



**Vida
Loves
You**

Nick Mulgrew

"I love Whitney. She may have died in the bath, but we still love her."

Vida Fantabisher often cackles at her own jokes.

"Maybe she just wanted to be clean when she met the Lord. But Radox is supposed to relax you, hey? Maybe she just put too much in?"

Poor Whitney.

Vida's just performed "I'm Every Woman" in tribute to her; now she's a little flustered. She fiddles with her bra strap and straightens the silver fabric of her top over her generously arching hips. Vida tends to smile like a pageant princess: with a slight tilt of the chin and a slight turn of her head; with her teeth slightly apart, bright and pearly under the stage lights. She clasps the microphone with both hands. She sighs. The crowd, sparsely dotted around tables and the bar, urges her to get on with the show.

She totters to the side of the stage nearest the body-glittered sound man. "What's next, hmm?" Her eyes widen. Sweat beads on her face, coagulating around her inch-long eyelashes, rolling down between her breasts. The sound man mumbles something.

"No, I sung that last week. What else?" A trio of disco balls bathe the stage in shards of light. Green and red lasers play behind on the spangled velveteen curtains. The air seems somehow purple, like





dimness incarnate. And somewhere in the background there's the chink of ice and beer bottles. The sound man mumbles something.

"I've been singing that song for ages now," she flutters. Someone in the crowd moans. "Ugh, whatever. Just play it." The glittery man clicks on his laptop. Vida stands centre-stage, calves taut; eyes in middle-distance, looking towards some distant horizon. A prom queen lifted from an American movie, about to take her tiara and make her speech.

And then, the music. Oh God, the music. The loudest a Mariah Carey song has ever been played. The speakers distort with torrents of camp '90s synth and vocal tracks. And there's Vida, lip-synching and sallying smooth-legged across the stage. She shuffles on her high heels, wrists cocked to accentuate the high notes, some of which only dogs and bats could fully appreciate. A short young man in jeans and a hoodie clasps a stripper pole in front of the stage. Another woman, about six and a half feet tall and with the most marvellously chiselled jawline, bounds from backstage and starts bopping near the front. Vida interrupts her mime for a second to send a smile her way.

It's ten o'clock on a Friday night. Two hours ago these two women were men. In about four hours' time, they'll be men again.

Bubbles is the only club in Cape Town that specialises in drag shows. It's tucked away in a quiet corner of Waterkant Street, on the periphery of what some call the Pink Triangle: a hotspot of gay bars to the north of the CBD. Most people come to the neighbourhood to dine and drink or dance. Some come to watch men and women prance around on-stage while dressed as the opposite sex. Different strokes.

Vida is queen of Bubbles — “my people, my club”. Her face is everywhere inside — mostly on posters advertising her Friday night shows, when she hosts an open stage. She herself started here on a Friday night at the beginning of 2012. It was the first time she had performed at a drag club. But, even with shaky hands and a much more diminutive frame than other queens, she brought the house down. And so she did it again another week. And again. After her third show, she was offered a permanent spot hosting at Bubbles.

The club seems to be at its fullest on Vida's nights. And it also seems to have its most diverse audience. It might be because Vida is coloured, and her friends and fans are mostly coloured, or it might be because her performances have a wider appeal than some other performers. It's tough to tell. Vida doesn't really think it matters that much, anyway. “It's the one place it doesn't matter,” she says. “Everywhere else it does to some point. This is the place in Green Point where it's just like, whoever you are, just come! That's why I like it, anyway.”

She might also like it because of the adoration and the free drinks that gravitate towards her when she hosts. As such, what happens when you come to Bubbles to watch Vida depends on when you come to Bubbles to watch Vida. One night she might start one of her 10 or so nightly sets — which start at 9:30 and end at about two in the morning — with a bracing monologue from *The Devil Wears Prada*. Another night she might just do a couple of songs, and hold her microphone to her crotch to let her “vagina” take over lip-

synching duties. On another she might have been given too many shots of bubblegum vodka after her warm-up set: watch her fist-pump, slur and pageant-smile her way to the early hours. Watch men and women dance with freedom. Watch the six-packed barmen sway as Vida and her drag daughters mime Streisand, Spears, Turner. Go to bed with ringing ears and know that, the entire time you were watching those women onstage, they probably hadn't peed for at about five hours.

