a version of one of the many sports bars, wine bars, cocktail lounges, and dance clubs that might be considered mainstream destinations. Currently, the nightclub confidently advertises itself as "New England's favorite place for female impersonation 7 nights a week!" Monday: Mizery Loves Company. Tuesday: Boyz Will Be Girlz. Wednesday: Jacques' Angels. Thursday through Saturday: Miss-Leading Ladies. The week is occasionally rounded out by a Sunday "Night of Mizery." The schedule makes it clear that drag at Jacque's is not gender neutral, despite the fact that it challenges gender's boundaries, male to female entertainers dominate the stage. Jacque's didn't become a drag club until the 1970s, but drag as a comedic medium—with a man thinly veiling himself in women's clothes, lifting and lilting his voice to deliver a monologue, or belting out songs onstage—was established as far earlier.

What makes a man in a dress useful for comedy has not been based necessarily on sight alone, but on its combination of physical comedy, with its undertones of stripped masculinity, and overplayed femininity. Men have always had a type of monopoly on comedy (as they have had a monopoly on nearly everything) from the times of court clowns and jesters. The trend was not bucked by drag, but instead further established by it in the 20th century. Even, if not especially, acts that used a woman's social position as comedic content, commenting on that position in the process, were performed by men: the use of drag for the dame role, a persona particularly popular in London in the early 20th century, didn't just entertain through the frocks an actor wore, but through the parody of a frustrated, nagging middle-aged woman. The requirement that a man play the nagging housewife, dame role, in order to make the joke laughable, was a symptom of the overarching patriarchal nature of society. Patriarchal practice both established men as more fit for the stage and hemmed women into social roles set out for them. And the staged display of those roles was laughed at because, under it all, it was a male impersonating a female position, providing the audience with just enough distance to enjoy the persona rather than be forced to reflect on it too deeply.

At Jacque's the "male as female" mechanism for comedy still remains the overwhelming operating tendency. However drag and its increased visibility also offers a new type of social commentary, one that is unavoidably tied to gendered sexuality, both as a way to change social norms and as something that must react and adapt to them. As the bartender adeptly shuffles from one side of the bar to the other, he is eager to tell the story of Jacque's long before he stepped behind the counter, when it was a gay bar in the 1950s and 60s. In the 60s, Boston's gay scene was beginning to emerge and the bar became a popular destination for the gay and lesbian community. According to the bartender, the decade's shifting social scene was accompanied by a rise in the number of police raids on gay establishments. When the police were spotted cruising around the dimly lit corner in Boston's theatre district, Jacque's owners would flick the club's lights on and off. Women would hurriedly find their way to tables with men, using temporary proximity to pass them off as straight, and momentarily avoiding any trouble.

In 2009, it would be hard to pair off according to the 50s premise of a couple at Jacque's. Not only is the bending of gender roles flaunted as men dance onstage in tight glittering dresses, high platform heels, and the occasional neon feather boa, but on the other side of the bar, there is a bar scene that seems unconcerned, if not unimpressed, by the show across the way. In contrast to the yuppy brides-to-be and birthday parties at the cabaret in back, this bar near the front is mostly serving transsexuals and transvestites. Dressed in fishnet stockings, bra-popping tops, leather skirts, and six-inch talons, they are unfazed by the cabaret behind them as they play pool, sip drinks, flirt, or occasionally glance up at the basketball game.

The divide is acute and reinforced by the clear division of space. There appear to be two manifestations of drag in the nightclub – drag as entertainment and drag as identity. In the first, drag seeks visibility as a form of hyper, in-your-face entertainment onstage, a constant "APPLAUSE" sign alerting the audience when to sing, when to dance, when to laugh, and when to buy another drink, based on clear cues and signals. While some of the performers themselves are transsexuals, having undergone surgery or hormone therapies, the entertainment value is not based on how well they play women, but on how transparent their performance is—so over-the-top and exaggerated, that it is clear they are men in dresses. Drag as identity, on the other hand, is not intended for an audience, and most importantly, not meant to exaggerate or parody one gender identity. Instead, when used as a form of identity, drag, better defined here as cross-dressing, is simply a way for individuals to outwardly represent themselves in their more intimate social interactions, performances of a certain kind, but ones that are meant to be subtle, even invisible.

