

Basically a vulgar parody on women

Halloween is night for drag queens

By DAVID McCAUGHNA

"An exclusive formal ball will mark Halloween in San Francisco this week. In couturier gowns and elaborately confected masquerades, the couples will whisk around the floor until 2 a.m., while judges award prizes for the best costume and the participants elect an 'Empress'. By then the swirling belles will sound more and more deep-voiced, and in the early morning hours dark stubble will sprout irrepressibly through their Pan-Cake Make-Up. The celebrators are all homosexuals, and each year since 1962 the crowd at the annual 'Beaux Arts Ball' has grown larger. Halloween is traditionally boys' night out, and similar events will take place in Los Angeles, New York, Houston and St. Louis."

--Time, Oct. 31, 1969.

And also, Time might have added, similar events will take place in Toronto. For Halloween in this city, like in most other large centres, has traditionally been blessed with its own drag balls. On this one night of the year it is legal for men masquerading as women to appear in public. For years it has been the habit of suburbanite Torontonians from Don Mills, Willowdale, Downsview, etc. to journey down to Yonge Street's 'gay row' to gawk at the drag queens as they go to the balls and parties in the gay bars and clubs along the street.

There is an important difference between drag queens and female impersonators. Female impersonators, while they are often homosexuals are not necessarily so, but are often heterosexual actors.

They entertain in night clubs and bars, for there is a segment of the population that finds men acting as women a very funny thing. There are a number of nightclubs in the United States that specialize in female impersonators. Finocchio's in San Francisco, for instance, features the best impersonators around the draws its audience from the city's homosexuals, straights, and curious tourists.

The most famous impersonator and certainly the best, Danny Le Rue, has his own club in London which is very fashionable, among its patrons are members of the Royal Family.

There was a brief rash of female impersonation shows in Toronto this summer. It started with a little production at the newly-opened Global Village that was extremely popular. It spawned a similar show at the Royal Alex, and finally a show called She-Rade at the Theatre in the Dell.

Drag queens are usually blatant homosexuals who identify so strongly with the female that they derive satisfaction by dressing as women. But in all their grotesqueness they are a cruel joke on the female ideal. For all their efforts at appearing as feminine as possible drag queens basically remain a parody of the female.

They accentuate all that is vulgar and repulsive: hideously made-up faces, fluffy wigs, and tight-fitting tasteless dresses.

If it is true that homosexuals harbour a deep felt hatred and suspicion of the female, then the drag queens would seem to be striking a blow at the female by portraying her in such extreme manner.

"Georgette was a hip queer. She (he) didn't try to disguise or conceal it with marriage or mans talk, satisfying her homosexuality with the keeping of a secret scrapbook of pictures of favorite male actors or athletes or by supervising the activities of young boys or visiting a turkish baths or mens locker rooms . . . but took pride in being a homosexual by feeling intellectually and esthetically superior to those (especially women) who weren't gay (look at all those great artists who were fairies!); and with the wearing of womens panties, lipstick, eye makeup (this including occasionally gold and silver-stardust-on-the-lids), long marcelled hair, manicured and polished fingernails, the wearing of womens clothes complete with padded bra, high heels and wig (one of her biggest thrills was going to BOP CITY dressed as a tall stately blond) . . . and the occasional wearing of a menstrual napkin."

--Selby, Last Exit to Brooklyn

God only knows what time the spectators start arriving on Halloween to watch the drag parade. By 8 the sidewalks on both sides of Yonge Street north of College for about three blocks were packed tightly. It was nearly impossible to pass through. The crowd was out for a good time, to ogle and laugh at the queers and they weren't about to move for the police or anyone.

The attention of the crowd was focused on the entrances of the clubs, especially the St. Charles where there was a big drag ball going on.

A girl passing through in a pant suit and cap became a victim of the evening's humour.

"Is that a boy or girl?"

"You can't tell around here tonight what the hell they are."

"Better not get too close to her."

The police were out in full force, but they were in a surprisingly good mood and tried vainly to keep sidewalk traffic flowing. They seemed amused by it all and one imagined that if they weren't on duty they'd be there anyway.

Suddenly a tide of jeers, cheers, and whistling was heard from around the corner, it advanced steadily up the street until everyone was straining on tip-toes to see what was coming. A group of five or six drag queens were sauntering up the street. The police held the crowd back to let them pass along the sidewalk.

"Hiya, honey."

"Will ya look at the tits on that one!"

"Sweet mother of Jesus."

The queens appeared to enjoy the attention they were getting from the crowd, but they were obviously nervous. After all, there were a couple of thousand people straining to watch them. A tall, statuesque queen in a tight sequined dress with a freaky blonde Afro-wig threw back his head defiantly: "Don't any of you give me any shit."

The queen's faces were drowned in make-up and they all wore coloured stockings to cover up their muscular legs. One or two didn't look bad and possibly could have passed for females in an ordinary situation,



Drag queens on parade

but most of them had tight, angular faces which were decidedly masculine and which no amount of make-up could help. They looked hard and clownish.

With a sweep the queens disappeared into the club and the crowd returned to its restless wait for the next arrivals.

"Aren't they incredible?" a fat woman asked her husband.

"They could pass for broads any day."

The crowd was practically drooling for the next appearance. This was public voyeurism at its height. The same atmosphere prevails at the scene of an accident or some other disaster when a large group gathers to watch. The spectators were glib and secure in the realisation that what they're watching is far removed from them.