02 Drag is a complicated thing. Not just in the preparation and the transformations that artists go through — we'll get to that — and not just in the personal feelings that go into each drag artist's performances (we'll get to that, too). There is, unbeknownst to most of us, a history and spectrum of drag in South Africa so great and so intertwined with our politics and societies that it deserves much more attention than it gathers.

But we should get something out of the way before we go any further. It is a trope of journalism that whenever someone writes something about gender or sex issues in South Africa, that person is required to do a certain amount of rhetorical genuflection. There's the usual talk of contradiction: of how South Africa has a constitution that enshrines equality, yet didn't allow its citizens to legally change their sex until 2003; or of how South Africa was the first country on the continent to legalise same-sex marriage but is a land in which people are abused and murdered on the basis of their sexuality. Here, a pithy nod towards the collision of tradition and modernity, or toward transition, or the violent discordance between state and citizenry.

Each piece, at some point, is expected to take a well-meaning step back. We can travel around the Pink Triangle, stalking its cobbled streets for clubs where men of all races converge to hang out and watch spandex-hipped performers gyrating on

the floor. We could travel to the convention centres and theatres that host pageants for drag queens and watch men publicly receive support from communities that are, in many of our imaginations, conservative or homophobic. We can feel immersed in some new, maybe imagined Afropolitan society, where language and race and gender all play among together. We can do all that. But in the end our piece should still pick a graphic, unignorable example of how far South African society still has to come. Perhaps news of another corrective rape in a nearby township, or a personal anecdote of homophobia. Perspective regained.

And rightfully so. The reality is that you have to have some sort of intellectual sobriety, lest you get carried away.

But let's do a different kind of legwork.

We should start with unpacking some tricky nomenclature. Let's start with 'cross-dressing' itself, which is, broadly speaking, the act of wearing clothing and accessories usually associated with people of a different sex to your own. Some people refer to this as 'transvestitism' and to cross-dressers as 'transvestites', but they aren't strictly synonymous. To some people, transvestitism implies some sort of sexual fetish — probably thanks in some way to Dr. Frank-N-Furter and the Rocky Horror Picture Show — even though transvestites aren't necessarily sexually aroused by cross-dressing. (You might call that 'transvestic fetishism', in case you're wondering.) As such, many people who like to wear the opposite sex's clothes, but don't get a sexual kick out of it, tend to dislike the word "transvestite". So they simply call themselves "cross-dressers". Neither of these terms is necessarily associated with being transgender or transsexual, by the way. In the United States, for example, most self-identified cross-dressers are biologically male, masculine-gendered and straight. In South Africa, cross-dressing is predominantly associated with homosexuality. Like all matters of gender and sex,

the entire production is nebulous.

So what's drag, then? Simply, drag is a theatrical kind of cross-dressing. It's a caricaturisation of men or women, mostly for entertainment's sake, but also potentially for self-expression. Going into drag can be a way to make money, too, or to attract sexual partners.

Drag (and cross-dressing in general) was illegal during apartheid under the Prohibition of Disguises Act of 1969. Nevertheless, drag was practiced by men of all races, in all sorts of places. But, like most things during apartheid, the reasons behind the drag cultures of different races and regions were remarkably different. In her excellent 2009 monograph *Sex in Transition*, Amanda Lock Swarr makes a historical distinction in South Africa between "urban drag", formerly practised mainly by white performers in front of white audiences in clubs and bars, and "township drag", practised mainly by black and coloured men who incorporate feminine trappings into their daily lives, usually in order to facilitate (and legitimise in the eyes of others) sexual relationships with other men.

Urban drag is the sort of thing done by the Evita Bezuidenhouts and Beauty Ramapelepeles of the world; the kind of cabaret or satirical or comedic imitations of women restricted mainly to the stage.¹ Township drag is perhaps best characterised by the archetypal "moffie", which, despite the term's very general usage as a homophobic slur, usually specifically means a gay man who uses drag in his everyday life as a means of negotiating relationships and his place in society. As Swarr notes, dragging helps some feminine men attract masculine men for sexual relationships, where they feel can affirm their femininity by taking the role of a woman in bed. Further, by wearing women's clothing to attract partners, men who drag might not just simply imitate women, but actually in part become women in the eyes of the community they live in.

1 | Or television, or radio, or the nebulous space of "dramatic performance". Bezuidenhout and Ramapelepele, of course, can claim to much more mainstream acceptance than the average drag queen.

