"THE GIDDINESS OF THE PERFORMANCE": AN INVESTIGATION OF DISTURBING, DELIGHTFUL DRAG

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Performance artist John Kelly is that most elusive sort of creator: one who challenges his public and stays true to his principles while managing to sell. His work has garnered both critical and popular acclaim, despite his atypical and potentially disquieting performance style. His longest-running and most famous show (he has dubbed it his "Bolero") is "Paved Paradise," an homage to Joni Mitchell performed in a wig, dress, and full makeup (Levy). The act has been a hit since its debut at the inaugural Wigstock festival in 1985, so much so that Kelly has nearly become defined by it (Levy). People continuously pay good money to watch John Kelly "do Joni," and it's not only the gay community in the audience: a survey of blogs and comments on Internet sites shows that heterosexuals embrace the idea of the drag show as well, at least when Kelly is the one doing the dragging (Kelly). It's a little strange that this should be so. After all, many people might be profoundly perturbed if John Kelly entered their homes as Joni Mitchell or bumped into them on the street wearing lipstick and heels. Yet patrons gladly shell out for theater tickets to watch Kelly perform drag on a stage in front of hundreds of people. How can such behavior be so frowned upon in private yet cheered in public? To attempt to understand this conundrum, we must first determine why drag can both disturb and delight.

In feminist theorist Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, she argues that our society has developed a "radical dependency" on a "very binary frame [of] thinking about gender" (xxx). We create "ostensible categories" through our system of gender norms, a system that is based on a perceived masculine/feminine dichotomy. Our "codes of purity and taboos" establish what "will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be 'real'": in other words, what will be "normal" (xxv). Through this process, Butler argues that questions of gender become subjected to a black-and-white discourse on "truth or falsity," where societal conventions choose who is assigned "legitimacy" (186, xxv).

Drag, then, inhabits a gray area of the gender spectrum, straddling the line between true and false and even threatening to erase it altogether. When we watch a drag show, we encounter a curious challenge: How do we classify the performer based on our binary model of gender? Drag becomes an odd sort of "double inversion," setting before us two equally plausible yet opposite interpretations of the artist's gender: The performer could be a man on the outside with a woman inside (a body with an Adam's apple and testicles is channeling a female spirit), or (s)he could be a woman with a man inside (the feminine exterior in the form of the costume is covering up the masculine body that lies underneath) (Butler 186). These "contradict[ing]" "claims to truth"

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subvert the entire notion of "truth and falsity" (186-7). Drag queens blatantly buck the framework of binary gender that society has created (which Butler labels a "preemptive and violent circumscription of reality") and in doing so they expose "the tenuousness of gender" and the circumvention of actuality "performed by gender norms" (xxv).

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, an academic who often concerns himself with entities on the outskirts of our societal boundaries, writes in his essay "Monster Culture," that beings with "ontological liminality" who hang between spheres of perception and appear to "question binary thinking and introduce a crisis" are (or can be called) "monsters" (6). Cohen's "monsters" are entities that exist as "disturbing hybrids" outside of the "classificatory 'order of things'" (6). They are "form[s] suspended between forms," just as drag performers are. Given Butler's analysis of drag as a force that threatens to subvert cultural boundaries, therefore, we may safely label John Kelly and his ilk "monstrous" in that they are "third term[s] that problematize the clash of extremes" (that is, terms that do not uphold our notion of a dichotomous and exclusive social order); they are "dangerous" beings that "threaten to smash distinctions" (6).

Through this discourse between Cohen and Butler, it becomes evident why drag agitates us so. The drag performer represents a direct refutation of all our preconceived binary assumptions about gender, and so can be viewed as a sort of monster. Both Cohen and Butler recognize that, in Cohen's words, drag queens demand "a radical rethinking of boundary and normality" (6), what Butler calls "a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real" (xxiv). This realization that a major revision of "truth" is needed to accurately understand the complexities of gender breeds a cognitive "dissonance" in our logical, compartmentalized minds (Butler 187).

Part of what makes us fear "monsters" is their ability to destroy (villages, cultural frameworks), but their "destructiveness" is really a "deconstructiveness" (Cohen 14). The monster dismantles our artificial categorizations, Cohen says, by showing us that "difference originates in process rather than in fact" (14). Butler comes to a similar conclusion regarding gender specifically, writing that the "naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (190; see also xxiv). Through the "double inversion" of drag (the ambiguity of the artist's identity), "drag implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself" (Butler 186-7). If the performer can essentially "play" a woman, or a man, and thereby become a strange hybrid between the two, it suggests not only that our two distinct gender categories can be mixed at will, but also that all gender identity can be arrived at through acting and imitation. A performance like John Kelly's recognizes the artifice of the common gender structure even when such "configurations . . . are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary" (Butler 187). The "monster" of drag creates a "revolution in the very logic of meaning" (Cohen 7).

