

mystery openly and more truthfully."

But it is Sissyboy's thematically complex drag performances that set it closer to achieving its goals than other postmodern drag shows like San Francisco's Tranny Shack. As a troupe, it has created a regular cast of characters and ongoing plot lines that allow its performances to become episodic, like a monthly after-school cartoon series gone terribly wrong. Its shows have evolved into scripted, ensemble-based narratives that are absurd, provocative, self-referential and witty explorations of the contemporary relationship among gender, sexuality, politics, religion and its own sissy-based demons.

The Genealogy of Sissyboy

If Sissyboy were a real child, it would have had a noisy, back-alley birth from the creative loins of Mark Thomas, 26, aka Zebra, and no one would know if the father was Turner or Sol, 26 (who claims his hippie mama didn't give a last name).

Upon moving to Portland from San Francisco in February 2004, Thomas realized: "There was no positive, alternative boy community at all. Lesbians were doing amazing things, but it was either dyke-centered or a mixed alternative crowd."

He immediately began searching for a venue and performers to create a theatrical theme night with the intention of galvanizing an alternative, boy-oriented, queer community.

Drag, however, was not his intention. "I was terrified of drag," he says. "I wanted it to be bizarre creatures and sexy boys."

On the day Thomas secured International Club Mummy as a free venue, he went to a John Waters-themed strip night at Portland's then nascent raunchy, pirate-core party, Booty. On the tiny, crowded stage, two performers, Sol dressed as Waters and Turner as Divine, reinterpreted the shock that went

round the world—Divine's ingestion of shit. Their choice of music? Loretta Lynn's "Have Mercy on Me."

"The minute I saw Lee as a skinny, muscular Divine and Sol started squeezing [chocolate] shit all over Lee, I knew that was it," recalls Thomas.

And so Sissyboy was born. "It was insane synergy," describes Thomas. "It shouldn't have been so easy."

Its first show at I.C. Mummy, *Sissyboy Brings You a Night of Addiction*, drew some 90 people. The second show, *Sissyboy Goes to Wonderland*, drew 150. This success defied both technical difficulties and the absolute messiness of unrehearsed shows. On the contrary, the performances' duct-taped, punk-rock edges were the very high they dealt.

Each subsequent show upped the ante.



Splendor Gabor comes to life.

Sissyboy Goes to the ER introduced the seeds of a narrative structure by concluding the show with the opening act: a battle between Laura Bush and Wonder Woman. *The Zombie Pin-Up Girl Pageant* featured zombie versions of Mama Cass competing with Marilyn Monroe and other Sissyboy characters, judged by zombie renditions of Andy Warhol, Jackie O and Hitler. This Halloween show incorporated hilariously photoshopped multimedia that quickly became integral to each show. But despite their originality, these early shows retained the traditional drag format of individual numbers linked by a common theme.

Sissyboy Builds a Syntax

As the Sissyboys developed regular characters, ensemble performances became necessary to keep the shows fresh. "We realized that if we just kept doing drag numbers, we were going to get old and tired fast," recalls Thomas, "so we tried to create something more."

Its next performance, *Sissyboy Grows Old and Tired: The Geriatric Show*, was the first show to have a complete, scripted narrative. In a



Fannie Mae Darling, dressed to kill.

world dragged down by bad drag, it was the first stroke of Sissy brilliance.

The Geriatric Show revolved around a futuristic retrospective in which the Sissyboys convened around a turkey dinner, 12 years from now, reminiscing on how each had coped in a world that continued to be ruled by the Bush dynasty. The Bush twins were elected president after Dubya's defeat of "the Muslim religion" and expansion of the United States. Jenna Bush, completely crushed by Ricky Martin coming out of the closet, outlawed homosexuality, spawning a witch hunt that dwarfed McCarthyism. During this oppressive reign, Splendor entertained U.S. troops in Iraq before being rescued and married to Osama bin Laden, who died mysteriously, leaving a large fortune that she blew on drugs and Botox (hysterically accomplished DIY style by not-so-artfully concealed packing tape). Fannie Mae, clucking and sprouting random chicken parts as a result of genetically modified foods, became the spokeswoman for ChickKorn, an über-delicious and almost nutritious chicken/corn

hybrid. Bulimianne Rhapsody swam across the Rio Grande and became a Mexican soap opera star. Finally, Polygrip repented his sinful ways and became a Bible salesman, only to be re-corrupted by the Sissyboys during a performance of Madonna's "Like a Prayer."

Bizarre? Undoubtedly. Brilliant? Absolutely.

By portraying their characters' old, drag queen selves, the Sissyboys demonstrated that they are anything but old-school, female-impersonating queens. Instead, they are imagi-

native and ambitious in their creation of a post-modern style of drag that takes none of the normal drag tenets for granted.

"While the look and attitude of the performers has been seen in Portland's past—Betty Bomber and Zowie Bowie, the Bad Miss M," recalls Poison Waters, a 17-year veteran of the scene,

"this more aggressive style is new and interesting as a whole to our community."

In *Sissyboy Goes Swashbuckling: The Pirate Show*, the troupe explored the relationship between its messier, gender-blender drag and the traditional, female-impersonating drag that went before it. But its performance, like all good forms of art, touched on a larger social issue: the transmission, reception and reimagining of culture that each new generation undertakes. The show asked the question: Can anything really be new? And does new necessarily equate better?

A number of Sissyboy pirates, wheeled through the crowd on a shopping-cart-made-pirate-ship, attacked a group of mechanical, pop diva impersonators with batteries in their backs called "Duracelles." The Sissyboys defeated the Duracelles and banished all tired drag queens into retirement before embarking into the Disco Diva Sea to find Duracelle's treasure. To overcome the booty's fearsome guardian, the

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