

Wellington's 'Drag Kings': Comedy, cabaret and community

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Abstract

In this article, Meghan Williams explores the history of Wellington's first drag king troupe – known as 'the Drag Kings' – as remembered by three of its members: Jac Lynch, Cathie Sheat and Andy Harness. While today's Wellington drag king scene enjoys a fair amount of visibility, the story of the early 2000s scene has been somewhat obscured, and, much like other queer histories, has been difficult to unearth without the use of oral history sources. After a phone interview with Jac in May 2019, and a visit to Andy's and Cathie's home in August 2019, Williams brings to light a story about how, in the absence of exposure to other drag king scenes around the world, the Drag Kings' style and performance took shape within a specific Aotearoa/New Zealand context, resulting in a troupe distinctly of its time and place.

Keywords

Queer history, oral history, drag kings, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Wellington

When I discussed my research on the history of Wellington's drag kings with my peers in Auckland, I was met with one of two responses: "Drag king?" I've heard of a drag queen, but what's a drag king?" or, 'Oh, like Hugo Grrrl?' The first response indicated a clear lack of visibility around drag kinging, while the second suggested that, where there was awareness of the existence of drag kinging (typically from those within the queer community), knowledge was confined to the big names (or 'name') in the current Wellington drag king scene. This is understandable – Hugo Grrrl has indeed worked tirelessly within the last few years to increase the visibility of Aotearoa/New Zealand's talented drag kings, and was even the world's first drag king on reality television when he appeared (and triumphed) on TVNZ's *House of Drag* show in 2018 (Mann, 2018). But overshadowed by Hugo Grrrl's impressive drag career is the story of a group of (mostly) queer women who have been performing in Wellington under the troupe name 'the Drag Kings' for the last two decades. In an attempt to recover this history, I interviewed three of the troupe's members: Jac Lynch, Andy Harness, and Cathie Sheat.

Much like anywhere else in the world, male impersonation as stage performance has existed in Aotearoa/New Zealand for over a century, but it was only in the last 20 years that a drag king troupe appeared in Wellington. In 2001, Val Little (co-founder of The Drag Kings) had a vision of gathering 'some really hot dykes' and putting on a show in which they would dress in drag and perform as members of a boyband (Little & Lynch, 2015). After reading literature about drag kings in the United States, and frequenting Wellington's Pound nightclub watching drag queen performances, Val asked why there were not many lesbians performing in drag (Little, 2015). Cathie Sheat was a well-known stand-up comedian who had been performing around Wellington for some years, including appearances as a drag king when MC-ing various events. Jac Lynch was also well-known; she had performed at Devotion dance parties (queer dance parties and stage shows often held in warehouses in 1990s Wellington) and was crowned Ms Gay Wellington in 1994. Val contacted Cathie, Jac and some others who had an interest in

theatre, and they met in Pound nightclub to talk about the drag king phenomenon. By the end of the year, the group had performed for the first time in Pound under the name 'N-Ept', which they later changed to the Drag Kings ('Gender benders', 2002). Andy Harness joined the Drag Kings after watching the troupe's first performance and has played an important role within the group ever since. Through a phone interview with Jac, and a visit to Andy's and Cathie's home in Lyall Bay (plus supplementary use of an online interview with Val Little carried out by Jac Lynch; see Little, 2015), a story emerged about how, in the absence of exposure to other drag king scenes around the world, the Drag Kings' style and performance took shape within a specific Aotearoa/New Zealand context, resulting in a troupe distinctly of its time and place.

Drag king scenes are subcultures that became popular in the United States in the 1990s and, being born out of 'the marginalization of lesbians and the conflation of white males with masculinity' (Baker & Kelly, 2016, p. 48), they formed a part of underground queer nightlife. To reach a broad definition of 'drag king', we ought to begin with the first specific study of drag kinging: Judith Halberstam's *Female masculinity* (1998). Halberstam defines the phenomenon as 'a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume' (1998, p. 232). Halberstam's distinction between drag kings and male impersonators is particularly helpful. She notes that, while 'male impersonation' has been a theatrical genre for centuries and entails the production of a 'plausible performance of maleness as the whole of [the impersonator's] act', 'drag kinging' specifically refers to the 1990s phenomenon where participants perform 'masculinity (often periodically) and [make] the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of [their] act' (1998, p. 232). Similarly, in their essay on drag kings in the southern states of North America, Ashley A. Baker and Kimberly Kelly (2016) argue that 'drag', more broadly, does not mean to impersonate another gender – as such a definition would rest on the assumption that there is an inherent portrayal of gender. Rather, drag 'demonstrates the arbitrariness of gender as a category and challenges any inherent meaning of the concept' (Baker & Kelly, 2016, p. 48).

