

# Dragging out the family

Übergay Cabaret subverts gender—and sibling rivalry

BY AARON SCOTT

**A** string-bean-thin drag queen in workout gear jazzercizes with a simply marked fitness bible: Atkins. Suddenly, a drag king dressed as a giant slice of white bread bounds on stage and desperately sings "I Want You to Want Me." Not to be forsaken, another drag king dressed as a T-bone steak appears, and a battle for the worship of the weight watcher ensues until the inevitable happens: Like all Atkins defectors, the drag queen ends up on her knees, going down on the übersexy piece of Wonder Bread.

While food has no doubt played a significant role in filling out many a drag queen's gown, few drag acts have involved food, let alone intelligently and humorously explored its fetishization.

But then, Übergay Cabaret, the culinary experts behind this piece, is not your average drag troupe. While its five core members have begun to make a ruckus in the Portland queer scene during the past two years, sibling founders Claire and Devan McGrath-Riecke, who play twins Max Voltage and Pollyanne Marie on stage, have been collaborating together for life, literally. Ever since Claire first applied lipstick to Devan's 18-month-old lips.

"We dressed up every holiday and put on skits," explains Claire, 23. "Devan always played the girl because he was shorter. It seemed natural."

Gender-swapping would not strike most parents as natural, but Sue McGrath says she and Bob Riecke "nurtured imagination in their children" and accepted their drag as "the theatrics of childhood." Still, Bob preferred that Devan didn't wear dresses in front of guests at their Lake Oswego home.

Like many kids, Devan and Claire took to performing at an early age. From a room filled with costumes and props, their self-directed productions would often go until an ending was parentally decreed. (Each skit had to have "a beginning, a middle and an end," the two quote their mother.) However, their performances differed from most kids in their extravagance and costume choice, which ranged from odd, genderless disasters to straightforward, innocent drag.

"Their choices were always very fluid," Sue recalls, although she admits most of Claire's princess dresses ended up showcasing Devan, who admired them more. Regular characters included Mr. and Mrs. Zorro (Claire in black,

Devan in pink), Thundergirl and Superkitty. "We were always subverting gender," admits Devan, 21, facetiously adding, "I guess we were ahead of our time in performance art vision."

A projected home video records two grade schoolers performing a choreographed dance to "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)." The boy wears a black athletic jacket, while the girl is in a turquoise sports bra. Pollyanne Marie and Max Voltage jump on stage, having swapped costumes so that Pollyanne is in the bra and Max is in the jacket, and they break into the same dance. Although there is nothing prodigious in the choreography or scandalous in the concept, the piece is revolutionary for the audience, which is given an inspiring and wholesome understanding of "We Are Family" by a sibling drag duo playing each other as they dance along to a 15-year-old home video shot by their mother.

The drag-tinged theatrical exploits of the pair "grew more sophisticated," Sue remembers, "until they stopped with junior high, when the two drifted apart." Devan came out to supportive although admittedly surprised parents the summer before eighth grade. Their experience with Devan prepared them to recognize queer signifiers so that when Claire told them she had a girlfriend during her senior year, Bob turned to Sue and simply said, "Well, honey, it looks like we're two for two."

While studying gender theory at Santa

Clara University, Claire states, "I became more intellectual about my identity and found the language and fluidity to deconstruct and play with gender." But the drag started through activism.

"I organized the first drag show to address queer invisibility," she recalls. "It was huge; I got addicted."

Although the Jesuit administration was not as pleased, Claire and Devan agree that her success was a reconfirmation of their childhood gender-play. She went on to win San Francisco's Drag King 8 title.

Dressing and moving like he belongs in a boy band, Max Voltage unzips his fly and, puzzled by the empty space between the zippered teeth, starts into the soliloquy of one-hit-wonder King Missile's "Detachable Penis." As he searches under the table, a heavier-set, ambiguously gendered performer wearing black spandex, a flesh-colored skull cap and two melon-sized testicles at waist level tiptoes on stage, hands curled at chest level like a chipmunk. The two play a slapstick game of cat-and-mouse until Max locates his penis, grinds it into his hips and proceeds to literally interpret the song's climax while the penis sprays Silly String on the audience.

Since Übergay's first Portland show, Überheroes, at Klub Z, the



Claire and Devan McGrath-Riecke will welcome 2005 as Hansel and Gretel

troupe has stripped gender like a Silverado dancer to create politically provocative and challenging pieces. "Through the use of drag, we want to deconstruct the gender binary and the politics of sex," they state, and few of their pieces escape some commentary on the gender and sexual inequalities slithering through our society.

Often they go one step further and explicitly address the conservative policies of President Bush and supporters of so-called "family values." One of their most complicated performances, set to Billy Idol's "White Wedding," involved a drag king Dubya's attempt to break up a gay couple and enough subsequent gender changes to bring the whole house of gender to a crumbling ruin.


