

Drag Shows: Men in Dresses, Women in Pants, Then and Now

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The line between dressing in “drag” and drag shows and the term crossdressing while clearer today is somewhat blurred prior to the 20th century. Strictly speaking dressing in drag is now generally considered a form of performance art where the entertainer is usually a male-assigned person who performs as an exaggeratedly feminine character. While sometimes the person is imitating a real person such as Cher, Carol Channing, Marilyn Monroe or Beyoncé; most are taking the part of a character they themselves created. This person, when in costume, would be referred to as a drag queen.

Conversely, and while not as popular in public entertainment settings, a drag king is the counterpart of the drag queen - a female-assigned person who adopts a masculine persona in performance. Some will perform as Bruno Mars or David Bowie, but more often as a character of their own imagination.

On the other hand, crossdressing generally refers to a more solitary activity that while it may be done in public, it could also be done in the privacy of one’s home. It may include fully dressing in the opposite assigned gender’s clothing, or wearing only their undergarments. Most commonly this is a male assigned gender dressing as a female assigned gender. It should be noted, however, that not all crossdressers were or are homosexual, or using the more modern descriptor, gay.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word “drag” as it relates to dress has existed since at least 1861 and we can trace the first drag “ball” or competition at least as far back as 1867 when both men and women performed at the Hamilton Lodge in Harlem. These events provided a space for self-expression and creativity, and performers often dressed in elaborate costumes and adopted stage names.

Some historians claim that the origins of the term drag traces its debut to 1860’s Victorian England when Ernest Boulton of the duo Boulton and Park described their crossdressing act as “drag” making it the first known use of the term and when it is believed to have been coined, as the long and heavy skirts of the day, particularly in the exaggerated fashion worn by men in female roles, literally dragged along the stage. Still others believe “drag” stands for “dressed as a girl”.

Whichever the case, crossdressing has been with us nearly as long as humans have worn clothes. For example the first reference in history to women wearing pants was for a purely practical purpose. Unlike the Roman garments of a rectangle of cloth cinched and pinned as a garment, the Scythians living in the steppes of Eurasia appear to potentially have been the inventors of pants some 3,000 years ago as they spent much of their lives on horseback. The Greeks thought pants on the Scythians to be bizarre and mocked them as “sacks for the legs”.

While the Greeks never adopted pants themselves, the Persians did, and by the 5th and 6th centuries, despite their initial resistance, the Romans had as well. But, for women in the West, they remained mostly off limits for quite a while longer.

While there are examples of women in Europe and the US wearing pants long before it was socially acceptable, even in countries such as the US, England, and France; they could actually be jailed for it in the 18th and 19th centuries. Suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw dress reform as part of their battle for rights, and some adopted an alternative outfit in the form of baggy “Turkish” pantaloons worn with a knee-length skirt. In April 1851, Amelia Bloomer, the editor of the first women’s newspaper, *The Lily*, told her readers about it, and thereafter the pants picked up the nickname of bloomers. Around the turn of the 20th century, though, something was happening that would change how American and European women dressed forever. In the 1920’s a young designer named Coco Chanel helped to spur the shift with sporty clothes for women as well as women’s menswear style staples including tailored jackets and trousers. Considered to be scandalous at the time, early adapters such as Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, and Amelia Earhart paved the way for women throughout the United States by wearing them. Yet even today in the United States many girls school

uniforms, especially parochial schools, designate skirts as the only approved form of clothing.

Crossdressing and the early forms of drag occur for religious reasons, for burlesque, disguise, status gain, and even for sexual excitement. In Native American Indian culture, for example, men who took on the roles of women were called berdaches. Berdaches took over special ceremonial rites and did some of the work attributed to women, mixing together much of the behavior, dress, and social roles of women. Among another group of Native Americans the Blackfeet Indians have women known as "manly hearts," who have the character traits associated with men and often adopt the male role and clothing. Some groups such as the Navajo identify three, not two, sexes and designate the nonconformist to the third sex. Several identify more than three genders.