Seminal as Halberstam's work on drag kings was, subsequent scholars have argued that her studies were decontextualized and thus implicitly assumed a unitary drag king culture. A trend in queer history has been to demonstrate that there is no unitary way of being a particular type of queer identity. Rather, behaviours and identities are constructed within wildly varying contexts to produce wildly varying ways of being. The same can be said for drag king history. Due to their underground nature, and before the internet was part and parcel of people's everyday lives, drag king scenes emerged around the world in relative isolation from each other. Each drag king culture has therefore been shaped by the complex contexts that surround it, 'leading to variations in how drag is understood and in content of performances' (Baker & Kelly, 2016, p. 61).

The lack of exposure to other drag king scenes, and the absence of ready access to Google and social networking sites back in the early 2000s, meant that the Drag Kings had to figure out drag king practices on their own. One fundamental practice that the troupe had to navigate was the drag transformation. Jac recalled that, when the troupe first formed, the Drag Kings put in a lot of work and experimentation to figure out how to achieve this transformation successfully. Luckily for them, Cathie had already been experimenting with drag kinging in the late 1990s, prior to the formation of the Drag Kings, when she used to perform at various drag queen events. As she recalled, 'There was no one to say, "Oh this is how you do binding" or "this is how you do packing"'. Binding is the process of flattening out one's breasts, and is commonly achieved using a medical chest binder, while 'packing' refers to packing one's pants to create a bulge where a penis would be. Cathie was not aware of medical chest binders at the time, but someone had told her that female sheep shearers bound their breasts with

Glad Wrap in order to prevent wool abscesses caused by the fibres getting through their clothing. After Cathie shared the Glad Wrap technique with members of The Drag Kings, it became common practice for them over the following years. At one stage, the troupe received a ‘cease and desist’ warning from the Glad Wrap company after using the brand name on their website. Cathie speculated that ‘they didn’t want to be associated with a group like that’.

Experimenting with transformation represented an important aspect of drag kinging for some of the Drag Kings: ‘playing with gender’. This was partly politically motivated; as an article in *Contact* magazine noted, ‘The Drag Kings aim to have fun with gender so they control it rather than it controlling them’ (‘Having fun with gender’, 2003, p. 11). Yet what became clear from the interviews I conducted was that the primary motivation was simply the enjoyment of drag. This is not to say that such a motive necessarily renders any political impact impossible – I agree with Baker and Kelly (2016, p. 61) when they argue that intentionality is not necessary for political impact – but it does challenge the assumption that, because drag king performers around the world have typically been feminist queer women, drag kinging always has political intentions. Each of the troupe members I interviewed expressed feelings of joy when they recounted stories of representing various aspects of gender. For Jac, who had always been a ‘tomboy’, drag kinging provided an outlet to explore gender in a way that she had not been able to before: ‘When the drag kinging came along it gave me an opportunity to really play with some identities and have fun with that. I loved it. I loved being able to dress up, put on a beard, see what it looked like, bind and really, you know, pack and all those things ... I really, really enjoyed it’. Andy and Cathie expressed similar feelings about performing masculine personas but for Cathie, drag was also about exploring non-masculine personas that deviated from her own gender expression: ‘I kind of think of drag as not necessarily entirely about bending gender. It’s also ... becoming someone that you’re not ... that could be an inanimate object, or it could be a woman or a man’. This more open definition of drag meant that, while most of their characters were masculine, members of the Drag Kings would also often portray ‘archetypal’ female characters. Cathie suggested that this flexibility could be attributed to the fact that many members of the troupe had a background in theatre, so the Drag Kings always performed theatre-type skits and ‘miniature sketches’, which often involved characters across the gender spectrum.

