

Latina Lumination

Drag pioneer Meesha Peru brings dash of diva to Latino Gay

For pioneering Latino drag queen Meesha Peru—aka Carlos Quezada—the long road to regional royalty was paved first with apprehension, later with pageantry crowns, in one of the most inspiring diva careers in Oregon's history. The road here was long, too, beginning in Lima, Peru, where Quezada was born.

Quezada has lived in Portland for three decades now. If it weren't for one fateful night out at Darcelle XV some 25 years ago, Quezada may have never been introduced to the queen within, Ms. Meesha Peru.

Quezada's first run-in with competing in pageantry contests began when some of his friends encouraged him to vie for Mr. Hunky, a contest for—you guessed it—hunky guys. Quezada ran for and received every other title the pageant could bestow, including Mr. Congeniality, Mr. Inspiration and Best Talent—everything *but* Mr. Hunky. Shortly after, a "Turnabout Show" at Darcelle's prompted yet another foray into the competitive spotlight, where once again he was coaxed into entering... this time in drag.

"I said, 'No way, I would never wear women's clothes,'" explained Quezada of that night. "I said, 'First of all, I have nothing,' and they

said, 'Don't worry, we have somebody down in the basement at Darcelle's to help you with the stuff. Anyway, they convinced me, and I did it. I guess I was the best looking one!'"

What transpired was an avalanche of performance, hosting and emceeing opportunities for Quezada, whose onstage persona was christened Meesha Peru. He was soon offered a guest spot every Monday and Tuesday at Darcelle's Catch a Rising Star, hosted by Sister Paula Nielsen.

"I was doing one number [at Catch a Rising Star] for a long time, and helping do the women's makeup," said Quezada of the early years. "After that, they fired one of the showgirls, and they said, 'You're next.' I said, 'Whaaaat?' So then I started to do more production numbers and got to be part of the cast."

Quezada's star rose even higher when Rose Empress XXXII Poison Waters—a longtime collaborator of Quezada's—asked him to be the Rose Princess that year, traveling all over the United States and parts of Canada representing Portland.

Despite the initial hesitation, Quezada's theatrical flair was bound to surface sooner or later, his family having been steeped in

the entertainment business in Peru.

"In the past, I always liked to perform," explained Quezada. "I was part of a company in Lima, where I studied theater. My grandfather was on TV, and I had an uncle who had a radio station, so I was kind of into showbiz because of my family. I think that's why I like to be on the stage."

Quezada's status as a groundbreaking Latino face in the world of drag was marked by being crowned the first Miss Gay Latina in 1998 for all of Oregon. After several runner-up finishes, Peru received top honors for La Femme Magnifique in 1999-2000.

Quezada attributes his success and notoriety to graduating from the school of Darcelle and Roxy (Darcelle's partner).

"I always mention to everybody who wants to become a performer to take a look at Darcelle's, and watch Darcelle perform, and be part of Darcelle's," said Quezada. "For me, Darcelle, Roxy and company was my school. They were the best teachers I could have."

Quezada continues to emcee for the Miss




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Gay Latina pageant, the Miss Gay Latina international contest and emceed Latino Gay Pride for the last three years, but is currently on a break from regular performances after six years of hosting Silverado's Latino night. Fret not, though: Peru will appear as part of La Lucha 2010 in the *Reina de la*

Lucha competition.

Quezada's involvement in Portland Latino Gay Pride is rooted in the organization's pledge to assist young, queer Latinos to come out and embrace who they are.

"I believe that Latino Gay Pride has helped a lot for Latinos to be themselves," said Quezada. "To come out, and say, 'I'm queer, I'm gay, I'm here, and I'm going shopping.'" 

Meesha Peru will be honored this year with a Mariposa Award for community involvement and gay Latino awareness. She performs Sunday, June 6 at the Portland Latino Gay Pride Festival at the Jupiter Hotel. There is a \$5 suggested donation, and the event is 21 and over.



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