"But drag and politics is only a starting point," Claire qualifies. "We consider ourselves a theater troupe that does drag."

"Entertainment is our first goal," Devan continues her thought (which they are prone to do). And each show is better for the infusion of intelligence, wit, theatricality and raw sex appeal that makes not only for good drag,

but good performance.

Sue says the straight friends she brings to shows agree that Übergay Cabaret has hit a pleasure nerve anyone can access, whether stranger, family or family. The parents have seen every performance since their children built the Überheroes set in the garage.

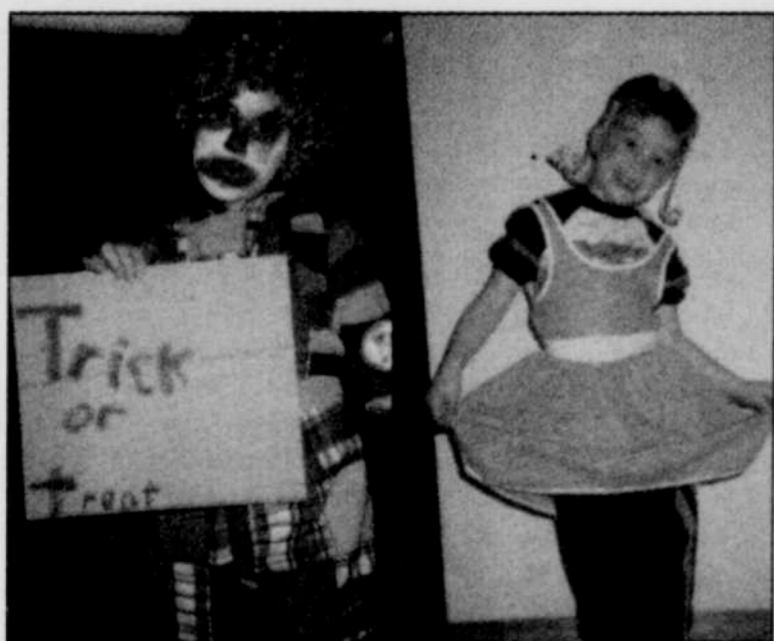
Sue even attended a show in drag as a character named Red Hots. She hopes one day her kids will script her alter ego into a number.

ÜBERGAY CABARET presents Jack's Off the Beanstalk: A Mish-Mash Fairy Bash Dec. 31 at Nocturnal, 1800 E. Burnside St. The evening starts with a dance party from 8 p.m. to midnight featuring DJ Yeah Yeah, radical drag troupe Sissyboy and young drag performers Jinx Monsoon DuBois and Kinetic. The pop-drag-opera begins at 12:15 a.m., when Hansel and Gretel (Claire and Devan) throw queer twists on childhood favorites, including an S/M Snow White and a multimedia Three Little Pigs. Tickets are \$8 in advance from Jackpot Records and \$10 at the door. 

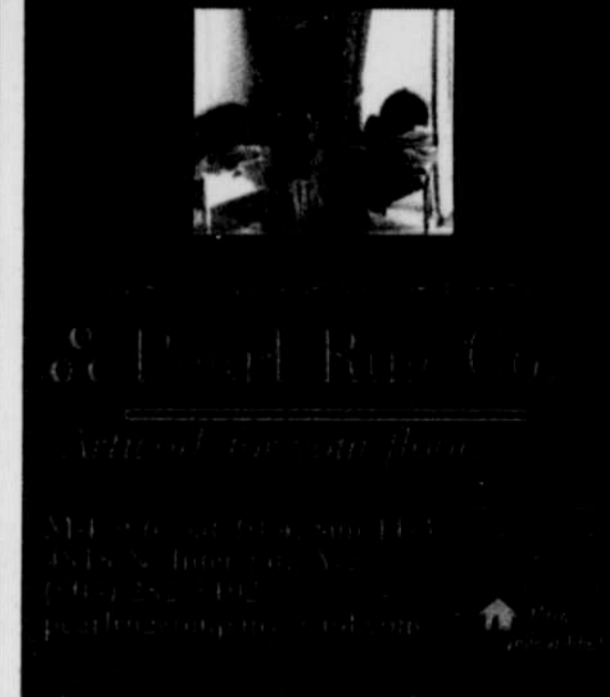
AARON SCOTT is a free-lance journalist. He is trying to convince his sister—a student at Santa Clara University—to carry on the legacy of Max Voltage. She's not buying. Please contact him at aaronxscott@yahoo.com.



Claire gives Devan his first taste of drag



Even as children, Claire (left) and Devan were deconstructing the gender binary




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