

# It's about gender. It's about healing. It's about a drag queen.

Filmmaker Alex Berry's documentary tells the story of Portland's Jerick Hoffer — aka Jinkx Monsoon

BY SUE ZALOKAR  
STAFF WRITER

Seattle-based filmmaker Alex Berry is the director of the documentary "Drag Becomes Him." The film chronicles daily life for drag queen Jinkx Monsoon, stage name for Jerick Hoffer. Hoffer hails from Portland and, as Monsoon, gained fame for winning the

Season Five title on "RuPaul's Drag Race."

The film, which made its debut in Seattle in April, is traveling a circuit of film festivals around the world. Berry says it is a collage of moments, and from the gentle note in his voice, it's clear that the

project is incredibly meaningful to him. It should be. He is making a film about a drag queen. Something that has been on the fringe is becoming more and more mainstream.

Berry says his desire for the film was to show moments in a person's life, and this person happens to be a drag queen.

**Sue Zalokar:** What brought you to filmmaking?

**Alex Berry:** I found my dad's video camera when I was 10 or 11. I just fell in love with the craft of making film. My first films were with my little sister.

One of my favorite parts of working with Jinkx kind of reminded me of when I would film my little sister as a kid because she would always play these wild, crazy characters. She was younger than me — I was 11 so she was like 7 — and we would make little short films. We always just kind of made them up as we went along. We didn't script anything, we didn't plan anything, and that's how Jinkx and I made this documentary.

**S.Z.:** What attracted you to the story of Jinkx Monsoon and compelled you to create

the documentary "Drag Becomes Him"?

**A.B.:** I'm interested in people who explore gender and who are comfortable with their androgyny.

The first time I met Jerick ... he kind of lit up. I was instantly intrigued by him. I had never even met Jinkx — I met Jerick first. I wanted to work with him in some way.

There is this little production company in Seattle, "Quiet Productions," and they really liked my work, and they asked me if I would be interested in doing a film for their film festival.

They wanted the film to be about gender. Jerick was the first person I thought of. I just went over to his place with a camera and asked him questions that I had based on my own personal interest in him.

**S.Z.:** The film is on a festival circuit right now. It left Seattle and has screened in Greece and South Africa and is gaining momentum. How is that going?

**A.B.:** I haven't heard too much from people about it. That's been the hard part for me. The film started out as little episodes on YouTube. Through that medium, I was able to immediately see the people's reaction. Since it was anonymous, there were lots of people being honest about it. I really love that kind of feedback. I love to see how people respond (to my films), whether they see it as negative or positive. But showing it in theaters, I really don't get to hear too much. From what I understand, people seem to really be liking it.

**S.Z.:** YouTube has become a platform for filmmakers in many ways.

**A.B.:** When I was making the shorts, I was just making them for fun. I never imagined it being a feature film. That wasn't the plan. I was more capturing moments in my friend's life. I took it as an opportunity to have fun, to practice and experiment. It really helped me to find an audience.

There are so many people who are drawn to Jinkx but also noticed the (cinematography) of the film, and they appreciate that, too, so I kind of found an audience through the experience.

**S.Z.:** Clever title.



When Portland's Jerick Hoffer, above, takes the stage, he's Jinkx Monsoon, top, the drag queen featured in the documentary "Drag Becomes Her."

Everyone has masculine and feminine sides, and then through our experiences and our conditioning, we kind of decide what is appropriate for which gender. In order to fit in and survive, we kind of just end up molding ourselves a certain way.

**A.B.:** I was working on the very first episode. In it, Jinkx talks a lot about the film "Death Becomes Her" and how it really influenced his drag persona. It really inspired him, and I really loved that movie as a kid too.

I was editing and I was thinking of a title, and it came to me: Drag ... Becomes ... Him. I just changed the pronoun. It just popped in my head, and I knew instantly it was the title. I didn't have to think about it anymore.

**S.Z.:** I have to say I felt especially cautious as I was crafting questions about personal pronouns and wanted to be accurate and respectful of a person's gender. I wonder about that duality; for instance, there is Jerick and there is Jinkx. What do you think about that duality, more generally: like drag queens and their alter egos?

**A.B.:** Everyone has a gray area ultimately. It's not so black and white. There are some people who are just drawn more toward one or the other — people who can contain both.

identities in our pop culture media?

**A.B.:** It's so much more interesting that way. There are so many types of people and so many flavors of humanity.

To only focus on three or four (flavors) because it's the majority, we're missing out on this whole other element of this unique experience that can offer us insight into what we're doing here and how to do things better.

By cutting out certain perspectives or certain people's experiences, I think we're missing out.

Film is so, so powerful. It's one of the most powerful tools on the planet. So many people can define themselves in accordance to it. It can be used for healing, like art therapy.

When I was interviewing Jerick's parents, his dad was talking about his relationship to Jerick and how he experienced him coming out and becoming a drag queen.

I'm not a drag queen, but I really related to how Jerick's relationship is with his dad. I almost felt, at times, I was being healed through his conversation. I

hear that a lot of people are really moved by that scene.