In different Hindu sects male cross-dressing is part of religious worship whose worshipers consider the godhead to be essentially feminine, and men present themselves in women's costumes. One Hindu cult holds that the god Krishna is the only true male while every other creature in the world was female, male followers of the cult dress like women and imitate the behavior, movements, and habits of women.

In Afghanistan there is a tradition of crossdressing of young Afghan girls by their families so that they present to the public as boys then as the girls reach puberty they are expected to revert to their normal gender.

In Islamic Oman, the Xanith are regarded by Oman society as neither male nor female but having the characteristics of both. Though they perform women's tasks, they are classed as women, and are judged for beauty by women's standards; technically they do not cross-dress. Instead, they feminize their male costume in every way possible.

Egypt has a group called the “dancers” who perform at weddings and other ceremonial occasions, and though technically their costume is not quite like that of women, they do all they can to appear as women, including plucking out the hairs on their face.

Much of theatre history traces its roots back to Ancient Greece and drag can certainly do the same. In Greek society, women were considered vastly inferior to men and unfit for the stage, one of the society's then most respected art forms. Female roles were played by men and in addition to female dress they also wore masks to further indicate whom the player was acting out.

Crossdressing has a much more extensive and recorded history than does the entertainment of drag. Roman Emperors Caligula and Nero were

famously crossdressers in public, as well as was the Macedonian King Alexander. While drag and the drag shows as we know them today are a 20th and 21st century phenomenon female impersonation was a part of the kabuki theater in Japan and China as far back as the 17th and 18th centuries.

However, both Christianity and Judaism strongly condemned crossdressing. Judaism took that view for both male and female in stating in Deuteronomy 22:5 when it was written in the 7th century BC that “The woman shall not wear that which pertained unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abominations unto the lord thy God”. It was this verse that became the root and sometimes unspoken justification for many of the cross dressing and anti LGBTQ laws ever since.

Others feel there is another way of looking at that biblical passage as “appropriateness” in men’s and women’s clothing is a concept that changes from culture to culture and from one historical period to the next. What “pertains to a man” in this particular time and place may not be the same as that which “pertains to a man” in another context. This is one of those instances in which the Bible *has* to be read and interpreted against the background of the culture and historical period in which it was written.

Deuteronomy notwithstanding, male crossdressing was permitted during festivals or carnivals during which the usual standards of behavior were laid aside. During these events women often were allowed to act in male roles and men allowed to impersonate women. The crossdressing aspects of such festivals have for example continued down to the present-day Mardi Gras festivals in New Orleans and the Mummer's Parade in Philadelphia on New Year's Day. Current clothing trends make it easy for a female to dress in what was once male assigned clothing of jacket and pants, but the same cannot be said for American men who wish to wear female assigned clothing in public.

It was in eighteenth-century London where cross-dressing organizations likely first appeared. A number of mens-only clubs were established and some of them became quite notorious. One of the more subversive of the male tradition was the Molly club, whose members met in women's clothes to drink and party; Edward Ward, who in 1709 wrote *The Secret History of Clubs*, described their meetings where they dressed as women:

“They adopt all the small vanities natural to the feminine sex to such an extent that they try to speak, walk, chatter, shriek and scold as women do, aping them as well in other aspects As soon as they arrive, they

begin to behave exactly as women do, carrying on light gossip, as is the custom of a merry company of real women.”

Even during Shakespearean times, for example, famous Shakespeare characters like Lady Macbeth and Juliet were portrayed by men or boys as during that time women weren't allowed on stage. In these Elizabethan times, women had limited freedom or social status and could not participate in any professional discipline, including theatre.

