

**T:BA:07**

# Stark Raving Fabulous

Drag freak seems like he's from another planet

**T**aylor Mac is a true New York original: an artist of great vision whose canvas is the stage, the streets he walks and his own body. All you have to do is search for images of him on the Internet to get a sense of his flamboyantly alien face paint, gratuitous sequins, DIY glam-punk costumes and general something-out-of-a-Matthew-Barney-film appearance. Yet beneath the fierce façade is a human being with a keen interest and emotional investment in our political and social realities and a desire to help us deal and heal through his art. According to *The New York Press*, he is "one of the best performers (and freaks) the city has to offer."

On his own Web site, Mac describes his personal and creative philosophy as "a belief that people are an amalgamation of definitions and ideas. We are not just men and women, not just black and white, old and young, or rich and poor, but a combination of them all." He goes on to say that he refers to his pieces as "plays" even though they are most often described by commentators as theater art in the mode of pastiche.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a *pastiche* is "a dramatic, literary or musical piece openly imitating the previous works of other artists, often with satirical intent." It also has the sense of something cobbled together from a medley of different materials.

**Tony LeTigre:** I saw Kate Bornstein give the keynote address at a symposium a couple of years ago, and I remember her saying, "I stop traffic now, in New York City." I suspect you're also someone who could stop traffic in NYC. Am I right?

**Taylor Mac:** [Laughs] New Yorkers are funny that way. One time you pass them and their mouths are on the floor, on the sidewalk, they're flabbergasted, or they yell things at you. And the next time they pay no attention, or pretend they're ignoring you even though they're watching you out of the corner of their eyes, and the attitude is, "We're New Yorkers, we don't care, nothing fazes

us.' And it can be the exact same time on the same day. There's no rhyme or reason to it.

In one affecting piece, "The Palace of the End," the artist, extravagantly done up in wig, face paint and a skirt made entirely of latex gloves, accompanies himself on ukulele as he sings a bizarre medley linking Lynne Cheney with Saddam Hussein through their respective romance novels. "You can't make this shit up, ladies and gentlemen," he deadpans to his audience near the beginning of the piece.

What strikes the uninformed viewer at first as a wild flight of fantasy is in fact grounded in reality: Believe it or not (and she would certainly like to deny it today), the vice president's wife really did publish a lesbian romance novel in 1981 titled *Sisters*. Similarly, the 2000 romance novel *Zabibah and the King* was apparently written by Hussein (possibly with the help of ghost writers), proving once again that truth is far more hilarious than fiction.

Yet beneath the humor and strangeness of Mac's vignette and the way he delivers it lies something pathetic and more than a little moving. He suggests that buried within our political monsters are genuine humans we may actually be able to relate to, but that the reason they became such monsters is because of their failure to ever find love.

Mac, 33, grew up in Stockton, Calif., the same city that produced songwriter Chris Isaak, the band Pavement and a former university alumnus named Jamie Lee Curtis. Unfortunately the city, historically a center of agriculture, today experiences among the highest rates of crime and unemployment in the country, along with poor systems of public education and transportation.

"It's the No. 1 place in the country where people are defaulted on their mortgage loans," Mac says wryly of his former hometown. "When I was growing up, it was the best place to get murdered." Still, he claims to be grateful for his time there, suggesting that such early experiences of depression

and deprivation helped give him the impetus to become the exotic self-creation he is today.

**TL:** It seems to me that you're not really a drag queen, because you're so beyond gender.

**TM:** When people say that, I always think what they're really saying is, "I don't like drag queens."

**TL:** I love drag queens. But it seems to me that by creating such an exotic and alien appearance, you're going for something beyond just being a man dressing up as a woman.

**TM:** Well, that's true, it's not female impersonation exactly, but there is a lot of femininity to what I do. There are sequins and makeup, and a lot of my mannerisms are really girly. See, the thing is, drag queens used to be truth speakers. They were the fantastical ones, the liberated ones, the ones who could say things that people with a less grandiose appearance couldn't get away with. And they've been co-opted now somewhat, like everything has. But I believe you can still get back to what they were in the beginning.

Mac considers himself a member of the "third sex" and seems the natural heir of New York drag artists such as Jackie Curtis and Ethyl Eichelberger, both of whom wrote and performed their own genre- and gender-defying plays, and both of whom Mac proudly claims as influences. Another influence would be Butoh dance, of which he waxes reverent: "I love the theatricality of it, and the nobility that comes from striving to reach the impossible, which is a state of neutrality." He pauses (barely). "It's an impossible task to get to a



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neutral place, but by trying, you can reach an extreme place much more quickly."

Taylor performed at last year's TBA but says it was more of an "event" than a focused performance, with people milling about in the back, coming and going, while others followed the performance more closely. While reflecting on it positively, he looks forward to headlining at a different venue that should afford a more intimate audience-performer connection. Although the show has the same title, *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*, he says in the course of the year-plus he's been working on and touring for it—in Sweden, London, Australia, Scotland and Ireland, among other places—the material has changed drastically. "For one thing, it was 55 minutes last year and it's 120 minutes now," he says. "My material is constantly evolving and changing as I perform it."

**TL:** If you were from another planet, what would it be called?

**TM:** How funny.

**TL:** I know my answer. I think it would be called Glamour-Fabulon. British spelling of *glamour*.

**TM:** That sounds nice. I would also like to live on The Planet of Blue-Haired Ladies.

**TL:** I think those might be the same planet. ☺

The Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center presents THE BE(A)ST OF TAYLOR MAC 6:30 p.m. Sept. 7 to 10 at 1819 N.W. Everett St. Admission is \$15 for PICA members or \$20 for nonmembers.



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