Even Jerick said, when he watched that scene of his dad — because he wasn't there when I was interviewing (his parents) — it was a surprise to him. Jerick said his dad had never told him those things before.

**S.Z.:** Wow. That is powerful.

**A.B.:** Film offers the opportunity for healing.

**S.Z.:** We need it. We need to offer diverse role models to all of our youth. Native kids need to see native adults living happy lives, and so do transgender kids. They need to see positive role models, too. They need to see that sometimes there is a happy ending.

**A.B.:** Yeah. And that we exist and that we're out there. We're just regular people, too. Every story doesn't have to be this romanticized version of (a gay, transgender or drag lifestyle).

I wanted to show the whole aspect of us. Just a regular human being — the

good and the bad.

**S.Z.:** What are your thoughts about Caitlyn Jenner? (Just weeks after the release of "Drag Becomes Him," Jenner made her debut appearance as a woman on the cover of Vanity Fair.)

**A.B.:** Um ... (Hesitates) Oh, God. I'm still thinking about it. I just know that there have been so many transgender people before who have really fought battles to come through the other side. And they did, and I've heard this story so many times. I'm not sure why this one person is so the face of that movement, or community. I'm more interested in the underdog, who is a little bit closer to Earth, someone I can relate to more. Someone who is a little bit more part of the real world. I also don't know that much about Bruce Jenner; I don't know much of his story. He's been a celebrity his whole life.

**S.Z.:** To me, the importance of Caitlyn Jenner is that a person like my dad might be someone who admired Bruce Jenner. And now, in a weird way, someone who my dad can relate to as that athlete is making him wrap his brain around alternate gender identities. There's something to reaching the masses ...

**S.Z.:** To me, the importance of Caitlyn Jenner is that a person like my dad might be someone who admired Bruce Jenner. And now, in a weird way, someone who my dad can relate to as that athlete is making him wrap his brain around alternate gender identities. There's something to reaching the masses ...

**A.B.:** I see what you're saying. It does introduce this topic to people who normally wouldn't ever be introduced to that culture.

**S.Z.:** According to a report by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the (National LGBTQ) Task Force, transgender people are four times more likely to live in poverty; they experience unemployment, harassment and prejudice at higher rates ...

**A.B.:** Nothing is really that simple. After you transition, you feel better in certain ways, and in other ways, problems you hadn't anticipated come up. It's probably a little bit of both.

I was just researching transgender people who have changed gender, had surgery and are having regrets and wishing they ... they changed their mind, you know? That topic hasn't been covered that much, but it is very interesting.

**S.Z.:** As an artist, when inspiration is waning, when you feel creatively sapped, what do you do? How do you stay fresh?

**A.B.:** I tend to stay on the lookout at all times.

Sometimes I find, if I get really healthy and I exercise a lot, ideas will start popping in. But then sometimes I'm really angry and in a state of dread and I'll start getting ideas. It's just about being open for when they show up.

Interaction and genuine human connection and people — especially the weird ones, the ones who rock the boat — (they also inspire me).

And music! If I hear good music, it will give me ideas.

**S.Z.:** What's some of the music that you like to listen to?

**A.B.:** I get a lot of ideas from kind of ambient music like Aphex Twin and darker strains like Kronos Quartet.

Also, Acid Mothers Temple, which is this Japanese psychedelic band. I used one of their songs in the movie. It was really awesome that they let me use their song!

**S.Z.:** Why do you think there are so few women in filmmaking?

**A.B.:** Everything is male-dominated, it seems. I guess (filmmaking) is a harsh business ...

It doesn't make any sense because you have such a great perspective and lens to tell stories through. I love a lot of women filmmakers' (work), like Miranda July, Sofia Coppola and — that's only two I can think of.

Why do you think (there so few women in filmmaking)?

**S.Z.:** Gosh. You caught me off guard. I wonder if women are seen more as "chirps" or "baubles," meant to draw attention to their bodies and their beauty. It seems difficult for some folks to see women as something more than beautiful.

Or maybe it's because — it's proven that people take direction better from men than they do from women. This is so bizarre to me.

**A.B.:** It's probably because the film industry comes from a thoroughly male-dominated history. I heard that in the early days of film, women were always the editors. I don't know if that's true. People thought if there was an overall "more nurturing" point of view to the story ...

**S.Z.:** How do you know when your story's finished, when to walk away?

**A.B.:** I like to take a long time with it. It's just a feeling. When I can't see anything else I want to change, everything else is totally in place and nothing is sticking out. It's a feeling; I'm ready to let it go.

With this film, I could have gone a bit longer, but it was hard because Jinkx got so busy traveling everywhere. I didn't get to work with her as much as I had wanted to towards the end.

Throughout the whole process, he (Hoffer) never told me what to shoot or how to shoot or what to cut out or what to add. He just let me work. He showed up and was who he is.

It was really casual and spontaneous. Nothing was planned or scripted. It was just me and my camera.

Because it was never planned to be this feature-length film, I didn't have this concrete narrative in mind, so I was grabbing random moments. In the end, I connected the original short films to make the feature into a whirlwind, a collage of moments that are happening in a person's life.