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Justin Buckles

From left, performers Devlin Lynn Phoenixx, Lexxus Lynn Phoenixx, Clare Apparently and Ginger Vitus following the first drag queen brunch in Astoria in 2020.

Life without drag

Performers navigate more uncertainty during coronavirus surge

By ZOË BUCHLI
For The Astorian

This Saturday morning will be a little quieter at the Merry Time Bar and Grill in Astoria.

What was supposed to be a lively return to the stage for Diva Drag Brunch performers turned into yet another cancellation. The venue informed the show's producer last week that the event would no longer be possible following a surge of coronavirus cases in Clatsop County.

It's a change of plans familiar to virtually everyone who works in front a live audience, and drag performers are no exception.

Justin Buckles, the owner of a Portland-based production group that produces Diva Drag Brunch, said performers miss being on stage in front of live audiences. Not only do they crave the excitement of interacting with the crowd, but the gigs used to serve as a main income source for some performers. As they wait for a safe time to return to performing, they have to find new creative outlets.

A new normal

Astoria native Joshua Conklin is well-known for his performances under the stage name "Ginger Vitus." Ginger was supposed to make a comeback as part of Astoria's Diva Drag Brunch. Before the pandemic, Conklin had been performing in the area for seven years.

Conklin said his performances are less about the money and more about the experience and environment. Leading up to the pandemic, Conklin was frequently doing fast-paced, high-energy shows.

"I do it for the community aspect," Conklin said. With the pandemic creating limited capacities and distancing enforcements at shows, it's hard to get into performing and be fully immersed in a show, Conklin explained.

Conklin said the energy from crowds is his favorite part about drag performances.

"It means so much when people can really show how much they're enjoying and appreciating it," Conklin said, adding that pandemic settings limit that key aspect.

He's dabbled with the idea of virtual shows, but hasn't really found the motivation to plan one. In the meantime, he's pursued his other passions and ran unsuccessfully for Astoria City Council last fall.

As far as drag, he's looking to the future and putting energy into planning in-person shows down the road, potentially with the first being in October.

A welcoming community

Right before the pandemic, Diva Drag Brunch was selling out shows in Portland. Buckles said the team

wanted to try to expand the show into other regions, so they expanded to Olympia, Washington, Astoria and Bend.

Buckles was a bit hesitant to present the first Astoria Diva Drag Brunch in January of 2020, not knowing what the reaction would be. The response was better than he could have dreamed. He said they were overwhelmed by how well-received it was by the Astoria community.

"It was killer. We had over 100 people there," Buckles added. When Buckles takes the show to new cities, he says he always tries to use one of their local performers, so he reached out to Conklin when planning the drag brunch.

"I think it's really good to do that and extend that olive branch," he said.

Both Conklin and Buckles raved about the Astoria

community's love and support of drag performances.

Although he enjoys all aspects of putting shows together and watching the performances, Buckles said his favorite part is at the end when he sees how enthusiastic the audience is about the show.

"Everyone wants pictures, everyone is so grateful, it's so fun," he said.

Buckles has been producing shows out of Portland through his production company for about eight years and across 22 states and parts of Canada. Some of the performers his shows include have been featured on NBC's "America's Got Talent."

While performances in Astoria remain on hiatus, Buckles anticipates hosting many more Diva Drag Brunches when the pandemic is under wraps.

Zoë Buchli is a contributor to Coast Weekend and The Astorian.



Joshua Conklin has performed as Ginger Vitus on stage in Astoria since 2013.