The Drag Kings’ use of these skits in their show is something they identified as a point of difference between their troupe and both overseas drag kings as well as the current Wellington drag king scene. When the Kings attended the Drag King Extravaganza in Melbourne, they noticed that many of the kings performed a single character that they had created, rather than performing together in troupes (Little, 2015). ‘They’d be a “crew” rather than a “troupe”’, Jac recalled. ‘Whereas we would kind of devise the show from go to woah and kind of flow in and out of different acts. We just had a very different way of approaching it and I think that’s because we had some theatre people in the initial group’. As a ‘theatre-minded’ troupe, the Drag Kings would produce shows consisting of a combination of group numbers, duos and solos that were organised around a central theme or story. One of the group sketches that proved to be popular with their audience, devised as an excuse for the members to use particular ‘pop-rock’ songs that they liked at the time, was an act called ‘The Men’s Room’. The troupe members, as Andy recalled, each dressed as a ‘particular kind of stereotype of a guy’ and sat in a circle as though taking part in a men’s group therapy session. Cathie’s character was an elderly, balding, burnt-out senior executive in a suit, who lip-synced to Linkin Park’s ‘Numb’. Andy described Val’s character as a ‘nerd in a cardie with long socks and Roman sandals’, who complained about a bad relationship and lip-synced to the lines, ‘She hates me, she really fucking hates me’. In addition to what this tells us about the Drag Kings’ tendency to perform as a group, it also

highlights the types of themes that found their way into the troupe's acts. 'If we can get a rise out of taking the piss out of men, you know, all the privilege that they have in our society', explained Andy, 'then we often go there'. Cathie added that, while they were 'kind of taking the piss', it was always 'in a light-hearted way' and they never had the intention of 'being mean'. In fact, many of the Drag Kings' performances also paid 'homage' to male-dominated areas of culture that they enjoyed, such as rugby and boyband music. Cathie explained that, from the beginning, boyband numbers were a common and popular type of performance for the Drag Kings, 'often because, you know, those songs are so earnest and sincere. And it's just sort of not even really taking the piss, just overdoing that sincerity and, you know, that faux deepness. But we really were doing it because they're quite cool songs'.

Cathie and Andy also found that making people laugh could have a certain political impact by proving wrong those who believed women could not be funny. Although Cathie did particularly well in the stand-up comedy scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s, she remembered that it was 'really hard to be a woman comedian'. She told me of one occasion when she performed last as the headlining act at a stand-up comedy gig. Afterwards, a man had approached the producer to say that he enjoyed the show, but that he 'didn't think that last performer should have been there [because he] didn't find [Cathie] very attractive at all'. So, to Cathie and Andy, the Drag Kings having a comedic focus was a way to challenge negative stereotypes in a society where, as Andy put it, there are 'men that don't believe women are funny'.

Similarly, in a 2002 interview for the *Capital Times* (a Wellington newspaper), Cathie said that part of the drive behind their performances was 'stretching people's boundaries and maybe stretching people's tendency to pigeonhole lesbians. People will say "we didn't know they could laugh at themselves"' ('Gender benders', 2002, p. 11). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, comedy has often been a powerful tool through which queer performers can gain a voice in and acceptance from wider society. Recalling Carmen Rupe, arguably the first Aotearoa/New Zealand drag queen to become a household name, Mika Haka describes her as 'the queen of acceptability and being able to be funny within a mainstream society', because, while she did not call herself a comedian, it was her ability to make people laugh that was vital to her public persona (cited in Horan & Matthews, 2019, ch. 4). Similarly, the ability of the Topp Twins (the Aotearoa/New Zealand lesbian sister comedy duo) to make people laugh meant that they won mainstream popularity, even when dressing in drag as their famous 'Ken and Ken' characters for typically conservative rural audiences (Horan & Matthews, 2019). The Drag Kings' focus on comedy is something they believe differentiated their troupe from other drag king scenes. Where drag king performances overseas are, according to Cathie, often about 'looking hot and looking cool', she suggested that the Drag Kings placed particular value on '[making] dicks of ourselves to get a laugh'. The reason for this focus, other than the enjoyment the troupe got out of making people laugh, was that they found using the vehicle of comedy to be a powerful way to reach wider audiences. 'It's like a complete barrier breakdown', Andy explained. 'There's so many things where humour comes into, I don't know, as an elixir, as a healer, as a tonic for what might be happening in society'. At this point in the interview, Cathie chimed in to say, 'Laughter's the best medicine!' Andy looked at Cathie with mock astonishment, as if Cathie was the first to use the phrase, and said, 'That sounds quotable!'