The apartheid government condoned drag in certain situations: in mine compounds, for example, where male mine “wives” could keep workers sexually satisfied and pacified. Outside of these spheres of control, however, the Disguises Act was enforced harshly, sometimes with violence. And so drag was confined. And as an art form, it generally remained unrefined. Since apartheid, of course, the law has relaxed — even though the Disguises Act is still in effect. There are drag shows all over the country — and sometimes in the most unexpected places. In Gauteng, for example, some Orlando Pirates fans dress up in bras and dresses and wigs on their team’s match days. They say that it’s a representation of how their club is, in their words, “the mother of all clubs in Africa”. But it’s probably just fun as well.²

Demonstrably, drag has been and remains mostly a man’s game in South Africa. And along with the divisions that remain in South African society, so there remain divisions — in race, in kinds of performance, in sex and in gender — in how different people drag.

It’s complicated, and that’s not even the beginning of it.

03 It takes a lot to be a drag queen. A lot of patience, a lot of confidence — and a lot of make-up. More than you imagine. Way more than you imagine.

For Alex Tabisher, it starts with a shave. Then, he covers his brow with a Mastix gum, an adhesive that glues all his pesky eyebrow hairs down. Then, DermaColor foundation, two layers or, he says, “until I feel like my face can’t breathe”. Heavy duty shit. Then, a fixing powder to make the foundation waterproof. “It’s what they use for shower commercials,” he says. He could swim in it and it wouldn’t budge; should be OK for sweat.

Then, highlights, accentuating the parts of his face that he wants to pay extra attention to: under his eyes, the middle of his forehead, the bridge

of his nose, the middle of his chin. He needs cheekbones, too, which he achieves with a darker powder.

Then, blend. Blend away all the lines. Make it look natural as possible. Create a good base to do the eyes. Layers of eyeliner like peacock feathers. Go mad. Then, new eyebrows. And lips. Take out a pair of hips made from mattress foam. Get them in place. Cover them with 10 layers of pantyhose to make them seamless. Then, a bra. Some fake breasts. Get them snug. Then, finally, he’s ready to get dressed — a full two hours later.

“Hello Vida!” The transformation is complete.

Vida is an evolving character. When Alex first started dragging he wanted to set himself apart, so he decided to play an older character, someone “very Broadwayish and very cabaret” — someone, he decided, just over twice his then age of 25.

“I did my make-up older, I dressed older,” he says. “But once I become a bit more noticed, I experimented with dressing a bit younger. Drag’s all smoke and mirrors anyway. It’s all about make-up. You can wear things to suck everything in — corsets and that. And the hips also hide things.”

Alex laughs. “A few years ago drag queens were at the bottom of the gay food chain.” He stubs out his cigarette in a silver ashtray. “It just wasn’t an elevated art form, you know?”

He fiddles with the lid of his box of Rothmans, considering taking another one out.

“Drag was usually just about putting on a dress and going out. Some people didn’t even wear make-up. They had hair and stubble showing and everything.” Alex strokes at his own facial hair: a day or two’s growth. He looks tired and surprisingly rugged sitting at his dining room table. It’s dim in here, though in a different way to how it’s dim in Bubbles. The midday sun diffuses through a veil of curtains behind him. The walls are painted cream; the floors are dignified parquet. (He wants to put new ones in, though.) It’s a homely apartment of wood and linen and

2 | See Anthony Kaminju’s excellent photoessay “Theatrics of the Soccer Fan” in the new collection *Categories of Person* (edited by Jacob Dlamini and Megan Jones) for some cracking photos of these fans.

the odd board game — not the sort of place many people would expect a drag queen to inhabit.

He lights another cigarette. Maybe Alex's house doesn't look like a drag queen's — whatever someone might imagine that looks like — because being a drag queen isn't his sole concern. Alex has been a performer all his life, and being in drag is — to put it plainly — just another act. Before he became Vida Fantabisher, he had been a jazz pianist. He still is. He acted, too, and studied performance and screenwriting at a private film college — via a year studying education at technikon — after he finished high school in Cape Town's northern suburbs.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to be when I left school," he says, "although I wanted to be a performer. Drag was the furthest thing from my mind."

And from many other people's minds, too. Although the popular gay scene in Cape Town was as thriving as ever when Alex went into college, there was little glamour in drag then. It struggled for popularity in a scene that was at times overwhelmingly masculine.

