

Lady in Red (Dress)



lady about town

BY DANIEL BORGEN

The party of the year isn't Pride. It isn't a gala, auction or black tie affair. It isn't a super-hyped birthday bash or 200 people packed into a house for a Halloween party. It isn't even, I'm sad to admit, a drag show. Each year, without fail, Portland's can't-miss event is Red Dress. Undeniable, palpable anticipation spreads—gays grill gays at the gym, on the street: *Did you find your dress? Did you buy your ticket?*

Red Dress Fever builds quickly, loudly, resulting in epic crescendos, the likes of which strike fear in the hearts of queer-loathing conservatives everywhere. Pent up and trapped during long, cold winters, we're consumed by a yearning for sun and skin. We invade department stores, boutiques, lingerie sections at giant retailers. Summer's perfect prelude, the party unfolds accordingly: long, satisfying, sustained release.

I haven't always been so pro-brightly-colored-drag-for-charity. I used to turn my nose at it, apathetic when friends were interested, refusing to compromise my unflappable masculinity. I'm not sure whom I thought I was kidding. I used to believe donning anything but pants—especially a dress—was an attack on being a man and, somehow, me liking men. I don't know what generational hindrance bogs down so many of my peers with misplaced dress-guilt. Regardless, it's refreshing to see it dissipate as younger gays freely embrace gender-bending with wanton enthusiasm. They realize what we were slow to: So-called societal norms remain useless constructs.

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My first red dress experience was an exercise in last minute scrambling. I called my best girlfriend, Ingrid, at the 11th hour—I secured a ticket to the party day-of and lacked appropriate garb. Before a long day of fasting, and exercising like a madman, I rushed over to her house, tearing through her and her then-roommate's sad, leftover dresses. My first outing, I wasn't ready to venture to malls for the shopping public to witness my misadventures in female impersonation. Ingrid and I rifled through closets, dressers, helping ourselves to her roommate's wardrobe.

In the attic, packed in a box tucked in the corner, we found a goldmine: her roommate's (very) old figure-skating number from long past glory days, a polyester, mesh and vinyl number adorned with thin gold piping and a

sequined bra outline, completed down below with fancy lace fringe. Amazingly, it fit—and I'd hide problem areas with socks-as-breasts and strategic accessories. After securing a sparkling pocketbook—which I stored in my faux tit—I was set.

The next year, I succumbed to Red Dress Fever. For weeks I walked aisles, conducting fit sessions with friends who caught unflattering moments with camera phones. Private moments prancing around American Apparel in ill-fitting numbers were circulated *en masse*. I settled on a skintight racerback and discovered the joy of Spanx. Not the male version—I unearthed the perfect, shaping pair in a lingerie department. Imagine that fitting, figuring out what to tuck where and how to maneuver through the thick black fabric during imagined bathroom emergencies. I spied bridge and tunnel folk—suburban shoppers—gawking, enjoying the show. The big city is always here, helping them see what they might not otherwise witness, expanding horizons.

As Red Dress grows, tradition follows. We plan pre-parties, after-parties, during-parties. Friends mistakenly invite newbies over to

their apartments, only to find their fine linens forever ruined by layers of bronzer and glitter, applied too eagerly by shaky hands. We compare gaudy hairpieces, cheap jewels and the most brazen of handbags. We ready in groups, refining accoutrements and, soon, an apex: the exhilarating moment when the ensemble comes together. Or, perhaps it doesn't, but no matter; soon it's a sea of hairy chests, wigs askew and smeared lipstick. (And many flawless women.) Some look perfect, of course, but it doesn't much matter in diversity's vast expanse. We're all in dresses; it's a level playing field.

Besides, Red Dress isn't drag—it's camaraderie.

Most who attend are forever converts. Despite broken shoe straps, torn, booze-soaked stockings, tangles of synthetic wig hair, the vast majority will return—and begin dress shopping long before April. And despite less open-minded relatives seeing pictures on Facebook (for those, like me, who can't master filters), revelers will do it all again. By the time you read this, The Party of the Year might be sold out. If it isn't, buy tickets at once. Make your friends.

Take it from a former naysayer. Should you foolishly pass, don't hate on fellow gays in bright dresses. ☐

The party isn't possible without the tireless work of volunteers who make it all happen. To them we owe gratitude. And to anyone complaining, why not volunteer next year? Email daniel@justout.com.



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