Drag has had many faces since its first flirtations with the burgeoning café culture of the 1960s, through Leigh Bowery's club scenes in the 1980s, and even beyond RuPaul Charles' foray into talk show television in the 90s, constantly evolving along a spectrum of entertainment and identity. Among the most visible type of drag persona, the drag queen, RuPaul is arguably the world's most famous. She most recently became host of RuPaul's *Drag Race*, a reality TV show that searches for "America's Next Drag Superstar." In an interview about the show, which has been green-lighted for its second season in 2010, RuPaul said that one of the most important aspects of drag is its ability to force people to acknowledge how constructed their self-identities are, reiterating her famous statement that "we're born naked and the rest is drag." The statement, although simple, is surprisingly pervasive. It maintains that from the very first pink or blue blanket, everyone is in one form of drag or another. And while it implies that drag artists are aware of this truth, it simultaneously acknowledges the artists' own complicity in the dissimulation.

Yet such inspiration to self-reflect and deconstruct is nowhere to be found at Jacque's, in either display of drag, at either bar. Drag onstage is a string of performances that seem to gloss over the fact that gender roles are being parodied. Instead, there is consistent laughter at any and all sexual innuendos – heterosexual or homosexual – and a constant flow of dance moves and sexual puns. The culture of one cabaret might not be a good measuring stick for the entire evolution of drag since its first forays into better-known clubs and cabarets, but as Mizery steps on stage, she asks who there is unlucky enough to be a "Drag Virgin." Only a spattering of a few anxious but eager hands pop up at the front tables of the cabaret. The small number suggests that drag has been absorbed into culture, no longer merely commenting on it from a distance.

The increased visibility of drag, in mediums of entertainment from nightclubs to television, music, and film further shows drag's status as a part of popular culture and entertainment. Drag no longer just appears in a few nightclubs in major cities, but has made its way into more widespread and popular mediums, by way of glam rock, cinema, and even reality television. By the American Film Institute's ratings, two of the top five funniest movies ever produced by the year 2000 involve drag. *Some Like It Hot*, released over half a century ago, in 1959 and *Tootsie*, released in 1982, each relies on drag to complicate relationships, get laughs, and offer a seamless fix for the romantic ills of its characters. In *Some Like It Hot,* Jerry (Jack Lemmon) disguises as Daphne and Joe (Tony Curtis) as Josephine in order to hide from a group of hit men who are after them. While on the run, they buddy up to Sugar Kane (Marilyn Monroe) by posing as fellow "female" band members.

And in *Tootsie*, Michael (Dustin Hoffman) dons a matronly outfit, transforming himself into Dorothy in order to salvage "his" male persona's acting career. The films rely on an outside force to put their main characters into drag. But the comedy in these films is not based on watching a man don a dress, but in how the dress complicates his romantic and sexual relationships. Roger Baker, in his book, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, points out that the audience finds itself laughing hardest in *Tootsie* when Dorothy falls for a younger actress, played by Jessica Lange, because it is a relationship that falls outside the social norms of sexuality assigned to Dorothy. The audience can watch the unrequited love and laugh at its awkward manifestation, because the only thing in the way of a possible happy ending is a wig and a few frock-like dresses.

This mismatch, between the outward performance of identity and the inner, culturally instilled instincts of the heterosexual characters, is a mismatch often presupposed by mainstream audiences in relationship to drag. A film such as *Tootsie* operates under this understanding of gender—the premise that there is an inner self that can be expressed accurately by an outer representation, a representation that relies on clothing, posture, gestures, intonation, and makeup. In both *Tootsie* and *Some Like It Hot*, the use of drag is rooted in plot situations in which the main characters must submit themselves to "unnatural" gender roles for extended periods of time because this baseline, internal identity does not match with the identity they are forced to construct.

