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A Drag Dream Team

The Cabaret brings focus and innovation to Cincinnati's drag scene

MATT MORRIS // AUG 3, 2011

As early as 1880, drag queens performing in Over-the-Rhine dance halls are mentioned in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. It's auspicious, then, that The Cabaret, a drag performance venue opened earlier this year, revives that OTR history by setting up shop in the same building as Below Zero Lounge on Walnut Street. It's a new home

for a set of performers to work on their art form that outrageously entertains while it fundamentally questions the privileges and power dynamics associated with gender.

One of Cincinnati's most popular queens, Penny Tration, is a joint owner and the emcee for the club. Penny has been doing drag for 18 years. In that time, she's explored the different corners of drag culture: performing for tips in gay bars, competing in pageants, hosting and entertaining at corporate events and fundraisers. Comprised from aspects of other drag clubs she'd come across in her travels and a stint living in New York City, a vision of The Cabaret was formed. Penny points out that there are only two other drag performance ventures like The Cabaret in the country.

The space itself mirrors the opulence and artifice of the performers. It's part Kit Kat Klub from *Cabaret* and part gypsy fortune teller's parlor, full of curtains and ornamental rugs, dark cozy corners and camp elements like a huge television that on one of my visits crackled with footage of a fireplace. A large, ornate bar is stocked with a menu of cocktails named after the different queens who perform there.

The cast of The Cabaret is exclusively engaged there for their shows from Thursday through Sunday each week. This is practically unheard of, when typically enthusiasts of the art form crisscross the region to see queens in all kinds of bars and clubs. Penny performs alongside a core cast of other local favorites: Shafreaka Jane, Monica St. James and Jessica Dimon. Each cast member has their own following, and those crowds combined have often packed the place to capacity with a wait at the door.

A trio of younger, experimental queens — Judith Iscariot, Mirelle Jane Divine and Arielle Lustine — came on as cocktail servers who will occasionally jump onstage to do a number of their own.

I would never ask a lady her age, but it seems like the performers at The Cabaret span a couple generations and quite a few aesthetics.

Penny amps up the larger-than-life qualities one expects in a drag queen: even bigger hips, breasts, hair and fashion statements. On one recent evening, she was a Disco Dolly Parton confection in pink and white sequins, literally iced in bling. A sassy provocateur, her quick wit pushes political incorrectness.

When it comes to the limits she tests and her main audience, Penny observes, “I like to say that I get the uppity white people. Regardless of how it assaults your masculinity, drag’s not going anywhere.



“There has to be an Abbott and there has to be a Costello, which is Shafreaka,” Penny continues. “I call Shafreaka the Queen of the Misfit Toys.”

Shafreaka Jane is a wacky lioness, and her clever slapstick comedy parodies pop culture and gender norms. Her costar, Arielle Lustine, sums up her niche.

“Shafreaka is a dude in a dress and loves to be known as that,” Lustine says. “She almost makes fun of drag by doing drag.”

She is never fully invested in the illusion of appearing to be female, as much as she is interested in camping up the whole idea of a man in women’s clothing.

Two queens in the cast known for their beauty are Monica St. James and the proudly transgendered Jessica Dimon.

“You need someone who is pretty, which is Monica, and you need a tranny, which is Jessica,” Penny says. “Jessica pulls in all the kids, and Monica gets the R&B crowd.

Both have their own takes on “realness,” with Monica updating all the old tricks of the high art of female impersonation, while Jessica has transitioned into not only performing as a woman but also living as one, too.

The three drag cocktail servers, who perform full numbers on Thursday nights, have all been doing drag for about a year. A former marine, Arielle looks to create a character that articulates the empowerment of women. Like Monica, she focuses on the transformation from the perceptions of being male to being female.

“The power of beauty and what it holds today is what I try to bring out,” Lustine says.

The avant-garde Mirelle Jane Divine wears hair that often calls Stieg Larson’s Lisbeth Salander to mind, and high fashions that on different evenings have reminded me of the androgyne actress and fashionista Tilda Swinton or recent Marc Jacobs runway shows. In college, Mirelle majored in psychology and microbiology and minored in queer theory. Her drag reflects that critically queer engagement.

“Drag breaks down gender binaries and there’s nothing more powerful than leveling a cultural norm that’s gripped society since the dawn of time,” Mirelle says.

Judith Iscariot, self-named to feminize the dark apostle from biblical mythology, could be Mirelle’s twin sister. She is the femme fatale of the crew.

“She’s an extension of me,” Judith says, “I’m a freak in real life. I’m a little goth, industrial boy with piercings and tattoos. Judith is dirty, raunchy, sacrilegious — everything that I am as a boy but don’t get to outwardly express.”

In drag, Judith is the tallest person I’ve ever stood beside, and in her performances, her physical presence commands attention and projects power.

Judith Butler, an altogether different Judith who is one of the foremost scholars in queer theory, made this observation about gender, “Gender ought not to be construed as stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.”

Drag calls our attention to the reality that our social responses aren’t generated by one another’s actual bodies but by unstable constructions of gender stereotypes. The eclectic cast of The Cabaret is a parodic parade of contemporary ideals of femininity

performed by male or trans bodies. The Cabaret is a place where societal preconceptions can be checked at the door.

“Drag is designed to allow you a little bit of escape,” Penny says. “It doesn’t have to be real. It is an illusion. The whole point of the gay bar is a moment’s respite from whatever might be going on that day out in the world. We’re there to allow everything else to go away.”

THE CABARET (1122 Walnut St., Over-the-Rhine) presents free drag shows 10 p.m.-2 a.m. Thursday-Sunday. For more information, check out www.cabaretcincinnati.com.

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