

CULTURE

# Female masculinity

Portland's first drag king troupe nudges you a little closer to your edge

BY JODI DARBY

**B**ear with me, friends, for a little trip through gender academia.

In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam clarifies that masculinity is not always equivalent to maleness; it is more precisely a set of specific behaviors and attitudes that are available to all who would access them. Masculinity, then, being in essence gender-free, takes many forms apart from maleness.

In other words, you don't have to be male to exhibit masculinity. But maleness carries a specific social demand for its emphatic expression. These internalized demands become a kind

of gender performance where the majority of people hope to fall into one category or another. This kind of gender performance is not perceived as performance per se by the actor or the spectator because the performance is an internalized and largely unconscious one.

OK so far? Let's continue.

In cases where gendered signs are consciously acted out—in some ways hyperacted—and presented as performance, we arrive at what social anthropologist Lauren Wells-Hasten calls "gender theatricality."

Or what some queers call drag.

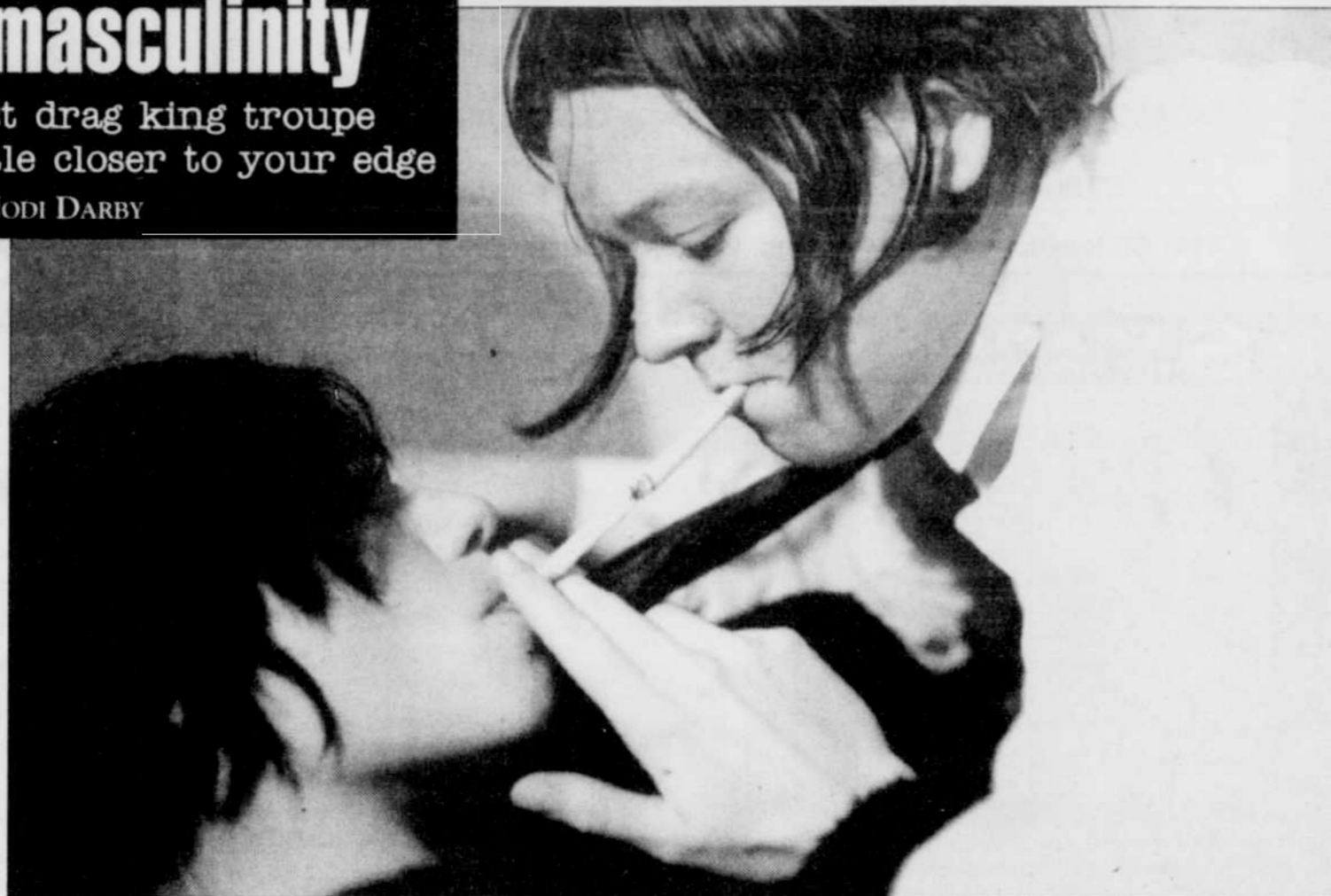
Drag is by its nature gender-disruptive and has always been an intrinsically "queer" form of expression. Historically, the keys to Drag City have always been kept in the hands of men, which explains why drag queens like RuPaul Charles have become part of mainstream society and drag queen bars have increasingly become the domain of straight, suburban bachelorette parties.

