

the feminine *Mystique*

Long the domain of male performers, the drag scene has gradually given birth to a movement of women known as faux queens. Storming cabaret stages from coast to coast, these flamboyant females are seizing the fake lashes from their gay boyfriends, and proving that sisters are gluing it for themselves

BY EVIE NAGY
PHOTOS BY LYNNETTE ASTAIRE

ALEXIA TATE IS an immaculate queen. In a sculpted blond wig, inch-long lashes, and pristine polka-dotted A-line skirt, she belts out "Don't Rain on My Parade" from *Funny Girl* with such fierce skill that most of the packed room can't help quitting their chatter to croon along. Her porcelain complexion doesn't seem to break the slightest sweat, even though she's giving it her all. She's so perfectly feminine, in fact, that it's almost hard to believe that she is a real woman.

Tate is a faux queen, a biological female who dresses, performs, and identifies as a drag queen stuck, so to speak, in a woman's body. On this Saturday night in January, she's emceeding Victoria, a new monthly party and performance in New York for "bio queens/faux queens/FTF [female-to-female] drag queens, and the gay man trapped in your vagina," according to its founders. Held at the historic Stonewall Inn, famous as the site of the 1969 riots that catalyzed the gay-rights movement, Victoria was started last year by Sharyn Jackson and Lauren LoGiudice—also known respectively as Chereynore and Queens Marie—who, though women, liked to dress up and experiment with hyper-femininity in a way that they could only truly characterize as drag. "I got really into going out [to clubs] and seeing all these people dressed up in drag," says Jackson. "I thought, 'That's really wonderful, but why do only guys get to do this? I want to do this, too.'"

Jackson and LoGiudice also knew that like-minded women were out there. While Victoria as an event is new, faux queens, who sometimes call themselves bio queens or FTF queens, among other terms, have comprised a small but growing segment of the drag community for years. The most recognizable FTF impersonator in pop culture is Julie Andrews' character in the 1982 film *Victor Victoria*—from which Jackson and LoGiudice's event takes its name—but Andrews'

Victoria was attempting to pass as a male drag queen, which is not necessarily true for real faux queens. For most female queens, the identity is not about deception but about self-consciously creating a persona that tests the boundaries of gender representation.

Jackson discovered how she could push these boundaries the first time she went out in drag, last summer, inspired by seeing LoGiudice's gender-bending performance earlier that night in New York's annual Miss LEZ Pageant. An actor, model, and performance artist, LoGiudice had long ago defined a drag persona for herself, performing as a man dressed as a woman, a woman dressed as a man, and other indeterminate combinations thereof. After the pageant, says Jackson, "we were all pumped up and went out to a gay bar, and I decided to wear this ridiculous outfit—long ugly wig, sequined pants. A lesbian approached me and said, 'Oh, my God, I love you. I love drag queens. I'm actually really turned on by this.' She put her hands on my boobs and was like, 'Wow, they feel really real,' thinking I was a man." Jackson then went to a straight club, where intrigued men got equally grabby. "These were straight guys who like women, but maybe they've had fantasies about a guy or something, and here I am, someone they

friends of mine, and two who were older and a little bit more old school who said, 'How can she be Miss Trannyshack if she's not a tranny?'

"The thing is," she says, "except for having to tuck away a penis, I do everything a drag queen does: stuffing a bra, putting a wig on my head, putting tons of makeup on. Drag is drag." Even now, as a singer in an internationally successful band, Matronic says she is still a drag performer. "It's Trannyshack every day I'm on stage with the Scissor Sisters."

It was six years after Matronic's near win that a biological female, Fauxnique, finally took the Miss Trannyshack crown. Trained as a dancer, Fauxnique had emulated drag queens since she was little and had been considering incorporating drag into her dance work when she first attended Trannyshack, in 1998. "I saw Ana Matronic perform and realized 'Hey, someone will actually let me get up on stage and do this,'" she says. Her winning performance in 2003 included a rousing lip sync to Elton John's "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," as well as an elaborate transformation, on pointe shoes, into a butterfly with 20-foot wings. Although her win raised some eyebrows, Heklina, the male drag queen who founded and hosts Trannyshack, defended the decision. "I never came from

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think is a man dressed like a woman," she says. "I was kind of in shock about how different segments of people had this reaction, these straight men and this lesbian, and it's just me in a wig." Later that night, Jackson and LoGiudice conceived the idea for Victoria.

A key inspiration for Jackson and LoGiudice is Ana Matronic, lead female singer for the Scissor Sisters and a pioneering figure in the faux queen movement. From 1996 until she moved to New York in 1999, Matronic performed frequently at Trannyshack, one of San Francisco's most noted weekly drag club nights. "What was great about Trannyshack is that no one cared who got on stage as long as they were good," says Matronic. "If it was a man dressed as a woman, fine. Woman dressed as a woman, fine. If you wanted to bend everything and go up there and be a giant freak with tits and a dick, great, we loved it. As long as you were bringing it."

