

Queens in Action: A Cross-Cultural Experience

Lauren Worley

Dr. Awasu

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Introduction

The Drag Queen culture is something that has started to catch the public eye in the United States more and more over the past few years. With television shows such as *Dancing Queen*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *The Queens of Drag: NYC*, it is much easier to have access to the culture and to acquire an understanding of what drag is mostly about. Although these shows give us a glimpse of what drag queens are and what they do, with the dramatic, alter-ego lifestyles, there is always more to understand. Drag queens are acknowledged for their dramatic makeup, crazy hair and outgoing personalities but people often mistakenly connect drag queens to only being transgender men expressing themselves in drag. This is simply not true! Drag branches out to straight, bi, gay and transgender people along with other sexualities. This is a whole culture and way of life that gives anyone the opportunity to express themselves with makeup, hairstyles, costumes, performance and sass! The world of drag is so unique and extraordinary; no wonder it has made such a huge scene in our entertainment industry.

Why Drag?

I chose to immerse myself in a drag queen event because this culture is one that I have wanted to know more about and making it to a drag show something that I have never had the chance to do before. Drag culture is one that has been outside of my comfort zone for a long time. After talking about destroying cultural comfort zones in class, I knew this was a great opportunity to branch out and understand drag culture a little further. Growing up, I never really understood what drag queens were because that was never a topic that my family was open about. I lived in a household with a right-wrong mentality, not knowing that it was okay to be open to accepting people we classified as “wrong.” As I got older, I just assumed that they were transgender men that liked to dress up as women and act out their wannabe alter-ego. I do admit,

I was extremely ignorant. In the past year or so, I started watching *Ru Paul's Drag Race* and *Dancing Queen* and I soon realized that this is a whole culture and a lifestyle that so many people of all different sexualities and walks of life take part in. This is a true art-form and outlet of expression for many people! As I am learning that understanding other cultures is so important for my life and that I truly do love challenging my biases and stereotypes of people, I feel much more prepared to take on new cultural adventures. I knew that this would be a good learning experience for me even if I didn't feel ready. I was excited to learn about the culture while being in it.

Before the Show

Before I went to the drag event called "Drag Queen Bruch: Halloween Costume Edition" I was very excited but very nervous. I did not know what to fully expect. I had a feel for the drag culture but had never experienced it. I knew drag in more of the dramatic reality show setting on television. I was excited for the show and to take in the full experience of the different queens' bursting personalities and crazy outfits. I wondered if it would be like anything I had seen on television with all of the makeup, glam and well rehearsed performances. I was also very excited to see their Halloween costumes! I was pretty cautious because I really had no way of knowing what the audience would be like; what ages and walks of life would be attending. I could imagine myself sticking out like a sore thumb- a little college-aged girl that looks like she has no idea what she is doing. I was also nervous about possible conversation that could show my ignorance and little understanding of drag or any other sexual orientation except for "straight." I was nervous because this was an interactive drag show and I knew that I could very well be awkward. I honestly went in with a lot of nerves. This is was really breaking boundaries and comfort zones looks like.

Observations and Interactions

Walking into the venue, I could feel my nerves leaving. My friend and I expressed to one another that it seemed like it was going to be much more laid back than we thought. This experience was going to destroy all of the negative ideas about drag queens that had been taught to me. I looked around and there were so many women and men of all walks of life! People were there to interact with one another, enjoy themselves and have a good time. My friend and I had the opportunity to interact with one of the queens before the show and she was so helpful and sincere. We shared our fears and nerves for feeling ignorant and uneducated with drag and other sexualities. When my friend and I expressed this, she was so eager to converse. She helped me understand that when she is not a drag queen, she is a gay male and goes by “he, him, his” but that her drag alter-ego is a full female. She also said that it is so much better to ask people about their orientation rather than us assume their orientation. After this, I did not feel like I had to fit a certain image as an audience member. The queen was so excited and committed to helping us understand and appreciate her culture. Not stuck-up and dramatic like I had thought. This setting was very intimate so I had the opportunity to interact with the friendly people around me, having light conversation. The room was just so full of joy and laughter. Pre-show, the queens all interacted with people. The show itself was a blast and they interacted mildly, just enough to enjoy and not feel weird. It was all very classy and fun!

My friend and I waited around until one of the queens had a chance to talk with us for a bit. We thought that it would be a great opportunity to get some real conversation with someone of another culture that is different from our own. They had showed vulnerability and kindness to us before so we thought it was a great idea. We explained that we had come for a cross-cultural experience assignment that we had for our Foundations for Social Justice class at Nyack College.

They asked what we wanted to do and I shared that I wanted to be a school social worker. It seemed that they loved hearing us talk about our passions. We then got on the subject of faith because Nyack is a Christian school. We told them that we are Christians and I noticed a little pull back from a couple of them. This personally hit me hard because I have been treated very poorly by the church for my own reasons so I could not imagine how they feel in this season on turmoil. This made me want to get deeper about this subject. My friend and I had expressed that we do support this and whatever lifestyle that they choose. I especially expressed how sorry I was for how the church as a general body treats them and harms them. I talk about how in my Social Work & Christianity class, we talk a lot about just loving others and how the church has it warped in many ways. It was such a cool opportunity to have a conversation with them. It was hard but it was so good and helpful that we got to both share our cultures and love one another though that. I left the venue feeling very full and happy. I did not think that it would go that well!

How Have I Been Impacted?

I am so happy that I got to have this drag event experience, I would do it a million times over. The show was amazing and I will always remember it as my first intentional cross-cultural experience. This culture has so much life and taste in it that I was interested in and got to experience. I loved how people just get to express themselves how they wish to for this short time. On a personal level, I was definitely impacted by the one on ones that I had with the queens. They were so warm, kind and open for understanding and conversation. It showed me that there could be some reconciliation. It also made me confident in my beliefs and choice to love people where they are at. I found that a lot of these drag queens do not receive love, they receive backlash and hate. It makes me very sad that they feel so negatively about the church but I was expecting that reaction. It gave me a chance to explain my purpose to love and show compassion. They loved that! That conversation hit me on a very personal level. Culturally, it broke a lot of barriers for me and made me feel even more comfortable with interacting with LGBTQ community. They are open for love and understanding and as a Christian social worker, I dedicate my life to that. It was so encouraging. Also, the other people, especially the regulars, that interacted with me at the show made me feel welcomed and comfortable. Having the interactions with cultures will make me much more competent to be ready for future



will help me communicate with and love future
own.

