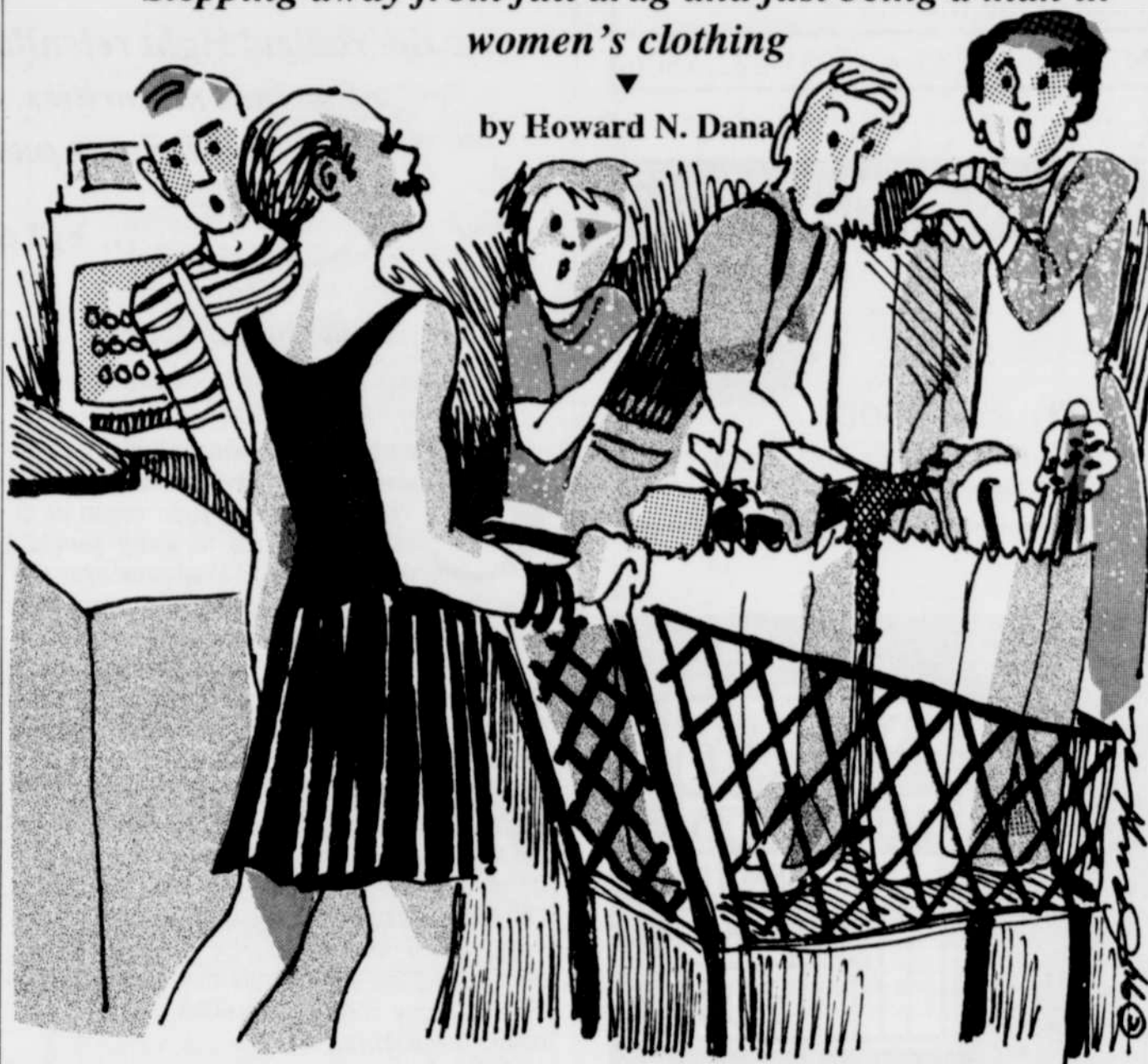


## IT'S A QUEER THING

# Breaking the mold

*Stepping away from full drag and just being a man in women's clothing*

by Howard N. Dana



**T**he politics of boys wearing dresses in public are anything but simple. Although this will come as no surprise to drag queens or transsexuals, it never ceases to amaze me how much trouble can be caused by putting on clothes of the opposite gender. In this case, I'm not talking about men looking like women but men being men in women's clothing—half-drag, if you will.

My admiration for drag queens and transsexuals is immense. I think they are fabulous beyond belief. I have even done drag (albeit poorly) a few times and enjoyed it. But what I really like to do is one step removed from full drag. Being someone who likes to question the status quo and push people's buttons a bit, I love to don a dress and carry on in public as if nothing were unusual about my appearance. I have always fancied women's clothes and think men look smashing in them. In the traditions of drag and half-drag, which are as old as history, this kind of costuming brings out the fairy in guys. And it still has power to wreak havoc on the mainstream culture.