Still, the idea of biologically female queens didn't always sit well with the drag community, especially when it came to competition. In 1997, controversy arose when Ana Matronic reached the finals of the Miss Trannyshack Pageant, the club's annual contest. "I should have won. It was a bit of a scandal for a little while," she says. "It came down to [the fact] that there were four judges: two who were young and

a traditional drag background where there were all these rules about what it means to be a drag queen," says Heklina. "Trannyshack was never about that. It has always been about who gets out there and does the best performance, and Fauxnique is an amazing performer."

Hedda Lettuce, a New York drag star, was one of the male queens who questioned Heklina's reasoning, arguing that although it was fine to have an open-gender competition, it shouldn't have been defined as drag. "It's not politically subversive for a woman to dress over-the-top," says Lettuce. "I don't think a woman could really call herself a drag queen without understanding what that means politically—the history of men dressing up and being arrested and persecuted for it. A woman who dresses up doesn't have to face those issues."

Burlesque performer Dr. Lukki, who hosted Victoria in December, has long considered herself a "big, bad, bold drag queen" but agrees that the appropriation of certain identities is potentially problematic. A Ph.D. in performance studies who writes about gender issues, Lukki is wary, for example, of using the term "FTF" for faux queens, because "female-to-female" is itself a phrase that is being appropriated by the transgendered community. "Transgendered women have gone

through a lot to get to that point, to say, 'No, I was not a man who became a woman; I've always been a woman,'" she says. "That, to me, is a lot harder than some chick who's a secretary by day and puts on lashes at night."

Lukki says she wouldn't apply this caution to every faux queen though, citing the World Famous *BOB*, a New York burlesque and performance artist whose FTF drag persona is intimately linked with her sexual identity. *BOB* has considered herself FTF for 20 years, since she started creating drag characters at 15 that reflected her own confused sexuality. She left her parents' house that year, finding a home in Hollywood's drag community. "I always say that it was like *The Jungle Book*, but instead of jungle animals, I was raised by hairdressers," says *BOB*, adding that she identified so strongly with gay men that it took her several years to figure out she wasn't one. "From about 16 to 17, I thought about having a sex change to become a man to dress up like a woman," she says. "I would walk into a room full of my flamboyant gay

"Most of it has to do with playing with persona and the idea that you create the person that you want to be," says Ana Matronic, who often performed songs by masculine male singers while dressing as an ultrafeminine bombshell. "To have that total gender-fuck of this beautiful natural woman, enhanced obviously, grinding her crotch into some poor little twink's face—that, to me, is drag."

Raven Snook, a Victoria performer whose flamboyant drag persona has a marked touch of goth, says that becoming a female drag queen helped her overcome the feelings she had as an adolescent of being awkward, overweight, and unfeminine. "It wasn't until I met drag queens and got in touch with their aesthetic that I got in touch with my own femininity," she says. "I don't think drag is necessarily about cross-dressing—drag is about seeing an ideal self and going for it."

In this spirit, Victoria isn't limited to women expressing their inner superfemme. Attendees run the spectrum of

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friends and drag queens, and I felt as if I were with my own kind." At 19, she decided that she didn't need to be a boy to be a drag queen and moved to San Francisco to perform professionally. Now a New York fixture, *BOB* has provided support to Victoria's organizers and agreed to host the event.

While questions surround faux queens' place in the drag community and its political history, the idea of a female/female impersonator is actually not far removed from mainstream celebrity culture—or feminism. Famous women including Mae West, Bette Midler, Dolly Parton, and even Miss Piggy have been described this way, by themselves or others, for projecting an over-the-top, almost unreal image of femininity that can be a particular form of social commentary. In her 2003 book *Female Impersonation*, Carole-Anne Tyler cites Dolly Parton as a "self-confessed female/female impersonator, miming or playing the feminine rather than simply being feminine, opening up a space within feminine identity so that it is not quite identical with itself—a space that might just be a critical distance."

"[Drag] comes down to a sort of self-awareness, a self-consciousness around playing with femininity," says Fauxnique. She adds that while drag for her is primarily about performance, it's also "a rejection of traditional oppressive forms of culture and masculinity—and that's part of an affinity with gay men as well. I wouldn't say every faux queen is a feminist, but I would say that part of them is in some way."

straight to gay, and drag of all kinds is represented, including male drag queens, female drag kings, and even faux kings—men who are experimenting with portraying another kind of man. Unique among drag parties, Victoria offers in-house style stations and a clothing swap, designed so that people can come in off the street and join the aesthetic without committing in advance to a new or awkward proposition. Some people who submit to the style stations give in to a full makeover, while others start slow by borrowing a wig or an extra pair of lashes. Newbies get a formula to help them devise a three-part drag name, using letters in their real names to match with suggestions on three lists—resulting in names like Millie Tickle Kiss. At the end of the night, anyone who visited the stations is invited to participate in a runway contest.

At January's Victoria, Alexia Tate staffed the style station when she wasn't on stage, applying eye shadow to women like Hillary Flocke, an unassuming Brooklynite who'd been active in the drag-king scene and decided to try female drag with a red evening dress and light coat of makeup. Nothing that would seem over-the-top anywhere, except maybe in her previous comfort zone.

"My perception of drag is that it's all a costume. We all wear some kind of drag every day," says Tate. "We all want to portray what we are inside through our outside clothes. And I like to be a little bit bigger than life." **B**