Adolescent boys played the female roles, perhaps looking somewhat plausible in women's clothing with their less broad shoulders, softer faces and more diminutive heights. While audiences of the time were able to suspend their disbelief, there would have been no doubt that they realized that the female parts were played by young males

It's however interesting that during medieval times female cross-dressers were not only tolerated but even encouraged through much of Western history since it was assumed they wanted to become more like men and, therefore, were striving to “better” themselves. Even Aristotle, in the 3rd century BC went so far as to claim that the female was little more than an incomplete male.

Cross dressers were summarily punished through the ages but likely none more visibly or harshly than Joan of Arc whose cross dressing was one of the major reasons for her execution. In the legal complaints filed

against Joan, it was alleged that she had not only adopted the costume of men but had had her hair cropped, wore spurs and breastplate, and carried a sword, dagger, and other manly arms. Later, the various charges against her were summarized into twelve articles, two of which dealt with cross dressing, as did two of the six admonitions directed against her.

Joan eventually recanted and agreed to again don female clothing. It was her later resumption of male dress that led to her execution. When her inquisitors asked why she had resumed it, Joan replied that “she had taken it of her own will, under no compulsion as she preferred men’s to woman’s dress”. When requested to explain why this was the case, she answered that it was more convenient for her to wear such clothes since she lived among men. And so it was that on May 30th, 1431 the 19 year old Joan of Arc was burned at the stake in France for dressing like a man.

As many of us will recall, a more recent result of exposed female gay life was just over 25 years ago when in 1997 Ellen DeGeneres came-out a talk show by playfully saying, “Yes, I am Lebanese” a statement about her suspected preferences that were to cost her both some of her viewers and the Ellen Show itself. I rather doubt that would still happen today.

Those who crossdress were once referred to as transvestites. This now antiquated term was coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910 and is from Latin trans-, or “across, over” and vestitus “dressed” to refer to the sexual interest in crossdressing. He used it to describe persons who habitually and voluntarily wore clothes of the opposite sex. This term is now generally considered derogatory and has largely generally fallen out of use.

Crossdressing in the 1600’s had a significant role in the growing gay community. One way they could come together in public was in the masquerade or crossdressing balls that were held in significant numbers in larger cities in the 17th and even on into the 20th century without fear of arrest.

Anti-crossdressing laws gained popularity in the United States during the 19th century. Between 1845 and 1900, 34 U.S. cities in 21 states passed laws used to police crossdressing. These laws were used to target people dressed in ways “not according to their sex” (especially women wearing pants) by claiming those dressed in gender nonconformist ways were dressed in disguise. The first law that explicitly prohibited crossdressing was passed in 1848 in Columbus, Ohio. Laws criminalizing crossdressing then spread like wildfire around the United States. Existing laws against costumed dress, even if they didn’t specifically mention crossdressing -

collectively referred to as “masquerade laws” - were increasingly pressed into service around the country to punish gender variance.

Drag found a new role during the heyday of vaudeville in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The comedic tone of vaudeville provided just enough cover for drag stars to make a living while mugging for laughs in the “wrong” clothes. Hollywood movies would later feature crossdressing characters as comic relief such as Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in 1959’s *Some Like It Hot*, Dustin Hoffman in 1982’s *Tootsie*, and Robin Williams in 1993’s *Mrs. Doubtfire* to name but a few.

As recent as the 1940’s, 1950’s and 1960’s here in the United States police arrested people for crossdressing in some parts of the country if they were not wearing at least three articles of clothing of their assigned gender. This is often called the “three article rule”. And, while no law requiring the three articles ever existed, instead police revived old outdated laws, like those banning costumed dress for the purpose of committing crimes, to target gender non confirming people.

The turning point for drag in the United States was the Stonewall Riots, also called the Stonewall Uprising, which began in the early hours of June 28, 1969 when New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village in New York City. The raid sparked a riot among both bar patrons and neighborhood

residents with the police as they roughly hauled employees and patrons out of the bar. This led to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar and in nearby Christopher Park. The publicity around the Stonewall Riots served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement not only in the United States but around the world. On the one-year anniversary of the riots on June 28, 1970, thousands of people marched in the streets of Manhattan from the Stonewall Inn to Central Park in what then was called “Christopher Street Liberation Day,” thus becoming America’s first Gay Pride parade. Now nationally Pride Month is celebrated with events taking place around the country, including in Fort Wayne, to commemorate the Stonewall Riots and the change in the country’s sensibilities.

