

Queens of Heart: Community Therapists in Drag

STUDY GUIDE



Queens of Heart: Community Therapists in Drag showcases the skills of Darcelle XV (Walter Cole), a seventy-five year old activist and female impersonator, as she manages the wild emotions of patrons during nightly shows at the club. Rather than analyzing the performers, the film puts audiences on the couch. Segments move from the surface to the depths of audience/performer interactions—from the hysterical reactions of bachelorettes on their "last night out," the paranoia of straight young men reluctantly entering queer places, the gender complexes of almost everyone, to struggles over grief and loss. Meanwhile, the performers offer interpretations of group dynamics and the actions of audience members. Through behind-the-scenes interviews, interactive dance numbers, and a narrative structure that links childhood experiences to the adult work of drag, the film tells the story of how these performers, like good therapists, must know themselves well enough to confront what they arouse in others. *Queens of Heart* is rich with astute observations on group psychology, sexuality and gender.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT



The documentary developed out of a class on gender, psychology, and film taught at Portland State University by Professor Jan Haaken. The project grew into a four-year study of performer and audience interactions at Darcelle XV, a female impersonation club in Portland Oregon. Enlisting methods in social action research, an area within Psychology that emphasizes community collaboration, *Queens of Heart* was completed as a feature-length documentary. Over 200 hours of footage were analyzed, using a coding manual that was based on initial interviews and observations at the club. The manual consisted of a series of themes with corresponding codes that were then applied to segments

of the footage. (See the animated Social Action Research bonus feature on the *Queens of Heart* educator's DVD.) The storyline for the documentary was constructed around the emergent themes, and video work samples were presented to performers at various junctures in the project to ensure the faithfulness of the documentary to the participants' actual experiences.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE FILM

The documentary is structured as a series of segments, with images of Rorschach cards and title cards marking the opening of themes and an unfolding story on group dynamics and drag. The use of the Rorschach images, conventionally known as the “ink blot test,” advances a central thesis of the film—that audience members project various fantasies, fears and desires onto the performers. Much like good therapists, the performers must develop the skills to work with these “transference reactions”—and to help audiences to be more reflective about their anxieties concerning sexuality and gender, rather than simply acting them out at the club.



Hysteria

The documentary opens with “Hysteria,” where we see Darcelle interacting with brides-to-be. This segment probes the performative aspects of bridal rituals and ideas about marriage, and why young women continue to come to Darcelle XV on their “last night out.” The young women enlist drag queens in casting off the corset of gender restrictions, but they also sometimes violate the boundaries of performers in the process. The film considers varying perspectives on the sexual advances of female patrons with performers on stage.



The following quotes from the film suggest a range of interpretations of touching, and differences among performers in how they negotiate body boundaries.

“To me boundaries are really important, I don’t like people touching me unless they are invited. When they go like that lady and just feel their way, that’s not okay.”

--Tiara Desmond, performer

“They are like Alice in Wonderland...they think this is their place.”

--Poison Waters, performer

“I’m a man in a dress, that’s pretty much saying ‘here touch me.’ ”

--Destiny Lynn, performer

Discussion Questions

How are boundaries drawn in this segment, and how do performers monitor their own personal boundaries? What are differing meanings of the concept of “hysteria”? Is the term used playfully or seriously in this segment? What critiques do the performers offer of some of the straight women at the club? What about the environment of the club as a liminal space makes gender boundaries ambiguous, or open to new rules for negotiating personal space?



Castration Anxiety

Although Sigmund Freud has been criticized for his theory of female “penis envy,” many feminists have reinterpreted Freud’s ideas through the lens of a gender analysis. In patriarchal societies, the penis *does* become a social signifier of power—and women often do suffer symptoms as a result of feeling powerless. Many feminist scholars argue that patriarchal societies are structured around the management of male anxieties over status hierarchies, or what Freud called “castration anxiety,” a preoccupation with loss of power. In this section of the film, we take up the question of what makes drag performance anxiety-provoking for straight male patrons. In playing with gender-based diagnoses, the film turns the clinical gaze generally directed at drag performers onto the audiences. Rather than asking, “why do they dress as women,” the film asks, “why do they find pleasure in watching drag?”

“If it wasn’t so funny, you would be saying, ‘what am I doing here, we’ve got to leave.’”

--Male patron

“He didn’t want to just shake my hand. He had to do this very, very hard to show that he was a man.”

--Darcelle XV

“It seems so wrong to say they need big balls to be a drag queen but...”

--Female patron

Discussion Questions

What parts of drag performance stir discomfort for many male patrons? What are some examples in the film of how the men manage that discomfort? Why do women in the audience

seem to have an easier time with the “bending” of gender norms?

Gender Complexes



Many patrons, and particularly those struggling with life transitions, find comfort in the club as a “liminal space.” The club also provides a kind of holding environment for those who do not conform to heterosexist and binary gender norms. This segment of the film recognizes the multiple identities within the queer community--distinctions between how people define themselves as gay/lesbian/bisexual, transgender, transvestites, or drag queens. And it also shows how straight identities require a certain amount of psychological repression to keep them in place. The roots of drag as a performative art grew out of the gay rights movement during the early 1970s, but the practice also stirs memories of early childhood. Patrons and performers alike recall “dressing up” as children, and how the pleasure in watching drag is tied to forbidden longings to cast off the tight corset of gender.