Men in dresses are a standard comedic vehicle in England. In any British sitcom series, you can be assured of seeing male members of the cast in drag from time to time. In our own early television history, comedians such as Milton Berle also used drag as a way of getting laughs. Drag clubs like Darcelle XV are immensely popular with straight and gay audiences alike, and no one blinks an eye at drag queens in queer clubs or at Lesbian and Gay Pride. These are all acceptable venues for "female impersonation," which are tightly regulated by societal norms. Cross-dressing is only acceptable when it is kept in context. What causes waves is when people do cross-gender things where they are not "supposed to."

I own a number of very flattering dresses which I occasionally wear to parties or out dancing. I do not change my appearance in any way except to put on a dress, rather than pants and a shirt. The reception I get from people, however, is as different as night and day. Both straight and queer people, regardless of whether they know me or not, react very differently toward me when I'm in a skirt.

Straight people, especially younger ones, freak out and don't know how to take me. Most are so used to people conforming to the gender code that they are nonplused when someone breaks the rules. The most imaginative thing straight men can think to yell at me is, "Fag," to which I reply, "What gave you the first clue?" Standing in line one evening at the Safeway on Northeast Broadway dressed in a

little off-the-shoulder black dress and a black top hat, I created such a stir that you would have thought I was Madonna dropping in to get a quart of milk. The seas part for you if you are a boy in a dress. While I don't recommend dressing up and going out alone (because people will beat you up), it can be great fun to create a spectacle in a traditionally straight environment.

Queer folk, who, on the other hand, one would expect to be cool about boys in dresses, are fine with the genre as long as it is in an acceptable venue as well. But under the glaring light of societal norms, even queer folk get nervous. To be associated with someone who is breaking the rules means that you condone this deviancy and are thereby "guilty" by association. This guilt can cause a person to put up a homophobic barrier between himself or herself and the "deviant." It is internal-

ized homophobia that causes members of the queer community to call for a ban on drag queens (and other groups) in public. This sort of self censorship in the queer community stems from caring too much about what the heterosexual power base thinks and says. I have been with people who were very chummy with me (dressed in half-drag) in a queer bar but wouldn't acknowledge me out on the street—it was too public.

It is also my observation that half-drag is caught in the crossfire of a sexist battle as well. Transsexuals and drag queens are definitely subject to sexism. But the sexism around half-drag has a twist to it. Sexist behavior is targeted at women because they are women. Sexist behavior is targeted at drag queens and transsexuals because they look and act like women. Boys, on the other hand, who are acting like boys but who are wearing women's

clothes are caught between genders. In our society's desire to neatly categorize human beings along gender, race and age lines, those who can be identified can be categorized. Men in dresses defy the categories. People seem unable to deal with a third category which is neither male nor female and, as a result, choose to force you into a category, reacting to you as either male or female.

If I am doing half-drag, often when people react to me as male they compliment me on the dress but lament that they like me much better in pants and a shirt. But what happens more often is that people will treat me as "female" because I have women's clothes on. Any man who has never put on a dress and pumps and gone out in public has no clue what many women go through every day. I cannot claim to really know what sexism is either, but I have had a taste of it. Dressing up in women's clothes makes you vulnerable. Not only are you physically vulnerable, but wearing a little black dress opens you up to verbal and sexist slings and arrows as well. I was at a party of gay men last month where some of the guys had had too much to drink. The fact that I was wearing a dress, coupled with the alcohol, made a number of them feel it was fine to grab me and try to put their hands up my skirt. Rude comments and jokes were made about me, even though the guys assured me that I was the life of the party. The queer guys that were doing this are people I know and who would never have acted this way had I been dressed in "normal" clothes. Simply by wearing a skirt, I had "asked for" this rude treatment. This is an extreme example, and not usually the reaction I get, but it is indicative of the sexism and misogyny that exists within the queer community.

It is my opinion that, as people in the United States, we do not deal with the issue of gender well at all. We are hung up on stereotypes and are obsessed with maintaining the rules. Very rarely do things come along, despite straight men wearing earrings, that bend these gender rules very much. For the most part, men and women are very restricted in how we can dress and act. Queers have a long, rich tradition of defying these rules. We can see how the status quo works against us and wants to shut us up. Many of us bravely try on new ways of thinking, acting and dressing. But there are still many among our ranks who would stifle this freedom of expression. Homophobia, heterosexism and sexism are present in each of us and in our culture. To work to change this is an invaluable effort. If each of us could break out of our molds and challenge the norm more often, we would be on our way to a more equitable world.

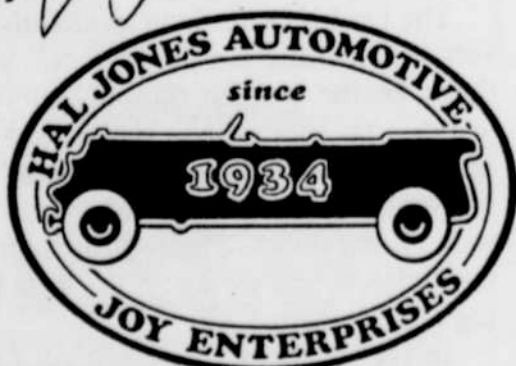
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