As much of a 'barrier breakdown' as comedy may be, however, Cathie also told me that the type of comedy performed by the Drag Kings was not always well received by audiences outside the 'late-night alternative scene'. Aotearoa/New Zealand has a rich history of late-night entertainment venues, namely cabaret bars, as important spaces for 'people excluded from the often white, male-dominated revue and stand-up scene to find a voice' (Horan & Matthews,

2019, ch. 4). ‘Blue cabaret’ emerged after World War II, in a still conservative Aotearoa/New Zealand, as the result of a demand for more risqué and daring comedy. The small venues, often cellars or upstairs rooms, hosted a large variety of acts and events ranging from music shows, joke tellers and variety acts, to dine and dances, experimental theatre, strip shows and drag nights (Horan & Matthews, 2019, ch. 4). While the cabaret scene fell into decline with the rising popularity of television in the 1960s, a small underground late-night entertainment scene persisted, and continued to be a particularly important place for queer performers to flourish (Horan & Matthews, 2019, ch. 4). When the Drag Kings began performing in Wellington, for instance, their shows would often take place in late-night venues such as Pound nightclub and Bluenote bar. Cathie’s signature performance, a popular number that never failed to please the crowd in these late-night venues, was a piece called ‘Tony Al Dente Does the Full Monty’. Cathie performed the Tony Al Dente character as an Italian-American lounge singer, whom Andy labelled as a cross between a lounge singer and a car salesman. Cathie described Tony as ‘overtly sexual’ and ‘sleazy’, strutting around the stage and through the audience using cheesy pick-up lines she found on the internet (such as ‘Do you have any Italian in you? Do you want some?’). Often performed to Right Said Fred’s song ‘I’m Too Sexy’, Tony would do a full strip, down to a hairy bodysuit complete with a fake penis (handmade by Cathie with the help of drag queen Pollyfilla), all the while, as Andy put it, ‘loving himself the whole time ... fondling his own nipples’. But Cathie remembered an occasion when she was asked to perform this number for someone’s office party at a restaurant in Wellington, bringing Tony Al Dente out of the late-night cabaret scene and into the view of unsuspecting patrons. While members of the office party ‘knew what they were getting’, the ‘Full Monty’ performance prompted some complaints from restaurant-goers. ‘That was absolutely disgusting!’ Cathie remembered them saying to the restaurant staff, ‘We’re sitting here having dinner with our daughter and we didn’t know what to say to her!’ The restaurant staff apologised and asked how old their daughter was. ‘21!’ they replied.

But Cathie has also borne the brunt of some ‘less-funny’ responses to her performances. Cathie and Andy both recalled the Drag Kings were criticised early on for being ‘lowbrow’ and ‘not sophisticated or high art’. As Paul Horan and Philip Matthews point out, the types of performances that would prove popular in cabaret-style contexts were never ‘a crowd-pleasing enterprise in big theatres’ (2019, ch. 4). Consequently, when the Drag Kings were invited to perform in larger, typically ‘highbrow’ venues, Cathie noted that ‘some people in the more established theatre side of things’ were somewhat perplexed. In 2017, she was involved in a show produced by the all-female comedy group Hens’ Teeth at the Circa Theatre in Wellington. Hens’ Teeth had formed in the late 1980s when the Aotearoa/New Zealand stand-up comedy scene began to emerge and was largely male dominated. Cathie initially joined Hens’ Teeth in the 1990s and, by 2017, she did not have any new stand-up material that she felt was ‘fresh’ enough to use, so she decided to share Tony Al Dente with the Hens’ Teeth audience. Tony’s act appeared on opening night and was reviewed by John Smythe for *Theatre Review*, who wrote: ‘Drag King Cathie Sheat regurgitates her well-past-his-use-by-date “Tony Al Dente” to remind us of all the gross, predatory, sexist so-called jokes we hoped we’d never be subjected to again (if we ever actually were)’ (Smythe, 2017). Tony Al Dente was not particularly popular amongst the Hens’ Teeth audience either, who Cathie remembered were ‘a little bit older and more conservative’. One of the most senior members of Hens’ Teeth itself, Cathie recalled, was so disgusted by the performance that she did not speak to Cathie for the rest of the show’s three-week season and has not spoken to her since.

