The Art Form of "Drag" in the LGBTQ+ Community and How it Has Navigated Itself Throughout History

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Introduction

The art form of drag and the presence of drag queens have become an iconic part of both the LGBTQ+ community and mainstream culture, known for their bold performances and larger-than-life personalities. With their unique ability to blend humor, creativity, and high-energy performances, drag queens have challenged traditional notions of gender and identity, propelling what started as an underground art form into explosive popularity. Drag queens use their performances not just to entertain, but to make statements about gender, sexuality, and society's expectations. From the tedious makeup to the elaborate costuming, drag is a way for people to express themselves in ways that feel freeing and fun. By examining how drag has evolved, we can see how it has helped push society's boundaries and offer new ways for people to think about self-expression. Additionally, we can see how drag queens have survived major LGBTQ+ moments in history, why drag culture matters in today's world, and how it has been a powerful form of activism, despite the recent backlash and labeling the art form as "criminal."

What is "Drag"?

Drag is a unique and powerful art form where performers dress in exaggerated gender bending clothing, makeup, and hairstyles to entertain, provoke, and challenge societal norms. Drag queens are specifically categorized as "gay men who dress up as women without the desire to change their physique to become women." (Sopitarchasak 2). However, when a woman gender bends and dresses in a hyper masculine look, she is known as a "Drag King". As an art form, drag is about freedom, self-expression, and often, a bit of humor, with queens challenging traditional ideas of beauty, gender, and identity through their performances. Present-day drag is

not exclusively linked to a person's gender identity or sexual orientation, with many straight cisgender and transgender women partaking in the practice of drag. The look and overall aesthetic of drag evolves around the concept known as "Camp", being described as a "love of the unnatural" and "things being what they are not" (Paul 34). Those who participate in this art form usually aim to "celebrate what increasingly can be seen as an institutionalized form of gender itself" (Underwood 3) It wasn't until the 1960s and 70s, due to the growing social and sexual liberation, that drag began to gain more visibility, owing its growth to the gradual destigmatization of sexual minorities and the decriminalization of homosexuality (World Atlas of Global Issues, 2018).

The LGBTQ+ Bar Scene and The Stonewall Riots of 1969

In the mid-20th century, drag, also known to many as cross-dressing, became more popular in underground LGBTQ+ bars and clubs, often as a form of rebellion against rigid gender roles. At the time, these bars were seen as safe havens to many who did not fit into normal society; however, many states took it upon themselves to place laws that prevented bars from servicing the queer community. For example, several bars in New York City were denied liquor licenses due to openly serving homosexuals, and in Boston, laws known as "Blue Laws" prohibited dancing after midnight (Hoffman 52). Despite the obstacles, many of these establishments operated in secrecy, while under threat of police raids. The secret bars became places of resistance, especially for drag queens, who often faced the harshest scrutiny. Drag performances offered both entertainment and a powerful form of gender expression. By the 1960s, drag had become a fixture in many gay bars, despite being considered illegal or immoral

by mainstream society. Public response was largely negative, with drag queens frequently arrested or assaulted during police crackdowns.

The Stonewall Riots marked a major turning point in LGBTQ+ history. In June of 1969, the riots began after a police raid and "a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations" at the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City (Canfield 35). Even though the policing of bars was common, this time was different. Drag queens, transgender people, and other marginalized queer patrons fought back. One participant of the riot, Martin Boyce, said that the reaction from the community was from "All the attacks on us—we just went mad." (Canfield 36). Figures like Marsha P. Johnson, an African American transgender drag queen and activist, played key roles during and after the uprising. Johnson's role in the riot helped remind everyone just how many directions oppression can come from (Steinmetz 90). Drag queens were not only on the front lines of this resistance but also became symbolic leaders of the LGBTQ+ rights movement.

The Aids Epidemic

The AIDS epidemic in the 1980s hit the LGBTQ+ community especially hard, and drag queens were no exception. Many drag queens, who were often part of tight-knit queer circles, lost friends, lovers, and mentors to the disease. AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is a disease caused by an HIV infection, which stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV attacks and weakens the immune system, making it harder for the body to fight off infections and diseases. Over time, if left untreated, HIV can lead to AIDS, which is the most severe stage of the infection (Forbes 6,14). When HIV first became known, it

caused a huge public health crisis, especially within the LGBTQ+ community, as many gay men were affected. At the time, little was known about the virus, and the epidemic led to widespread stigma and stereotyping of the gay community, many viewing the virus as a "hilarious fag joke" (Hoffman 51). Despite the shunning, the community rallied together, advocating for improved research on the virus, better treatment, and support for those affected. Drag queens became important voices in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, fighting for better healthcare and rights for those affected. They used their performances, platforms, and social gatherings to spread information and support those who were suffering, helping to turn tragedy into action. The AIDS crisis not only brought the LGBTQ+ community closer together, but it also highlighted the resilience and strength of drag queens in the face of such a devastating time.

Present Day Drag and its Significance

In the 21st century, drag and drag queens have risen from underground subcultures to international icons, symbolizing both artistry and activism. Drag has grown globally through television, social media, and worldwide pride celebrations, not only gaining consciousness from others outside the LGBTQ+ community, but also introducing diverse styles of performance and identity to global audiences. The rise in popularity of drag is mainly credited to drag queen entertainer RuPaul Charles, who "defied that darkness" and helped bring drag into mainstream media culture through his show *RuPaul's Drag Race,* airing in 2009 and now going on its 18th season (Campbell). When asked to describe what drag is, RuPaul said that "Everything here is overdone … the only natural thing about any of this is the light." (Aguirre). Charles and many other popular modern-day drag queens are not only entertainers but also activists, using their platforms to push for social change and acceptance.

What was once considered taboo is now a celebrated form of self-expression in many parts of the world. In the past decade, drag has experienced widespread popularization in European, North, and some Latin American countries such as Brazil, México, and Chile (Lizama 2490). Alongside the original *RuPaul's Drag Race* series airing in the United States, the franchise has significantly grown, with different global versions of the show in countries such as Canada, France, Mexico, and even the Philippines (Paul 33). RuPaul's influence and the demand for drag-related content even allowed for the hosting of an annual drag convention, known as "RuPaul's DragCon", with its yearly venues being located in New York, Los Angeles, and London (Paul 33). Ultimately, drag in the 21st century is more than a performance; it is a global phenomenon that celebrates diversity, defies oppression, and uplifts the voices of those who have long been silenced.

Conclusion

The evolution of drag serves as a vivid reminder of resilience, transformation, and the right to self-expression. Drag queens have turned self-expression into an art form that challenges norms, gives people a voice, and creates a space where being yourself is celebrated. They no longer have to hide in the shadows, concealing who they are to avoid discrimination and violence. Beyond entertainment, drag queens have become influential public figures, advocating for equality, mental health awareness, and HIV/AIDS education. Their presence at pride parades, in political movements, and across digital platforms highlights their role as cultural leaders and activists. Their art often incorporates satire, fashion, dance, and political commentary, making drag a powerful medium for storytelling and resistance. In countries where LGBTQ+ rights remain limited, drag continues to be an act of bravery and protest, giving marginalized voices a stage. As society struggles to grasp the idea of inclusion and identity, drag continues to welcome

all to participate and enjoy its art, demonstrating that gender can be both performative and creative. From local bars to international stages, drag has and will continue to play a central role in LGBTQ+ culture, serving as a source of empowerment, education, and most importantly, joy.

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