

Out, Part 2: The Slow Stuff Between the Exposition and the Climax

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What the hell is Drag Outreach, anyway?...the gauntlet (not to be confused with The Gauntlet)...the apple-lined portrait...straight into it... scrutiny...Pepper's boots...

A good cast is worth mentioning at least once, so for those unfamiliar with the players: Kim is my girlfriend, my fiancée, my SO, my Imzadi, the other half of what I am. Louise is one of my closest friends, both an indirect catalyst and vital element of all this. Most people like me aren't lucky enough to meet someone like her. She's Obi-Wan to my Anakin Skywalker. (What that says for the future, I don't know.)

Then there's the other queens. Pepper Spray is the team captain, the head queen by any standard. Pepper, although tall (taller than me, and I'm 6'2) opts for what I suppose you could call a more "realistic" look, i.e. less blatantly flaming. That's all reserved for Jimbo, your (stereo)typical flaming genderfuck drag queen. None of this covering- up-your-five-o'clock-shadow-with-makeup or trying to act credibly feminine for him. And god bless him for it. Even if you don't like that sort of drag queen (and you know who you are), you couldn't help but admire his energy. If you get a kick out of that sort of drag queen (and you know who you are), you couldn't help but admire his energy.

Unfortunately, I can't begin to remember the others' names, so Number One and Number Two will have to suffice. Unlike myself or Pepper, Number One arrived fully dressed (as did Jimbo, more or less), a thin drink of water in a slim black dress and a platinum blonde wig. Didn't talk much, and seemed to approach it like more of a job than anyone else. Number Two didn't show up until we were almost done, actually, but more fit my perception of the "cross-dresser in his late

thirties" rather than a "drag queen," whatever either term means. (This isn't meant to sound like a judgment, mind you.)

StopAIDS is a non-profit organization with a fairly simple goal, to reduce the transmission of HIV amongst self-identified gay and bisexual men in San Francisco. From the literature, the description of outreach is to "engage gay and bisexual men in 15 min. safe-sex interventions, and invite them to participate in a StopAIDS discussion group." In practical terms, this involves surveying them on the street about their sexual habits: have they had anal sex in the last six months (first question), was a condom used, other forms of sex, questions along those lines both general and specific. Drag outreach is generally considered one of the more effective forms because people (and when I say "people" I mean aforementioned self-described gay and bisexual men; this is not discriminatory, it's just that there are organizations specific to the straight and lesbian community as well) often find it easier to discuss these things with a drag queen. How embarrassed can you be talking to someone who looks like that?

First, you have to get to the people. SA's headquarters at Market and Sanchez are a few blocks away from the corner of 18th and Castro, where it actually takes place. I've never timed it, but it's maybe a five or ten minute walk. Frankly, I think that even if SA was located on that corner the walk would still be part of the ritual. A sort of warm-up, if you will. To either get used to all the attention or to soak it all in, depending on your point of view. Jimbo was definitely in it for the latter.

Our first stop was at a Peet's Coffee on Market, apparently where Pepper works. Pepper and Jimbo went in; Number One and I stood outside for a minute, then figured what the hell and went in. One first of many, I suppose: after being out in public for the first time, going inside a public establishment, and not an explicitly gay one for that matter.

I've avoided talking about "what it was like" being outside in full femme, mainly because I haven't the foggiest idea how to describe it. I just was, that's all. The only thing I was genuinely nervous about was the actual "outreach" aspect, soliciting people to take the survey. I hate it when people try to talk to me on the street, and I'm to this day not crazy about being the one doing it. As for being out dressed, it provoked no particularly extreme emotions, high or low. I guess if a word must be assigned, it's "natural." It felt no more or less natural than the way I'm usually dressed. (Here's where it gets *real* confusing.) Which isn't to say I didn't enjoy it—I did, a great deal, and it's something I intend to make a habit out of. But it wasn't particularly sexual, which it is for many people and as I was somewhat expecting. Perhaps the more visceral pleasures, so to speak (I don't mean sexual, either, though I'm not quite certain what I *do* mean), will begin to develop after I've lost more weight, done it for a while longer, and in general gotten better at it. I still have a long way to go.

A shop with a window full of mirrors is strategically placed on Market along our route. Naturally, we stopped and primping ensued. Not that I had the foggiest idea what to do, so I just kinda looked at myself. Not much different from the mirror inside SA. My reflection, nothing more.

The usual place for drag outreach is the southeast corner of 18th and Castro; wasn't going to happen tonight, as it was the location of the Lady Di tribute by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. (If you're not familiar with the Sisters...oh, girl, you're beyond my help.) Flowers, candles, banners with zillions of messages and signatures, the whole nine yards. What I found most interesting was a large chalk portrait of her on the sidewalk—lined with green apples. I was informed that they were there simply to keep people from walking on the picture. Fair enough, but darn it, I wanted there to be a deeper connection. Alas, no. Apples were used for no reason other than they worked.