But something arrived here in 2010 that changed things. Torrented from the United States and shared by friends on flash drives, it opened Alex and many other gay men's eyes



to a new world of performance and expression. And that thing, perhaps unexpectedly, was RuPaul's Drag Race.

Dwell for a moment on all the things reality TV has given us — things like C-list celebrity worship, shower hours, an insatiable curiosity for the broken parts of strangers' lives. Whatever you think of it, the entire history of reality television is worth it a hundred times over for Drag Race — its 100 k.p.h. rave soundtrack, its insatiable and glorious sponging of all things camp and shimmering, and its insights into the practicality of tucking scrotums into booty shorts.

On the surface of it, the kind of drag shown in Drag Race is much the same as you would have found in urban clubs in Cape Town before it made a splash. Its acts are based on outrageous alter-egos, lip-synching and comedy, here made into a competition resembling a mash-up of Project Runway and Idols. But it presented a new aesthetic. RuPaul and her contestants offered a vibrancy and provocativeness that rose above the frumpiness that sometimes characterised urban South African female impersonation; a kind of super-drag, driven by RuPaul's ever-shifting persona and her personal tenets of "charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent".³

"I'd always been fascinated by female impersonating," Alex says. "When I started watching RuPaul's I was like, this looks like fun! We started studying how to do our faces properly in an American style, and nowadays drag queens really get into it. It's a lot more effort, but you look more like a female."

He takes a drag of his cigarette. "What we do now is more professional and advanced." He smiles.

And professional it is. Alex makes his living performing as Vida, mostly at Bubbles, but also at the odd corporate show and at other bars around the city. He makes a good living — enough to cover the huge amounts he spends on make-up and clothing. But despite the investment, Alex seldom appears as Vida anywhere else.

It isn't about homophobia: "I've never had an issue," he says. "Gay culture is quite big here, and as with all places you'll run into homophobes, but it's just a job for me, and if it wasn't paying I wouldn't be doing it." He shrugs. "It's too much effort. If I want to transform, I want to be doing a show. It takes too long just to do it for nothing." He slouches into his chair, visibly more comfortable in T-shirts and jeans than he is in high heels.

"I don't want to be a woman. I mean, I want to look like one — but that's one of the things that people don't understand at first about drag queens. They automatically assume you want to live your life as a woman, and that's actually the furthest thing from my mind."

There's a sense that Alex knows he's unusual. That he's unusually good at drag, that he's unusually financially covered by his performances, that he's unusually secure in his identity. His is a career choice. On his off days, he's his own man. On weekends when he's not on stage he relaxes or heads with his friends to Star Gayzer in Parow — "the main gay place for coloureds", as he describes it.

"I'm a person for the spotlight. I'm an attention whore, you know. But I don't go out clubbing in drag. It sometimes gets frustrating because a lot of my fans who I meet only know me from the stage, and they don't know who I am when I see them out. It's like, you should know me!"

A good frustration to have, I suppose. And especially when he doesn't have to worry about censure from his parents or his friends. His is a pacific life compared to those of many of his friends and colleagues, some of whom can't transform or appear in drag at home.

"I think that being successful from the start made it easier for people to grasp that this is a professional thing that I'm doing. I mean, I don't think they'd have a problem if I wasn't, you know, if it were a life choice.

"Compared to me, a lot of other female impersonators are hardly out of drag. And there's

3 | Or "CUNT", as the acronym goes. In one of the latest seasons of Drag Race, queens were forced to perform in teams, leading RuPaul to add "synergy" to the list — thus, "CUNTS".

some tension in the scene that comes from that, because some people have an issue with what we do.” He shrugs again. “At the end of the day, drag is caricature. We don’t try to take ourselves too seriously. Drag is supposed to be comical, it’s supposed to be fun. And, while we do it well, at the end of the day we are men.”

He stubs out his cigarette. “But for a lot of them it’s not that. They think that we do it for the sake of it, because we get recognition for it.”

A smile trickles across his face, almost reluctantly. “But it’s nice to get the attention. I mean, who doesn’t like admiration?”

04 “I was raped. Drag was a way for me to reclaim my identity.”
Bianca Clarke is a pretty direct woman. It seems to work for her.

“I’d known about drag my whole life. My mom is a bit of a fag hag, and my best friend is a drag queen. He suggested that I should drag.”