Interestingly, the men in these films do not feel entirely oppressed by their forced bending of gender norms and in fact discover some glee and satisfaction from their acquired roles. In *Some Like It Hot,* Jerry actually plays his role of Daphne for so long that he nearly embraces the relationship that it leads to, and he causes Osgood Fielding, the man who has been pursuing Daphne, to completely accept "her." Even when Jerry reveals his identity, trying to deter discussion of their wedding, Osgood simply refutes Daphne's excuses as to why they can't marry. An exasperated Jerry runs out of excuses and has to use the truth. "I'm a man!" he confesses, ripping off his wig. "Well, nobody's perfect," concedes his faithful partner, with a shrug and a smile, suggesting that he is anything but disappointed. Jerry turns away, speechless and bewildered.

At first, the moment of Osgood's total acceptance of the ill-concealed man sitting next to him might appear to be a type of break from the "phallocentric order" of cinema, an order established as soon as narrative film afforded society with a new dimension on which to represent life, its social and sexual relationships. In 1975, feminist critic Laura Mulvey explained that the history of cinema revealed a consistent positioning of women as objects of visual pleasure, things to be looked at, while men were given control by being assigned the active role of the observer, both as audience members and characters on screen. Cinema does this by provoking pleasure in two ways. Firstly, it uses the camera's angles and movements to directly provide the audience with visually pleasing images through framing and following its subjects. Secondly, and particular to narrative film, cinema provides viewers with a point of entrance into the world onscreen, by way of identifying with a character.

The interesting commonality of these techniques of visual pleasure is that neither allows a woman to be important in and of herself, but only subscribes her worth based on the pleasure and the gaze she manages to evoke and hold from a male viewer. Osgood's acceptance, then, is a moment in which comedy relies on the surprising, if brief, departure from the heterosexual norms that dictated the screen in the 1950s. But it does not actually break with the cinematic order that posits the man as voyeur and woman as object. Instead it establishes that Jerry's passive acceptance of Osgood's gaze has worked in a traditional cinematic way, establishing him as a woman so long as his man is still inspired to look.

Osgood's final cinematic words were received on much simpler terms by critics in 1959, described as just another of the "wacky-goings on" of the film by A.H. Weiler in his review in the *New York Times*. The film was reviewed well largely because drag was superficially presented and accepted as a complete farce rather than a prompt for cogitation on the implications of the film's sexual posturing. Its successful reception was largely ascribed to the fact that it was silly, wacky, and a compilation of "variations on an ancient gag," a gag just as popular in Shakespeare's comedies such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. In Shakespeare's plays, these two classic comedies and more recent films (such as *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The Birdcage*, and *Big Mama's House*), drag is presented as comedic because the men and women involved want to play by the proposed rules of gender and society but their personal circumstances compel them to temporarily subvert their natural and traditional norms. The humor arises because within the diegetic world of the screen, the performances they put on easily dupe their fellow band mates or costars. This facile success calls into question the stability and truth of the very genders they are forced to undermine. The plot structures of these comedies are versions of the flickering of the lights at Jacque's and do not try to call attention to the ways in which gender can be constructed, but to the comedy that arises when the "wrong" one is assumed.

Drag found another route into more modern forms of entertainment as it trickled into mainstream nightclubs and cabarets in the 1960s, moving from lesser-known establishments in London to the more middle-class areas such as Hanover square. At the same time, drag queens and transvestites found safe arenas for nightlife of their own at events such as Fancy Dress Balls (thrown by female impersonator Chris Shaw) where they could dress in drag because the occasion called for it, not necessarily to entertain an audience. But beyond these outlets was drag's entrance into the "mainstream" culture of cafes and nightclubs, packaged as a type of over-the-top entertainment, an ultimately limiting one?

