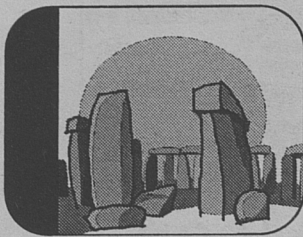


STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

by charlie emond



History is a Drag (Ball)

Best you think RuPaul and Yolanda were among the first men to put on heels, glitzy dresses, and wigs and come out looking fabulous, let me fill you in on a rich and honorable tradition that stretches back into the mists of time.

Well, "honorable" may not be exactly the right word, but God knows drag queens have been around forever! Even during the hunting rituals of the Neolithic era, you can be sure that one of these guys snagged the prettiest fur wraps and lip-synched to the sabre-tooth tiger roaring outside the cave.

Theater grew out of religious rituals, and the earliest plays in the Christian tradition, the mystery plays, were actually performed in churches. These interconnected worlds have allowed men in drag to strut, emote, inspire, and entertain... and that's just in church!

RuPaul says it well: "With my drag I encompass both male and female. I become a microcosm of the whole universe, the yin and yang, and people pick up on that and are enthralled by the power. When you are in drag...you become the God of your imagination, and that's powerful medicine, baby."

Clerical drag

Serving gods or goddesses

has historically been an occupation for gay men that's right up there with nursing and hair-dressing. Our "sisters" have always staffed the churches and temples, and decorated them, while they were at it. Let's quickly review the drag queens who have already waltzed across our historical stage, beginning 4000 years in Babylon. There the goddess Inanna was served by cross-dressing men who let their hair grow long, wore colorful necklaces, and sang, danced and performed magic. (Think Mardi Gras in New Orleans.)

Similarly, the main goddess of the Canaanites was Athirat. Her priests, the "qedishim," dressed in long-sleeved, multi-colored caftans, and wore veils. They maintained the temple grounds, created pottery, wove cloth, and made it rain. Even more interesting, they participated in same-sex rituals with male worshippers. (Think Mardi Gras in New Orleans!)

Getting your rocks off?

The worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis goes back to 3600 BC. This religion was immensely popular in the Greco-Roman world for many centuries; it only died out when Christianity came along. It was one of many such goddess cults, and the priests of Isis

were typical of the rest. They grew their hair long, shaved daily, and dressed like their goddess.

One of the mysteries of this religion was "The Secret of the Two Partners." This involved Set, the brother of Isis, and her son, Horus. They "merged" and formed a mystical union that produced a child named Thoth. He was called "the Shepherd of the Anus" in reference to the method of his conception. (And you thought the virgin birth was something!)

On the island of Samos, the priests of Hera dressed in "snowy tunics that swept the floor of the wide earth" and braided their long hair with gold ribbons. They also may have been eunuchs through ritual castration. Although I have met quite a few serious drag queens in my time, I can happily say that none of them was that serious! This is an aspect of androgyny that I will explore next time.

"All day, all night, Mary Ann..."

In 12th-century Europe, you could always find some action down at your local tavern or inn, or at the village fair. The term "molly" came to be used for gay men during the middle ages. It came from "Mary" or "Mary-Anne," and grew out of

the language and world of transvestites. You may remember from last month that Maid "Marian" in the Morris dances in England was actually a boy in a dress. (Pay attention here; this stuff will be on the final!)

In a book by Thomas Middleton written in 1599, the narrator describes seeing a beautiful woman and falling in love with her. However, "the woman was in fact a man," "a painted puppet...in a nymph's attire." The book makes it clear that the appearance of a transvestite was common in Elizabethan London. Of course, many of us also remember from high school lit classes that, since women were forbidden to perform on stage, Shakespeare's leading ladies were all boys in drag. Think about that for a while!

During the next century, society began to think that only certain men were really interested in same-sex activity, and that they conveniently wore dresses. Of course society is rarely interested in truth or reality, just in ease of identification. At the instigation of the churches, the authorities began to crack down on cross-dressing. The queens continued to dress up of course, but not in public. They either met secretly in homes or inns called "molly houses," or else they joined the church, where nobody would be the wiser — but where there was probably considerably less sex!

Do you come here often?

The molly houses of the 1720s in England were very much part of the homosexual subculture of the time. For example, a drag ball in a molly house near the Old Bailey in London featured "the men calling one another 'my dear' and hugging, kissing, and tickling each other...and assuming

effeminate voices and airs... Some were completely rigged in gowns, petticoats, head cloths, fine laced shoes, furberlowed scarves, and masks; some had riding hoods; some were dressed like milkmaids, others like shepherdesses with green hats, waistcoats and petticoats; and others had their faces...painted and wore very extensive hoop petticoats, which had been very lately introduced." Although this was centuries ago, it could easily describe the scene at a drag show I attended a few months ago in White River Junction!

In 1725, twenty molly houses were broken up by the authorities. In Covent Garden during one of these busts, "the crowded household, many of them in drag, met the raid with determined and violent resistance." This counterattack by enraged queens preceded the Stonewall riots by more than two centuries. Whenever a drag queen echoes Queen Victoria's "We are not amused!" — you'd better look out! ▼

Next time: Mona Lisa was a man (?) or the life of the OTHER Leonardo.

For more information: This gay history column is the 14th in a series that began with pre-history. Much of my research comes from two excellent books: Alan Bray's *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* and *Blossom of Bone* by Randy P. Connors, both of which I highly recommend.

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queen's College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction.

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