Bianca was afraid of her masculine side. Although she was raised in a caring home, in her adulthood she was exposed to a violent masculinity — one that took root inside of her, driving her to punch walls in anger and, in darker times, to cut herself. It was at odds with who she was the rest of the time: a trained performer, a dance teacher to special-needs children, and a stand-up comedian.

But it so happened that, in May 2012, a gender-queer⁴ activist and rapper by the name of Catherine Pretorius put out a call for drag kings. She spread the word on Facebook, through members of LGBT student societies, through *Butch Life* magazine — anyone who would share the word. It seemed a novelty to some, but the result was a bringing together of a substantial group of women from different backgrounds. Catherine schooled them on drag kinging, introduced them to dance routines, and got them to figure out personas for themselves. They worked out how to use make-up to emphasise the masculine features of their faces:

stronger jawlines, sharper cheekbones, authentic-looking five o’clock shadows.⁵ Some of the women flaked out, but six stayed to become Bros B4 Ho’s, probably South Africa’s first-ever drag king troupe.

Their ranks were diverse. There was the dreadlocked Catherine, stage name Saint Dude; hard rock lover Jax (Cory Linguis); the hyper-intelligent, female-to-male transitioning American Frankie (otherwise known as Frankie Hard-On or simply Frankie H); the tall, Afrikaans-inflected Freddie Mercury impersonator Marchané (FreDDie); the high-voiced, backwards-cap-wearing rapper Sinead (Umlilo John); and loudmouthed, voluptuous Bianca, otherwise known as Cold Steel Johnson — and the only straight one in the group. (“I’m not lesbian,” she insists.)

Unlike the majority of drag queens in town, Bros B4 Ho’s don’t lip-sync. With the exception of Marchané, who was shy of her singing voice at first, the Bros set themselves apart by performing all of their songs live. Saint Dude and Umlilo took to covering Lil’ Wayne and Kanye West — as well as performing their own tracks — with considerable swagger. While not quite as convincing as men as some drag queens are as women, their dedication was much the same. The sometimes painful deal of strapping breasts was a particular sticking point. Different women have to strap in different ways: flatter-chested Marchané uses packing tape; Bianca pushes her breasts under her arms, giving her extra width and allowing her to perform with an open-buttoned shirt.

“That was something I hated when I was a kid,” Bianca sneers. “I was always told to put my shirt back on because I was a girl, and now I can just be like, ‘fuck you!’ This is the only way I can wear an open shirt without people thinking it’s inappropriate or sexual. To me it’s the most masculine thing that a drag king can do.”

And drag kinging is just as phallogentric as drag queening, although where queens do their best to hide any semblance of their genitals, kings pack:

4 | Someone who identifies neither as fully masculine or fully feminine, and exists in a state of fluidity between different genders.

5 | You can use either your own hair or a really cheap weave to make your facial hair, by the way. Different things work for different people.



with football socks, or cricket boxes, or other dick-sized objects. It isn't just a statement of virility, or simply to shock: packing helps kings make their walk more authentically masculine.

And so, with strapped tits and fake dicks, the Bros shared their experiences of feeling outcast onstage, in their monologues, in their music, in the jokes Saint Dude told between sets. They were something of a smash hit in certain circles. They performed sold-out shows at small theatres around Cape Town. They were handed a monthly gig at Bubbles. Eventually a documentary was made about their inception — simply titled *Bros B4 Ho's* — which is still busy making its rounds at LGBT film festivals in South Africa and elsewhere.

“Our support base was very small, though”, Marchané says. “And initially the lesbian community got their backs up about the rapping and the misogyny in the lyrics. People want women to go along this very specific pro-feminist thing, and if you don't strictly go along with that ideal, people don't know how to respond to you.”

The Bros believed that they could subvert the inherent misogyny in much of popular music by performing it in drag. They also eschewed the traditional, hierarchical nature of urban drag queening, of mentor mothers and subservient daughters, for something approaching equality between every member of the troupe. (“Queens want to be worshipped, kings want to be friends,”



says Marchané.) They became, in their words, family. And it became an outlet, especially for Bianca.

“I reclaimed a part of myself that I lost during my rape.” She smiles. “It really was a kind of therapeutic performance.”

The Bros rode the wave, performing almost weekly until December 2012. But it soon became too much, and the group began to amicably fragment. Jax found full-time work that required her to step away. Frankie went home to the United States. And even their leader Catherine left, to focus on, among other things, her rap career in her own non-drag persona. The Bros were on hiatus.