Looking back on this event, Cathie expressed frustration, saying that receiving the criticism from Smythe, Hens’ Teeth performers and audience members was ‘quite a horrible

experience'. To Cathie, Smythe's review minimised the need to bring to light a culture of 'toxic masculinity' that still plagues society. Nine months after the review was published, the #MeToo movement erupted all over the internet, prompted by the sexual assault allegations made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. As Cathie explained:

It's kind of like saying, 'Fuck you, not only does Tony Al Dente exist, he is a blight on our society'. I'm not some out of date, old fashioned, out of touch lesbian feminist who can't get over myself. This is real and right now, and we're bringing it into the spotlight to make it well-known that the Tony Al Dentes of the world need to change their toxic masculinity.

The Drag Kings' comedy was likewise not immune to criticism from within the queer feminist community itself. Cathie remembered that when the troupe first started performing, 'there was a bit of backlash from the lesbian community'. She described the 1990s as a time in which 'much more clear space existed for lesbians' (see also Little, 2015). Andy also thought the 1990s lesbian movement was characterised by an effort to claim space, identity and visibility, and resulted in the creation of 'lesbian only' spaces, such as lesbian-only dances and bars. Similarly, Val recalled that 'separate to being women or feminists we were lesbians, and [the 1990s were] an interesting time because there was this separatist movement which was all about hating men and denouncing any kind of straightness and all that kind of stuff' (Little, 2015). While Val thought that this movement was important in terms of promoting 'lesbian visibility' at the time (Little, 2015), she and other members of the Drag Kings also identified ways in which the resulting conflation of femininity with heterosexuality was counterproductive to the overall queer feminist project. In rejecting heterosexuality, lesbians whose appearance was regarded as 'straight' were sometimes subject to criticism from some members of the lesbian community. Andy recalled facing criticism herself for 'being perceived to have heterosexual privilege', because she preferred to wear makeup and 'feminine' attire. Cathie remembered being involved in the production of a lesbian competition called 'Ms Gay Downunder' in 2003, when the winner of the competition, who was 'quite femme and quite beautiful', was booed by the audience for not being 'gay enough' (see 'Gay victor booed for "straight" look', 2003). With parts of the lesbian community having 'set up lots of rules of what you're supposed to do and how you're supposed to be', Cathie and Andy felt that drag kinging may have presented a challenge to some lesbian feminists, who did not see the appeal of performing misogynistic heterosexual male characters. Andy suggested that perhaps, to some people, playing male roles was 'like allowing men into a lesbian space', or that performances with characters embodying 'toxic masculinity' may have retraumatised people in the lesbian community who had had negative experiences with men. Largely, though, Cathie and Andy felt that some of the criticism from within the community came from those who 'just didn't get it'.

The history of the Wellington drag king scene can perhaps be separated into two distinct periods: the early 2000s reign of the Drag Kings, and the more recent scene largely headed by the likes of Hugo Grrrl. I began my research assuming that the current scene had evolved from the earlier scene, and that the younger drag kings were aware of the Drag Kings moment and built upon that history. This was not the case. Rather, these two scenes formed independently of each other, so much so that Andy and Cathie believed the current scene would have existed regardless of the existence of the Drag Kings. Andy noted that the current scene emerged during the Drag Kings' 'five-year hiatus' where they did not do any performances as a troupe. She believed that this led to a new generation of younger aspiring drag kings having 'nobody to take a leaf from a book on, or feel that there was any support'. When the Kings regrouped, they felt as though they had suddenly stumbled into a scene dominated by kings they did not know, and who did not know them. 'I believe there might have been a couple of awkward moments', Andy recalled, 'where some of the people coming up through were