"The whole idea of drag is in general a little bit of poking fun at gender, in general, whether it be male or female."

--Roxy Le Roy

"My mom dressed me up as Dolly Parton in the fourth grade."

--Male patron

"There is some that can fool ya....Some of us can spot them better than others."

--Male patron

Discussion Questions

How does the performance of drag stir longings in normative hetero-masculinity that ordinarily are repressed? How might these longings shape emotional reactions to drag, particularly hostility and/or discomfort? How might the performance raise critical awareness concerning gender and sexuality?

Family Dynamics

Just as therapists need to know how their own histories and personal dynamics shape their responses to patients, Darcelle explains how drag queens must know themselves deeply in order to carry out this challenging work. This segment explores Darcelle's upbringing in a small lumber



town on the Willamette River in Oregon—a site of active union organizing during the 1930s—and explains how her early sense of community carried over into struggles for human rights. In looking back on family history, Darcelle focuses on both the traumatic and sustaining aspects of the past, both of which are important in understanding human experience. After the death of her mother and emotional abandonment by her father, Darcelle was nurtured by her aunt—a fat woman with a huge heart. Darcelle describes how her large breasts came to represent strength to him as a young boy. Memories of aunt Lil are often invoked as Darcelle works with women in the audience to feel good about being big, as well as her comic routines that mock the cultural fixation on thinness.

"I never could depend on anything from [my father], love, attention, nothing....But I had my aunt Lil... Whenever I needed help, I went to her...she was my strength."

---Darcelle XV

"When I was looking for a birthday card from home and it didn't come I came here for twenty years and had my birthday greeting."

--OLOC member (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change)

Discussion Questions

What are potential interpretations of childhood influences on Darcelle concerning the interest in drag performance? How does Darcelle understand her alliances with women through the humor of drag and in interacting with audience members?

The Talking Cure

One of the most famous patients in the history of psychoanalysis, given the name of Anna O in case studies, introduced the term “the talking cure” to describe this modern approach to therapy. As the patient gives voice to previously unspoken fears and desires, and finds that the therapist tries to understand rather than judging, the patient is better able to confront conflicts and fears. Darcelle tells several stories in this segment that illustrate her therapeutic role in the community, and how drag performance serves to embolden people to express concealed parts of themselves—often parts associated with stigma and shame.



You can't come in here and not be transformed...you learn that these are people who love, just like you do, but just have a little different way of showing it.

--Male patron

"Most people are fenced in...but wouldn't you hope that if people are fenced in that there are holes in the fence so that they can see another world out there?"

--Darcelle XV

Discussion Questions

How might this entry into a "queer space"—and exposure to an aesthetic created primarily by gay men—provide support for people struggling with life transitions? What is the surprise turn of the "Rhinstone Cowboy" number? In using the fence as a metaphor, what is Darcelle saying about how defenses against anxiety are expressed in prejudices?

Film Subjects

Darcelle XV (Walter Cole)
Roxy Le Roy (Roxy Neuhart)
Poison Waters (Kevin Cook)
Tiara Desmond (Donavan Banks)
Destiny Lynn (Donald Kahapea)
Tommy Girl (Thomas Bentley)

NOTES FROM DIRECTOR

As a psychology professor, therapist, and documentary filmmaker, I have been interested for some time in forms of work that are not usually taken seriously. Drag performance is one such form of work. The campy type of female impersonation carried out night after night for 40 years at Darcelle XV's is deeply appreciated by locals, but the skills behind the craft are typically overlooked. In making *Queens of Heart: Community Therapists in Drag*, we set out to expose the work behind the act—and also to turn the tables on the audiences. Many people who come to Darcelle's ask, "why do they do it?" But as filmmakers, we were more interested in pursuing the question of "why do they come?" Part of the reason they come, we found, is that they are seeking something from the performers they cannot find elsewhere, a chance to acknowledge the anxieties and absurdities of sex, whether gay or straight, and to vicariously play with identity, suspending for a night the rigid boundaries between masculine and feminine. Audiences project their own longings and fantasies onto the performers, who operate much like Rorschach cards for fascinated patrons.



Like drag itself, our documentary project of putting audiences on the couch was part tongue-in-cheek and part serious cine-psychoanalysis. Patrons were initially reluctant to respond to our questions about why they came and what they thought drag was all about. The routine response was, "It's so much fun!" Over time, however, we learned to engage audiences—catching people as they entered and left the club. The film crew crawled through packed spaces behind the scenes, hid behind heavy curtains, and climbed through tightly knit rows of excited patrons to get passing comments by performers and patrons about how each understood the nature of drag performance. We learned a lot about why people come to drag clubs during the four years of producing this film, and we developed a deep respect for the skills of the performers. Like good therapists, the performers had to know themselves well enough to take a lot of emotional heat without getting burned.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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