Another commotion arose. Everyone looked frantically to see what was happening. Down the street ran a short, fat queen clutching his wig to his head and pursued by a man in a dark suit. The queen was laughing; he enjoyed the spotlight on his antics. Suddenly he took shelter in a bar and the crowd applauded.

"That night Harry went to the drag ball. Hundreds of fairies were there dressed as women, some having rented expensive gowns, jewelry and fur wraps. They pranced about the huge ballroom calling to each other, hugging each other, admiring each other, sneering disdainfully as a hated queen passed. O, just look at the rags she is wearing. She looks like a bowery whore. Well, lets face it, its not the clothes. She would look simply ugly in a Dior original, and they would stare contemptuously and continue prancing. (Last Exit to Brooklyn)

We wandered on down the packed street, eventually deciding to stop in at Le Coq

D'Or. It is one of Toronto's most popular clubs, with its flashy interior, semi-topless go-go girls, and crass stage show. We finally found seats at a table with two guys, one who had the word Newfoundland embroidered on the side of his jacket. The band was blaring with a din of mish-mash music and the girls were jerking in the cages. But we soon realized that the audience's attention was focused on another group of 'girls' — two tables of drag queens sitting in the centre of the floor.

The man with Newfoundland on his jacket was staring open-mouthed at the queens.

"Hey what do you think of that?" he asked us. "Ever seen anything like that?"

The eight or 10 queens were sitting drinking and talking. The waiters hovered over them and the queens flashed them big smiles.

"I was in the washroom," the guy at the table told us, "and one of them came in and I sure as hell got out fast. You know all you have to do is blow in their ear and they follow you all night."

He laughed, quite pleased with his wit-tiness. We remarked on the chest development of some of the queens.

"They are real, you know," our new friend explained. "They take pills for three days and they get a fabulous pair of jugs. Those guys have a set of boobs that would knock you out."

A tall queen, with a flaming red wig moved to the bar and chatted up the bartender. The queen giggled in a deep titter. "See that. That goddamn guy really goes for these queers. Like I said, all you have to do is blow in their ear and they won't leave you alone."

The queens were all quite thin. Only after looking at them for some time did I realize that they lacked hips; their figures descended from chest to knee without a curve. Two of them got up and left.

"They went out the ladies exit," the fellow at our table announced. "I'm not going to the bloody washroom again with those creeps around. Can you imagine standing up in there and one of them comes along."

It was late and we left; the guys from Newfoundland stayed, still staring at the queens. It was past midnight and we assume that the crowds outside the clubs would have vanished leaving the queens in peace. But they were still there and in full force. I was amazed that their twisted curiosities were still intact at that hour.

We passed quickly through the crowd. Outside a cafe a group of men were banging on the window and making faces and gestures at a lone black queen in a low-cut red gown. The queen sat sipping his coffee and payed no attention to them.

As we continued up the street, two slim queens with street-length silk gowns came out of a club and headed up the sidewalk in front of us. Their arms were around another. Almost immediately a group of men congregated about them kibitzing.

"Hey, beautiful, let's see what you got."

"Oh, are you ever one great chick."

They laughed and teased the queens. The queens smiled; they were slightly drunk. One of them with long white gloves flipped a rose he was carrying in the face of one of the men: "Piss off, sonofabitch."

Miss Cellany

If you were planning on getting rickets today to see Allen Ginsberg tonight at Burton auditorium, forget it. All tickets for the poetry series and for the mime series are gone. There are still some tickets left for the other programmes in the Fine Arts Department Performing Arts Series.

Planning is now underway for EXCALIBUR's fall literary special. If anyone is interested in doing book reviews, interviews, or most anything else, would they please get in touch with the cultural arts editor in the EXCALIBUR office or call 535-1222 and request David.

Harbinger, one of Toronto's longer living underground newspapers (its been around for about two years) appears to be giving up. They just put out an anthology of the 'best' from Harbinger called Eat Shit.

McClelland and Stewart's description of Scott Symon's new novel, Civic Square, is really something. The blurb reads: "Scot Symons' new novel is an LSD 'trip' through the nightmarish world of Toronto today — from Yorkville to Rosedale, from Civic Square to Blythe Folly. In the same way the author's first novel Place d'Armes, caught the French fact of Montreal in the early sixties, Civic Square documents the English fact of Toronto in the late sixties. It lays bare the Upper Canadian mentality, from the artistic-minded Yorkville hippie community to the city's '500' who run the country from their offices on Bay Street and their homes in Rosedale. Not quite prose, not quite poetry, this is no ordinary novel, but a McLuhanized narrative. . . ." If you should still want to read it, its \$17.50.

The ever-constant elevation of Bob Dylan has reached a new level. A 24-year-old New Yorker, A.J. Weberman, who

taught a course at the Free University there called Dylanology, has brought together a remarkable work called the Dylan Archives. It contains a catalogue of more than 1000 articles on Dylan, over 100 unreleased tapes and demos of sessions, rare uncopyrighted songs and a copy of Dylan's unpublished novel Tarantula. Weberman himself has written a 500-page dissertation on Dylan's lyrics, the first volume in what will be a series, which is a key to every single word, verse, and image in the whole of Dylan's work so far. Weberman even dissects the album covers. Here he interprets a detail from Dylan's painting on the Big Pink Album: "The cat who is propping up the piano player is Dylan since, as I have said, Dylan is behind the scene writing the Band's lyrics. Notice how light is shining on the ass of the cat Dylan is propping up, but not on Dylan. Which brings us to the theme of 'One More Night': that tonight no light will shine on Dylan." Weberman is currently looking for a publisher. — D.McC.