claiming to be the first [drag kings in Aotearoa/New Zealand]'. Due to the perceived lack of an Aotearoa/New Zealand drag king scene to build upon, this new generation began, as Andy put it, 'creating their own way of being in the drag community', resulting in a scene that looked quite different to that of the Drag Kings. Cathie noted that the current Wellington drag king scene resembles the scene they saw in Melbourne, where drag kings did not perform sketches and group numbers together as a troupe. Whereas the Drag Kings had formed out of a group of lesbian women who were interested in theatre and comedy, the troupe members suggest that the current drag king scene also has roots in the burlesque scene. The result of this burlesque influence, Jac and Andy suggest, has been that today's Wellington drag kings show a lot more flesh, and incorporate themes around body positivity and 'fat politics'. Audiences have also become more accustomed to risqué performances, with stripteases being not only common, but, as Cathie puts it, 'almost compulsory'. Tony Al Dente, however, still never fails to shock. When Cathie was asked by Hugo Grrrl to perform in a show he had produced, Tony (and his bodysuit) made an appearance to do the 'Full Monty', much to the surprise of the younger generation of drag kings and audience members. As Cathie came off stage, she remembered Hugo Grrrl saying, 'Oh my god, I was not expecting you to do that! I've never seen anyone do full frontal nudity!'

Today's drag kings also enjoy a larger degree of visibility, which has been attributed to the rise of *RuPaul's Drag Race* prompting Aotearoa/New Zealand drag kings to work fiercely for 'equality in the scene' (MacDonald, 2018). In 2018, TVNZ aired Aotearoa/New Zealand's very own drag competition, *House of Drag*, the winner of which was the only drag king contestant, Hugo Grrrl. While Hugo Grrrl, who runs a drag and cabaret events management company 'on a shoestring' budget, expressed frustration at the financial difficulties involved in performing and producing drag shows (*House of Drag*, s.1, ep. 7), his appearance and triumph in *House of Drag* indicates a level of visibility and acceptance of drag kinging as an art form that did not exist for the Drag Kings. Though Cathie acknowledged the amount of work it has taken for Hugo Grrrl to be in the position he is in today, she said that she was 'a little jealous' that drag kings like Hugo have been able to make a living through drag kinging. Cathie remarked that the Drag Kings shows had always required large amounts of effort, time and money, and members of the troupe could not 'get rid of the real job to focus fully on [drag kinging], you know, it's a risk'. When they travelled to do shows in Lyttelton and Auckland, the troupe lost money, so touring also proved to be financially unfruitful. As the troupe became 'a bit more grown up' and had somewhat dispersed in order to pursue their 'real jobs' (as Cathie put it), it became too difficult to put on shows.

Just as Horan and Matthews describe Aotearoa/New Zealand LGBT comedy as not being 'a tale that builds one step upon another to make a distinctive tradition', they also describe the Wellington drag king scene as a 'disconnected story of moments' (2019, ch. 4). As disconnected as these moments were, however, the different acts have since converged to some degree, staying in dialogue with each other and sometimes performing at events together. Jac, Cathie and Andy each expressed a lot of affection for the younger generation of drag kings, saying that they love the style and content of their shows. The things that they love about the current shows are very much products of new contexts: the Wellington burlesque scene itself, as well as a society that is more accepting of diverse sexualities and gender identities. This shows again the unique drag king cultures that develop when performers interact with wider contexts around them. 'I love the whole gender-benderiness', said Andy, describing the way the younger generation of drag kings perform gender in a more fluid way. Jac also said that she appreciated the newer drag kings' incorporation of 'fat politics' into their drag: 'I love that people are really challenging stuff and they're getting on stage and showing

so much more flesh than we ever did'. The convergence of the two distinct generations of drag kings has resulted in a broader community of queer performers who do drag in order to have fun, entertain audiences and challenge notions of gender. But overall, the Drag Kings' shows have become few and far between. Their last show was in 2018, and was the first time in three years they had performed together. 'I wish I was performing more', Cathie said, 'but, also, I'm glad that I'm not'. Andy nodded in agreement. While each of the troupe members were incredibly nostalgic when they shared their stories with me, getting older and busier has meant the energy for more regular shows is no longer there. What has remained, after 18 years of performing together, is a bond so familiar within queer communities. As Cathie told me, 'We've been together so long, it's like a family'. In no small way is this due to the troupe's unique form of drag kinging: always performing together, and always dedicated to making people laugh.

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