The attachment of drag to specific artists' personalities and names might seem counterproductive as a tool for overcoming drag's reliance on entertainment and performance. It is easy to isolate an individual celebrity who uses drag as an outlier, an eccentric, or just a celebrity out for more celebrity, without opening the door for generalization or larger cultural reflection. However, it seems that drag's full, captivating social power can only be realized, when it is tied directly to the identity of the entertainer and not merely a part of the show or plot device. Through such ties, drag seems to have found yet another variation on the ancient gag of putting a man in a woman's dress, one that can have a liberating effect, particularly when it is used to blur the lines of sexuality as well as gender, rather than allowing itself to be labeled as belonging to one sexuality.

Musical performers such as Boy George and David Bowie, during their peak of popularity in the 1980s, transformed drag into a way of rendering the scripted signals of a man or woman null and void. Speculation could be made as to whether the performer Boy George was a guy or a girl, gay, straight, bisexual, or asexual, but keeping the audience wondering was a potent use of drag. The artist himself believed that "when people accept Boy George, they are accepting a million things about themselves. They're not accepting that I'm gay or straight; they're accepting that a man can act in a different way from how they're expected to act." When presented as an active rejection of the labels and sexual norms assigned to either the male or female sex, drag seems fall instep with RuPaul's hope that it inspire a deconstruction of the self.

The evolution of drag in these varied types of media shows that it can be used by entertainment as well as use entertainment to push the boundaries of gender norms, but, as a type of pure identity, drag is caught in a rather self-conscious, almost self-destructive position. If drag is meant to underscore the constructed nature of gender norms, with strong ties to theatricality and performance, then if it attempts to find status as an identity, it becomes an even more obvious construction. Boy George and RuPaul's ultimately liberating views of the effects drag can have on identity are based on two different approaches. One, hinted at in RuPaul's embrace of drag, looks to focus the image of gender roles, revealing them to be the constructions they are. The other approach, used by Boy George, seeks to blur the image even further, making it so unclear that it is fluid.

The final goal of either approach is to encourage acceptance of more types of identity roles, but this result is not guaranteed and when it comes to issues of sexuality that surround drag, gender roles are further complicated. For example, the transsexual and transvestite patrons at Jacque's do not necessarily accept the idea that the self is nothing but a construct. Instead, they aim to satisfy an inner identity in the same way a man born in a male body or a woman born a female one would. Roger Baker's history of drag defines a transsexual as someone who believes they have been born into the wrong sex. But here, on the entrance side of Jacque's, language begins to become less and less accurate. A transsexual's clothing choice is technically only drag to an outside observer, because there is no disconnection between the psychological state of a transsexual and the gender role he or she follows. And it is not an impersonation, but a construction of an outer self for an inner identity, in this case the inner self dictating not just clothing and gestures, but biology as well. So while drag onstage highlights how false gender roles are - because they are based on physical traits that then dictate mannerisms, clothing, and gender roles - on the opposite side of the bar at Jacque's, gender roles claim control over those physical traits.

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Drag at Jacque's does not wholly dismantle gender roles, entertaining without demanding self-reflection, nor does it heed the traditionally accepted biological assignment of them. Instead, drag at Jacque's has evolved to a point where it no longer simply looks to deconstruct what is accepted, but seeks to accept new constructions of self-identity. In order to be accepted, identities must first be willing to show themselves and then find a willing audience, whether the spotlights are on or the bar lights flicker on and off. On both sides of Jacque's, identities are ready and audiences are willing. And as Mizery

begins the night's revelries, she doesn't entreat the seated men and women to second guess who or what they are, but instead asks them to "knock the liquor back," keep their eyes on the stage and take it all in, because no matter what role is being performed onstage or across the bar, or what liquor fills the glass, Mizery promises, "the more you drink, the prettier we get."

tags: Cross Dressing

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