So, we were across the street on the southwest corner, in front of a club called Harvey's, one of the few with windows. As appropriate a place as any, since they hold drag shows regularly and a local cable show called Electric City is more or less based from there. Did I say windows? Big windows. Like, the walls are mostly windows. We had an audience from all sides.

My base of operations was the perpetually overflowing garbage can next to the bus shelter. Again, as appropriate a place as any. Besides, I needed somewhere to occasionally put my condom-filled purse (not mine, but SA's; like the bra, it was a detail we never got to in planning) and the clip-board with the surveys. Jimbo was also carrying a football-sized inflatable pencil—really, could I make this stuff up?—and brought enough for all of us, but thankfully Pepper and Number One both declined, making it easier for me to do so.

I'm four-eyed. (Wham! For some of you, your mental image of me just changed.) I'm not blind without my glasses, but just nearsighted enough to where it's not good if I'm without them. I tried to go without them for about two minutes, but it just didn't work. Bleh. And why can't a drag queen wear glasses, I ask you?

I also took my hair down after a while. Louise and Kim (whom, I might add, I didn't see at all while I was out) suggested that wear most of it back in a ponytail, leaving enough hanging in front to frame my face. I had it like that until I got tired of seeing my reflection in Harvey's window without my hair all around my face. What's the point of having long hair if it's tied back, particularly when you need as much help as you can get to appear feminine? It was a little windy, but there can be something kinda seductive about brushing hair away from one's face. I have no idea if it worked for me, but I gave it a shot.

The hardest part of it all, predictably, was getting people's attention. Jimbo had no problem whatsoever getting right into people's faces, and I'll be damned if it didn't work every time. That was a bit beyond my level of courage (and not to

give myself too much credit, but I think I was courageous enough just being out there), so I opted for more of the hawker style which I'd been shown in training: calling out when people walked by stuff along the lines of "Sex survey! StopAIDS project!" Etc. Every time I did so, I tried to add something on: "Fun and painless!" "Firm yet gentle!" "Intimate yet personal!" "Green yet velvety!" "Join me at the trash can and we'll rap!" I tried to change it every time, even though nobody would notice. I tend to babble like an idiot when I'm nervous, so it wasn't hard.

It didn't take long, actually. (Pepper commented that I was much more into it than most on their first drag outreach.) And, wouldn't'cha know it, the first person I spoke to was as straight as the day as long. Nothing wrong with that, but it's useless as far as the statistics go. I suspected that a lot of the reason he stopped was just to see what it'd be like to talk to a drag queen, though he was quite open and didn't seem uncomfortable about the subject. Though he was a little shocked when I described the concept of rimming: "You mean putting your mouth up to the booty-hole?" Toe-MAY-toe, toe-MAH-toe...

The second guy won my heart right away: he said he liked my dress. I resisted the temptation to tell him where I got it and how much it cost (\$15). I don't think I could have imparted the information with the necessary style.

Then again, "style" was something I was sorely lacking. I don't say this to be self-deprecating, but rather as a simple fact. I was just myself. I didn't have the mental energy necessary to adopt any kind of persona, if you will. And that's not necessarily a bad thing, I guess, but what better time to have a little fun? Something else to work on; I guess if I had a role model in that regard, it'd be Kelly Michaels. If you don't know who she is, imagine a Madonna impersonator with a very noticeable southern twang.

Anyway, we also got into a guessing game of each other's age. Another first: I stood back and let a guy study me closely. He guessed 23. (I'm 24, for those of you playing along at home.)

Yeah, I'll admit it: I'm a little miffed that he was the only person to comment in any way on my appearance. I was at least hoping for someone to say they liked my hair, 'cause it's *real*, people, it ain't no wig, but nooooo—all anyone could comment on were Pepper's boots. I kid you not, someone driving by actually yelled out that they loved her boots. Sure, they were nice, but hey! Have I been growing this mane for the last nine years for no reason? Sheesh!

(Sorry. Had to get that out.)

Owing largely to the Di tribute, it was a slow night. I only spoke to three people in the roughly hour and half we were out there, though Pepper assured me that I definitely kicked ass for my first time and on a night like that.

Number Two finally arrived just as we were calling the survey portion of the evening quits at 10:45pm. But, the night wasn't quite over.

Coming Up: A pointless history lesson...an audience with the Sister and another exercise in poor taste...the gum that tastes like rubber... getting intimate with someone's groinatological area...Neve's hair... the only reason I envy Republicans...



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