The Fort Wayne’s Pride Center, with offices at 527 West Berry organizes and manages the local Pride Festival that takes place in July and is held at Headwaters Park with two days of live entertainment, a vendor market, resource fair, food, a beer tent, Pride March and more. This organization has been active locally since 1998 and last year hosted over 20,000 people during the two day Pride event. To show how far things have progressed locally for the LGBTQ community the festival includes mainline sponsors that include McDonalds, Star Bank, Lincoln Financial Group, Zimmer Biomet, Chase Bank, MedPro, Dana, Sirva, Fort Wayne

Newspapers and more. Additionally, Fort Wayne Pride offers year round workshops, seminars, education and support groups for the local LGBTQ community.

The popularization of RuPaul Charles, or just RuPaul as most know him, has taken Drag and Drag Shows to an entirely new level. His 1992 single “Supermodel (You Better Work), became a hit and has made himself and RuPaul’s Drag Race known near and far. He has since won 14 Emmy’s and thus making himself the recipient of the most of any Black artist. The also Tony winning entertainer is now in his 16th season on television, has written four books and made 18 solo albums. RuPaul is synonymous with drag around the world exposing millions of people to the aspects of its culture. If you’ve been on a deserted island the past 16 years I’d invite you to go to Youtube.com and type in just RuPaul. I stopped counting at over 200 different of his videos on that website.

Fort Wayne has a strong history of drag in its own right for just two years after 1969’s Stonewall Uprising on April 29th, 1971 Charles Miller, AKA Tula, opened the city’s first drag bar. He named it Tulisa’s and located it at the corner of 226 West Main Street at Maiden Lane. While the bar changed hands and locations a couple of times, the larger than life Tula stayed on as the entertainment director for decades and through their annual events helped raise over a million dollars for local AIDS and HIV

awareness, education and prevention. Eventually, the bar by then renamed *Up The Street* - was purchased by Miller's friend Leo Vodde in 1981. Later the bar moved to Masterson Street and was known as Babylon. Vodde then moved it to its current location 1601 South Harrison at the corner with Grand Street where it is called After Dark. In 2021 Mayor Tom Henry recognized the 50th anniversary of Miller's founding of Tulisa's by proclaiming April 29 as Charles Miller Day acknowledging him as the mentor to the city's gay community. Charles "Tula" Miller died last year in January at age 83.

Last Saturday night about 8:00 I went to After Dark and sat at the bar. The crowd, which quickly grew to shoulder-bumping size, appeared to be a mixed group of both male and female gays and straights including a group of young ladies having a bachelorette party and waiting for the drag show to begin. Within five minutes of sitting down "Jill" came up and asked if I minded if she sat next to me. After a few minutes of small talk I explained the project I was working on and both Jill and Nick the bartender were intrigued. Jill and I, and intermittently Nick, spent the next two hours chatting about the drag scene in Fort Wayne, its various personalities and history. In addition to the typical bar, the After Dark Nightclub features RuPaul Watch Parties, Drag Bingo, Karaoke With A Twist, and of course Drag Shows on certain nights. They also have an

annual Tula Drag Show contest followed by an awards ceremony where they award trophies in about 20 categories that for example are for Best Broadway Performance, Hip Hop, Pop, Country, Wardrobe, Dance, Male Performance, etc.

Jill who lives in a small community a half hour from Fort Wayne told me she can't be herself where she lives and works so a few times a month she likes to get dressed up and come to After Dark. As I stood to leave about 10:00 Jill quietly and seriously said "Tell them we're not bad people, we just sometimes like to wear women's clothes". I stuck out my hand to shake hers and said "I will".

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