Marchané felt the absence acutely. “When we stopped, all the self-esteem we had built up went

away again. Our personas were just something inside of you that you’ve repressed — because you’re a girl, you’ve submitted to everything and everyone — and when you perform, that thing just comes out.”

Sinead and Bianca nod in agreement, sitting on either side of Marchané. These three are what remains of Bros B4 Ho’s: three giggly friends sipping cocktails out of plastic beach buckets in a Caribbean-themed pub in Observatory. Wider success seemed so close to them at the end of 2012, but things are a bit different now. The past winter had few shows for the trio, who wanted to save up and take advantage of an invitation to Philadelphia to perform at a leather conference.⁶

They'll probably have to pass on that due to a lack of funds — they'll go to Pietermaritzburg instead, where their documentary is screening at the Pink Mynah festival. Their pursuits are more humble now: a show here and there, when they can fit one in.

Or, when someone wants them, more like.

"There's no popular demand for us,"

Marchané says. "A drag queen will be booked for events. We won't. People don't want to see girls dress up as guys."

Bianca perks up. "There is no discrepancy between drag kinging and drag queening. You're cross-dressing. You're singing a song in a different outfit. But drag queens can do classic Diana Ross and Streisand and the crowd goes mad." She slams her palms down. "You do one Frank Sinatra song and everything dies."

So is the LGBT community just as patriarchal as the outside world?

Bianca sighs. "An audience doesn't respond as well to a woman as they do to a man. It doesn't matter what it is — the audience always has their back up when it comes to a woman performing. And that's across the board."

Of course, it's difficult to know whether Bianca's opinions are universal, especially when there are so few drag kings around here. But wouldn't it be mightily ironic to find that, even in the realm of gender-bending and subversion and activism for equal rights, patriarchal norms still reign supreme? Drag seems to be a men's game. In women's clothing, sure, but a men's game nonetheless.

05 As these things sometimes turn out, Bubbles closed indefinitely during the time I was finishing this story. I don't know exactly why. Phones went unanswered. People in the know were reluctant to speak much about it. One queen described it as a "management crisis". Another said the club would close down unless there was outside intervention. Vida mostly shrugged her shoulders and said it'd be fine.

Whatever the reason, its absence was felt. Even the club's annual Halloween show — a chance for queens to experiment with new costumes and thus the highlight of many of their calendars — had to be cancelled. But things went on, as they do. There were still a bunch of places you could go to. You could try Beefcakes, the gay burger joint on Somerset Road, and catch the awesomely luminescent Princess Pop sing old Katy Perry hits on weekday nights. You could wonder about her weightlifting regimen, or how else she gets such nice forearms, while sipping a R55 cocktail. You could pay R300 to have a shirtless barman let you and your friends take shots off of his abs. Fair trade.

Or you could head to Black Pearl in Lansdowne and catch a drag queen pageant. Find out which of the 14 amateur contestants will walk away as Miss Gay Black Pearl 2013. It'll be a blast. Buy into the #VIPLifestyle, book a booth, get bottle service. Just don't wear a hoodie or a cap, lest you get bounced at the door.

Or you could wait until Sunday night, and go to Zer021. It's somewhat less glamorous: the changing room looks like a service corridor with a mirror and some coat hooks. The gay club equivalent of a dive bar that tries to dress up. Fairy lights and spray-painted wooden benches — that sort of thing. Not that anyone minds. "It's the new place to be," Vida says.

The show tonight is due to start at 9:30. At 9:45, the club is empty save for a squad of yuppies playing pool. A couple of Francophone men with high-fade haircuts sit on the outside deck smoking a joint. Re-runs of old Victoria's Secret fashion shows are on the big screen. "Party Rock Anthem" is on the PA. It can feel a bit lonely if you arrive alone.

But soon the queens arrive, some in their cars, some sitting on the back of a bakkie like casual labourers. They haul in their suitcases, accompanied by friends. And then — suddenly — the place is full. It's rammed. The air comes

alive with the soft smack of cheek-kisses, of how-are-you-dears, of gnarlingly high-pitched voices emanating from backstage. The four queens on the bill tonight do their rounds, leaving smudges of foundation on the clothes of anyone who hugs them. Other queens come out of the woodwork, flirting with the barmen pouring jugs of brandy and coke, or smoking, or hanging around on their dotting, soft-bellied boyfriends.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Vida minces around the club in a beige trench coat. “I haven’t figured out my sets yet.” In their change-room the queens line their suitcases against the wall. Inside: make-up, wigs, underwear, dresses.

