

Documenting Darcelle

She oughta be in pictures—and now she is

BY GARY MORRIS

Darcelle (like Garbo, Brando or Anna Nicole, a full name would be superfluous) is both institution and icon in Portland's queer community. Proprietress of the longest-surviving drag club in the United States, mother hen to a gaggle of performing queens, tireless community activist and, in her own bemused words, "a gorgeous, very large blond lady!" she can now add another credit to her résumé: star of her own documentary.

Some fans at Portland State University have been working for the past several months on *S/He Shows: Drag as Social Action*—a portrait of the divine Miss D. To date, they've shot 60-plus hours of performance and interview footage, with the aim of a late 2004 release (depending on the success of fund raising and grant writing).

Co-directors Wendy Kohn, a filmmaker associated with Portland's Kwamba Productions, and Jan Haaken, professor of psychology, along with a handful of Haaken's students, have become fixtures at the club, discreetly documenting Darcelle XV and Co. on film.

The former Empress of Portland and her team of dancing divas "have contributed a tremendous amount of time and energy to the community, including many charitable events," Haaken explains. "The club has become a kind of community center. The performers also...have a reputation for engaging audiences in a warm, respectful yet challenging way. Darcelle seems to relate well to people from rural communities or small towns."

Indeed, Darcelle (aka Walter Cole) has the brio and the balls to speak with equal panache to straight truck drivers, seasoned dyke fans, nervous queens in the process of coming out and, in one recent case, a woman who'd just had a double mastectomy, who watched the show through laughter and tears. At another recent performance, Darcelle movingly recalled the joy of working for many years with a drag queen named Tina, who had died that morning.

"Most people think of drag as wildly frenetic, fun and celebratory," says Haaken. "It is, but Darcelle and Roxy [her partner of 36 years] have also made the club a place to acknowledge loss and sorrow. Whether it is illness, death, divorce, coming out or a birthday party, the club seems to be a place where it is acknowledged that you can be 'somewhere in-between.'"

This sense of suspending, at least temporarily, rigid boundaries of roles and emotions, pervades the ethos of the club and the performances. Darcelle knows this is part of her mission. "Whenever I'm asked about boundaries," she says in a film short that served as a kind of rehearsal for *S/He Shows*, "I say wait a minute, maybe there are boundaries for countries. Do there have to be boundaries for people?"

The Darcelle shows stylishly smash that status quo with a wild mix of audience participation, vaudeville schtick, Broadway belting, "naughty" sex routines and disco excess, with Darcelle herself as likely to appear in elaborate



Director Jan Haaken backstage with Darcelle during filming of *S/He Shows: Drag as Social Action*

cowboy gear (well, the chaps are made of white feathers) as in a glittery dress.

Of course, one of the major attractions for audiences and the filmmakers is the playful approach to gender the shows take. Haaken says that's just one of the areas in which Darcelle provides a kind of safety valve—a reinforcement that being different is cause for celebration, not withdrawal.

"We think that part of the appeal is that the humor taps into areas of people's lives...that get loaded up with conflict," notes Haaken. "Much of the humor is 'body talk' as well as related to sex and gender. Differences based on fat/thin, short/tall, young/old are central to the parody. In this society, many people are made to feel they don't have the right kind of body. Oppressed people are particularly made to feel bad about their bodies and other aspects of who they are in a range of ways."

Darcelle is quite aware of these aspects but doesn't feel constrained by them. Above all, she's a performer trying to move her audiences—whether to laughter or tears.

"The last thing I'm trying to be is a real woman," she remarks. "If I worried about gender, I wouldn't do what I do for a living. You have to know who you are on this planet. One of the first things we do at Darcelle's is we learn to laugh at ourselves. Then we can laugh at everybody else!"

Watch for fund-raising events for *S/HE SHOWS: DRAG AS SOCIAL ACTION*. In the meantime, send those contributions to Darcelle Project, Portland State University Foundation, P.O. Box 243, Portland, OR 97207.

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer whose favorite movie is *Showgirls*.

REVIEW



WHALE RIDER
Pioneer Place Stadium 6

Whale Rider opens on a grim note: In a New Zealand coastal town hospital, a woman is in difficult childbirth while her husband engages in an ongoing feud with his own father. A mother dies; a baby girl is born.

In their traditional Maori culture, this is a wrenching development, as a boy would have been groomed by his grandfather, Koro, for the role of chieftain. The girl, Pai, grows

up embraced by her grandmother and loved by Koro—as long as she's just a typical little girl. When she begins exhibiting unmistakable signs of ambition to become a chieftain herself, Koro becomes her enemy.

They make for powerful adversaries—one obsessed with an imperiled tradition, the other determined to reinvent it. "Whale rider" is a reference to the mythological character who started the Maori race. Pai learns the ancient songs and rituals of their ancestors, while Koro tries desperately to thwart her. Matters escalate when a pod of whales washes up nearly dead on the beach, a dire event that Koro blames entirely on Pai's alleged hubris.

This simple storyline, like that of the Canadian Inuit film *The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)*, has

the poetic power of ancient myth, with a primal narrative enriched by an element of genderplay in its pitting of patriarchy and the rigid, repressive roles it represents against an expanding feminine (and feminist) spirit. It's this conflict that gives the film much of its considerable force.

The native actors are uniformly strong, particularly Vicky Haughton as Pai's sympathetic grandmother and Rawiri Paratene as Koro.

But the most riveting performance is that of 12-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes as Pai, who is simply extraordinary in this complex role. It's impossible not to be moved by her incarnation of a small and suffering yet powerful girl, driven by a force that seems equally likely to transform or destroy her.

—GM

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