

The Drag Queen Effect

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Many people are familiar with drag queen RuPaul Andre Charles aka “RuPaul.” His reality competition television show RuPaul’s Drag Race has brought drag queens into mainstream conversation while challenging gender norms and roles.

Drag queens are entertaining in so many ways. Elaborate fashions, death drops, amazing splits and that hair. I have always enjoyed watching drag queen shows. They use humour, wit and artistry to entertain and bewilder their audiences.

Drag queens transform feminine gender roles for entertainment. They spend an inordinate amount of money on wigs, clothing, and makeup to create those amazing looks. Then there are the physical demands they place on their bodies as those transformations take a lot of time and duct tape.

But contrary to what many people think, drag queens are not men dressing up to be women. As RuPaul said: “I do not impersonate females! How many women do you know who wear seven-inch heels, four-foot wigs and skintight dresses. I dress like a drag queen!”

With the popularity of his show, RuPaul and many of his queens have become household names. Names such as Bianca Del Rio, Bob the Drag Queen, Trixie Mattel and Alyssa Edwards are talked about at the dinner table. One of Canada’s very own drag queens, Brooke Lynn Hytes, finally got to participate in season 11 of the show.

These talented queens now deliver top performances on stages around the world. They have their own TV shows, Netflix series and YouTube videos. Many of them even come to Calgary to perform. These queens are enjoying star treatment and making a good living performing drag. All of this is because of the popularity of RuPaul’s drag race bringing drag into popular culture.

As wonderful and promising as this is, I believe, that many queens still live in fear and are not able to live their lives as they would like. Drag queen history is littered with discrimination and homophobia because some don’t see them as being “normal.”

Many drag queens are typically gay cisgender (a person whose identity corresponds with their gender and birth sex) men. However, drag queens cross a much wider spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity as mainstream culture’s understanding of sexual and gender expression has changed.

It was during the Stonewall uprising in New York in 1969 that some queens finally got recognition. They had always existed on the margins of society, but drag queens were one of the first groups to stand up against the ongoing police brutality against the LGBTQ+ community.

Discrimination and violence were rampant during this period, many drag queens were beaten and some were killed. Many queens also had difficulties being accepted within the gay community. When

you look at pictures of the riots the queens are standing up at the front of the pack. Drag queens like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera are just two of the unsung heroines of Stonewall. These historic queens took the very first steps fighting for gay rights and the rights of drag queens, paving the way for the acceptance of queens in society today.

The thriving local drag scene in Calgary has evolved based on all of this history. The Calgary drag queens have expanded their repertoire. They do drag shows, but also drag queen brunches, and drag queen story telling times at our local libraries. Wow! Times have changed.

Even one of our local drag kings, yes there are drag kings, Duke Carson, is enjoying national success (check out CBC arts) and was the first drag king to be named “Alberta’s Next Drag Superstar” in the 2018 competition.

There are many ways to enjoy drag. You can go out and enjoy some local entertainment, like the Fake Mustache Drag Troupe, western Canada’s longest-running drag troupe or one of the many other local drag shows. Or grab a cocktail and get comfy in your favourite chair, because RuPaul’s Drag Race has been picked up again for season 12.

Rainbow Elders Calgary is a passionate group of volunteers who work to promote awareness of the issues and concerns of LGBTQ+ seniors. Visit us at www.rainbowelderscalgary.ca or email: rainbowelderscalgary@gmail.com.