“If you do two songs,” Kitty de la Renza says, “you have to have two outfits.” She rushes to get ready. “Real girls have it easy.”

A single microphone on a stand is placed on the plywood stage. Groups of friends start squeezing onto the damask chaise longues nearest the front.⁷ Those without seats dance to old Rihanna songs. Androgynes in blouses shimmy near the back.

The lights dim, the stage now bathed in pink. The MC suddenly blares: “Put your hands together for Riri Rosenfels!” And just like that, it’s on. Red-dressed Riri glides onstage. She opens with a passionate monologue lifted from an Alicia Keys interview, before segueing into “Empire State of Mind”.

Next is the bee-stung pout of Manila von Teez, jazz-scatting and ragtming in her gray batwing dress and claw-like nails. She’s a regular here: a couple weeks ago, she wore a green unitard and performed the kind of on-the-floor-writhing, high-kicking performance you might expect from a Pussycat Dolls music video — but, you know, in real life. Her range is intimidating, as is Kitty’s, with her foot-stomping routine in a vaguely Native American two-piece. Tassles and pumping bass. It’s drag queen roulette, and it’s breathless.

Once Kitty’s off, Riri takes the mic.

“Some say,” she purrs, “that our next performer is the highest paid drag queen in town.” Murmurs

from backstage. “But I haven’t told you how much I’ve been paid. Anyway, it’s Vida Fantabisher!”

And on she is, shedding her trench coat as she launches into a mile-a-minute medley, centred on a disco remix of the O’Jays’ “For the Love of Money”.

She shimmies.

Money money money!

She poses.

Money money money!

She flicks her legs.

Money money money!

And just like that she’s off again. Applause rings around the club as she heads backstage. Away from the punters’ eyes she strips down into her bra and pantyhose. Off comes the wig. There’s the masculine haircut again. The illusion begins to melt. She chats with Manila and a friend while she searches in her bag for a black dress.

But even in her undress, something feels strange. Here you are on the strange boundary where maleness and femininity run parallel to each other, like a precipice, deep yet crossable. You find yourself become more demure than you would around a shirtless man. You think you should apologise for catching a male performer in feminine underwear, even though that performer is actually mostly clothed. You listen to the queens gossip cattily about other performers, never leaving character for a second. Maybe it isn’t even character, you think. You find yourself in this other place, where gender is fluid, like mercury, slipping between your fingers.

The queens are due to go back on in 10 minutes. During the break, a woman wearing a leopard print top, who everyone else seems to know but won’t be able to tell you exactly who she is, takes the MC’s microphone and addresses the crowd. She’ll inform them of the presence of a director of the Artscape Theatre, one of the Cape’s most prestigious theatrical agencies, in the front row.

“We know that the gay community is strong,” you’ll hear her announce. “We know that we’re

7 | These chaise longues, by the way, are much, much less sticky than you’d expect them to be at first sight.

pulling together, and we thank you for your support. We know we will see us and our queens onstage at your theatre soon.” You’ll see the director, a small, curly-haired woman, smile demurely, slightly embarrassed, and sit down again.

You’ll turn and see Vida emerge with Kitty in the sleekest of glamour gowns. They’ll start to sing a duet, “When You Believe” by Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. Vida is Whitney, obviously. They hold hands and begin.

There can be miracles, when you believe.

You’ll watch the Artscape director mill around, maybe a little bit drunk, maybe a little bit starry-eyed, with her friends. She hugs old acquaintances. She laughs at the queens’ exquisite pantomime.

Though hope is frail, it’s hard to kill.

You’ll stand somewhere to the side and watch

the throng of people here laugh and cheer.

You’ll think suddenly of the drag kings and their struggle for shows. You’ll think of Bubbles and whether it’ll open again. You’ll think of the men and women around the city not able to express themselves like this, in this kind of safe space. You’ll think about why a safe space would even be needed for this —shouldn’t everyone do this?

Who knows what miracles you can achieve.

You’ll think about where the queens here are all headed, if anywhere else. You’ll think this is, maybe, all a bit ludicrous, a little bit brilliant, a little bit problematic. You’ll wonder why you think that. You’ll think about why this is even entertaining in the first place. But then you remember. Oh, there’s the fist pump again. And there’s the applause.

You will when you believe.

You begin to think, maybe, that they’re right

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