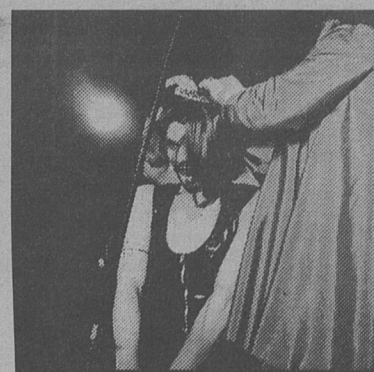




clockwise: Nathan "Biba" Jones (in banana skirt) with sidekicks Allison Banister and Myesha Gosslin, queen Chloe, crowning with Lemay Sister, Biba singing, Hedwig.



Kings and Queens and Everything in Between Sold-Out Winter Is a Drag Ball VIII Raises Funds, Provides February Thaw

By ESZTERLINA PASADITA EN SU TINTA

"You're born naked, the rest is drag," RuPaul has noted. True enough, though there is everyday drag and there is special occasion drag, and it was mostly the latter on display February 8 for the eighth annual Winter Is a Drag Ball at Higher Ground in Winooski. And this year's Ball was bigger than ever; arriving fashionably late, we found the joint sold out and jumpin', with a long line of ticketless hopefuls freezing their chaps and tiaras off outside the door.

I've always thought there's something perverse (yet wonderfully Vermont) about holding the Drag Ball in midwinter, for as anyone who's tried to navigate an unsalted driveway in heels can tell you: Drag queen on ice, unlike Riunite, is definitely not nice! How vividly I recall one year's adventure emerging from the house after an exhaustive makeover only to discover the snow falling so heavily there was no discernible difference between road and pasture. The AAA guy's going to be in for a big surprise, we imagined, as we slid our way up Route 7, because there was no way in hell we were staying home after spending three painstaking hours producing our über-diva selves. It's one thing to be fabulous; to be fabulous in February

is downright heroic.

This year was blissfully blizzard-free, so we arrived in time to catch several of the pre-crowning acts introduced by The Sisters LeMay. You really had to be there (and if you weren't, why weren't you?!), so I won't go into detail except to say a diverse array of talent was on display, from breathtaking operatics to rocking-out Hedwig to a Madonna tune probably performed better than Mrs. Ritchie herself could have done it to a phantasmagoric androgyny extravaganza with a startling phallic finale which I regrettably missed, since I was busy attempting to smoke a cigarette at the bar, something I wouldn't dream of doing out of heels.

Committing uncharacteristic acts — in my case, smoking and flirting shamelessly with anyone who crossed my lipstick path — is one of the pleasures of drag. Drag frees you to be that which superficially you are not: boys can be girls. Girls can be boys. Butch women can go femme. Effeminate men can go butch. Het can go a little homo. Homo can go a little het. Or, as several people proved at this year's festivities, you can toss it all together and be your own pangendered, polysexual creation.

For those not inclined to go all out, a little drag can go a long way. The female friend who accompanied my boyfriend and me to the

Ball tarted her goddess self up a bit, added a boa and a groovy hair extension and said she felt like a whole new woman. As for those party poopers who showed up in their drab everyday drag, note for future reference: It's not the You Are a Drag Ball!

My own version of drag, thus far, has been more or less "straight," give or take breasts and chest hair. That is, I go girly but skip the Nair. Still, donning a dress, a pound of makeup, and a Dusty Springfield wig never gives me illusions of passing as a woman. Nor would I personally want to, even if I do strive for a squirt-from-five-feet prettiness akin to Joan Collins in her "Dynasty" days. (Not that I've been around the block half as many times as Joan.) My boyfriend, on the other hand, has learned to aim for a sort of supersized vivaciousness after unexpectedly discovering that slipping into women's clothing suddenly renders him more manly than Janet Reno and Barbara Bush combined.

Maybe the idea that drag allows you to be someone other than yourself isn't quite accurate? Maybe it's really that drag gives you permission to be *more* yourself, tapping into exotic facets of your personality that exist but lie dormant, self-censored through much of ordinary life?

I must confess, I am a drag amateur. Thus, my musings on drag are liable to be, well, amateurish. I

am, however, a great admirer of those who can pull off drag with thorough conviction. When tickets for the Ball went on sale, I encouraged my aforementioned female friend to invite her lesbian sister and her sister's partner to join us. They opted out, in part because one of them admitted to being afraid of drag queens. Afraid of drag queens? It seemed funny, but I understood: true drag queens can be intimidating. To do drag in mixed company you've got to be fierce and sharp-witted. The professional drag queen, or king, never withers under society's disapproving gaze.

I have a faint memory of naively sashaying in front of my mother one childhood day with a yellow bath towel over my head in an attempt to reproduce the cascading blond tresses of a TV beauty pageant contestant. Not surprisingly, she didn't encourage further explorations of my feminine side. Later on, very secretly, I dipped into my older sister's impressive minidress collection and struck a few Marcia Brady poses before the mirror. Then puberty hit, and I lost interest.

Or was it society that stifled my interest? Any man who does female drag is sending a big fuck-you to the culture in which he was raised; for natural assimilators like myself, this presents a major obstacle. Though cultural milestones like "Priscilla" (and how about that new Christina Aguilera video for "Beautiful"?) have mainstreamed drag to some extent, it's still a radical act for a man to wear a dress in public. Perhaps that's why drag is usually interpreted as guys in dresses? Women can do male drag, up to a point, without anyone batting an eye. For a woman, putting on pants isn't a radical act, which could take some of the transgressive fun out of it.

But any preconceived notions that drag mostly equals

queens were upended at Drag Ball VIII. While there have been some fine drag kings in years past, this year's kings totally knocked my pantyhose off. Simply put, the kings ruled! And quite a few of these struttin' sideburned studs were packing penises, convincing ones at that. The runner-up king wasn't shy about whipping it out and showing it off, and the winning king — clad in police garb cut to display a fully loaded red jockstrap — reinforced the notion that size indeed does matter. Interestingly, while many of the kings were going for hyper-verisimilitude, this year's queens — with some notably frilly exceptions — seemed a much more sleekly androgynous lot than queens of yore.

What all this says about the changing tides of feminist and/or LGBTQ politics, I'm not entirely sure, but — if Vermont is any indication — drag has freed itself from La Cage Aux Folles and is now flying into wide-open spaces.

The 2003 celebration, a benefit for the Vermont People with AIDS Coalition, had a loosely interpreted "Salute to the Troops" military theme. The military homage might seem a dubious choice given current events, until it was clarified that the troops referred to are those on the front lines of the HIV/AIDS battle. That's an oft-overlooked war we can all stand behind, and, as far as that other war goes, isn't drag supposed to be in dubious taste? In seriously bleak times, perhaps especially in such times, a little leather-and-laced irreverence helps brighten, for a few hours at least, even the darkest winter evening. ▼

Eszterlina shares mind and body with Ernie McLeod in Middlebury, but wears much sexier clothes.