Where drag queens have found a certain level of acceptance in both popular media and academia, drag kings are still a relatively unknown community.

In recent years, organized drag king troupes have emerged in large cities: Club Casanova in New York, the Royal Renegades in Philadelphia and the Chicago Kings are among the better known. In years past, Portland saw drag king revues downtown at Embers Avenue; now, inspired by the political nature of smashing gender, the sexiness of performing and the excitement of charting new territories, we can say hello to DK PDX.

Founder Ali Cotterill, aka Tommy Torpedo, might be considered Portland's King of Kings. From a young age, she played with gender. "When I was 5 and 6, I looked like a boy," she says. "When I got a little older, I still looked like a boy, but I also wanted to perform. I wanted to be a child star. The problem is you can't be a movie star in this society if you're 13, and you look like a boy!" she laughs.

It was five years ago at Oberlin College in Ohio that Cotterill discovered drag. She was 19 and went to a performance of drag king Pat Riarch, who was opening for queer slam poet Alix Olson. "It was the first drag performance I



Tommy Torpedo (right) woos the women as part of DK PDX. See the drag troupe during the TechnoDyke.com birthday bash Feb. 22 at Holocene.

had ever seen, and it involved a priest and an altar boy. It was really political and really, really hot at the same time." Cotterill was on stage within a month.

**O**nce in Portland, Cotterill "started talking to everybody I could to feel out whether or not people seemed interested," she remembers. "There was an overwhelming interest, so I worked to make it happen." One of the first and most ambitious connections Cotterill made was with Soox, a Boston transplant with a knack for the stage.

Soox's "first brush with the idea of drag" was in her North Carolina middle school. "For the talent show, my group wanted to be Duran Duran. We wanted to dress like them and perform. The school wouldn't let us and told us we had to be a female band. We ended up

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—Ali Cotterill, aka Tommy Torpedo

doing a Bangles song, but we did it dressed as Duran Duran."

Later Soox, aka Ace, began to perform during Amateur Night at Jacques's, a Boston queer bar. "I do different types of performances, different characters," explains Soox. "Sometimes I'm a gentleman; sometimes I do the redneck with the mullet thing. Either way, it's completely over-the-top masculinity. It's mocking traditional ideas of gender stereotypes, the same way drag queens do."

As for their inspirations, both Cotterill and Soox give credit to classic nationally known drag kings Mo B. Dick and Dred, the writings of stone butch Leslie Feinstein and gender outlaw Kate Bornstein, and the drag activism of Diane Torr, originator of the Man for a Day workshops.

The women set out recruiting and premiered last May during Skervy, the erstwhile queer dance night at Cobalt Lounge. After Skervy ended, they began performing at the eastside club Holocene in earnest and feel they have finally come together as a solid group of

performers. The last show Jan. 25 packed in a sell-out crowd as DK PDX did a sendup of movie icons like *Top Gun*, *The Graduate* and *Wayne's World*.

"Drag has the ability to deconstruct binary gender. I've seen a lot that reinforces that," says Cotterill. "It gets people talking, thinking about gender and their own perceptions of it and reactions to it. It directly affects the players and the audience."

The idea is simple—what Cotterill calls the "Le Tigre factor," after the feminist punk group that conveys serious social and political messages through dance music. Entertain the crowd: Make them dance, make them laugh, make them hot, but most of all make them think. "We want people to walk away from our show and feel uncomfortable, to question their own ideas about gender. We especially want people to push us in different directions, too."

As a troupe, DK PDX is incredibly diverse. The intersection between performance and trans visibility is huge for some members of the troupe, which is a major step toward community building.

"We're all queer," Cotterill explains. "Some of us are trans-identified; some want to transition, but most don't. Some do king and queen drag. Me, I like being a dyke and being a fag. I like playing around with both."

Audience outreach is of utmost importance to DK PDX right now. Others priorities include film and video projects and more performing nationwide. "We want...people [to] know how approachable we are," says Cotterill. "We want people to contact us and for them to know that we're not a clique."

Soox adds, "For me personally, this is what I do when I'm alone and in my room, and now I can share it with people." ■

Watch DK PDX enact readings from the new anthology *Up All Night: Adventures in Lesbian Sex* during the TechnoDyke.com fourth birthday bash—a Studio 54 tribute party—7 p.m. Feb. 22 at Holocene, 1001 S.E. Morrison St. Cover is \$5 at the door, \$3 with '70s gear. Join the DK PDX fan list at [groups.yahoo.com/group/portlanddragkings](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/portlanddragkings).

JODI DARBY is a Portland writer, graphic designer and radio producer.

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