This revolutionary aspect of drag goes a long way towards explaining why Kelly refers to his performances as "punk" and also why audiences flock to see him partake

in a "freakish" act (Levy). Our cognitive dissonance, our aversion to the "monster" (what Cohen would call a sort of fear), is no barrier to our enjoyment of the show—and on some level, it may even enhance it. While watching a drag show, our "bored and repressed" minds are treated to a temporary unshackling, and we are "freed to populate the margins" (Cohen 17) of our conceptual landscape with John/Joni. Even if some in Kelly's audience have no desire to don a dress themselves and start crooning "Big Yellow Taxi," on some level they appreciate and even admire Kelly's ability to fearlessly challenge their most basic societal assumptions—as a punk rocker, he is sticking it to the man. Butler lends her support to this interpretation, arguing that "part of the pleasure [of drag] . . . is the recognition of a radical contingency between sex and gender" (Butler 187); that is, our love of the performance stems from Kelly's demonstration that our assumed male/female dichotomy is *un*natural and *un*necessary. "We distrust . . . the monster at the same time we envy its freedom," Cohen says, and therein lies the core of our attraction to drag. It is not the cross-dressing itself that we "fear and desire," but the act of liberation that comes with the recognition of gender's fluidity (Cohen 16). Some may still distrust the practice, or be perturbed by the implications drag holds for our societal codes, yet many are intrigued by the possibility that a performer like John Kelly offers.

Cohen provides one way to reconcile the inherent dilemma of the drag show (i.e., how a behavior can be held suspect in society yet lauded on stage): By keeping Kelly removed in a theatrical setting, we allow him a "clearly delimited" and "permanently liminal" space in which to live, just as we do for other "monsters" in Cohen's conception (17). In this realm we are temporarily treated to escapist fantasies, but we can rest assured that the show will indeed sometime end. The fun of the performance only stops, Cohen says, when the monster threatens to leave its enclosure and obliterate the "thin walls of category and culture" (17). Thus Butler's recognition that the "giddiness" of a drag show lies in "*implicitly reveal[ing] the imitative structure of gender itself*," and exposing our own cultural framework as artifice is only half of the puzzle, because if the same device was used offstage to subvert gender norms, the transvestite would be greeted with a profound wariness (187). The key to the appeal of drag to a mass audience is that such subversive, liberating behavior takes place as a "safe expression" of "monstrosity": It is relegated to the stage, where we may play and let our minds wander freely while knowing that we are watching a show.

This seems to adequately resolve our curious drag paradox, but our interpretation needs revision when John Kelly puts it to the test. Near the end of "Paved Paradise," the performer "suddenly sheds his costume," "stepping out of his role and creating a moment that is strangely profound" (Levy). The audience is "unsettled, affected" by this gesture, yet they often give Kelly a rousing standing ovation (Levy). Why should this moment provoke such an outpouring of approval? After all, every member of the crowd bought a ticket knowing they were going to watch a man do Joni, so why react so overtly when Kelly confirms what they already know? For that matter, what's

"unsettling" about Kelly revealing he's not a woman—didn't everyone come to see a dude in a dress? This moment (including Kelly's gesture and the audience's reaction to it) is a crucial key to understanding the drag mystery.

Before addressing the significance of this moment, though, we must acknowledge that John Kelly is extremely good at what he does. The *New York Times*' Ann Powers captures Kelly's unique skill in her review of "Paved Paradise," writing, "There's drag, and then there's transformation through spiritual osmosis," while no less a luminary than Joni Mitchell herself declared that watching John Kelly made her feel like "Huck Finn attending his own funeral . . . I didn't expect to be so touched" (Kelly). The fact that Kelly can deliver such a profound out-of-body experience to Mitchell shows that Kelly is not simply putting a caricature before his audience, but rather fully embodying his subject so effectively that even the subject herself is moved. This holds its own implications. Butler might point out that because Kelly's artificial gender is so convincing, it reveals that "the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation" (188). But I would argue that Kelly's skill in fact de-emphasizes the "drag" aspect of his show. Through his intense "channeling" of Mitchell, Kelly effectively makes us forget, at least for a time, that it is a man singing (Levy). He leads us into the Cohenian realm of "escapist delight" (Butler's state of "giddiness") that results from communing with a "monster" in a secure context (17). Kelly becomes an actor, a person bringing life to a role, and if he stays in that mode, the piece is little more than a masculine woman performing. We can let our minds forget for a while that Kelly is a man because he so fully enters his character, and in doing so we take a little of the edge off "Paved Paradise."

However, when Kelly removes his wig, we are jarred back out of this forgetfulness. The dramatic reveal is Kelly's punkiest statement—this is drag, and don't you forget it. Some may argue that by "revealing" he is a man, Kelly effectively restores order to our fragile system by upholding the "reality" of his masculinity, but I hold that the action is more complex than that. The "unsettled" crowd at this crucial moment is not disturbed because logical categories are being upheld—where's the danger in that? They are unsettled because Kelly has taken his subversion one step further: through the "device" of shedding his costume (Kelly's words), the performer can really "mess with people" (Levy).

Drag is artifice, a kind of theater. By calling the act of removing this artifice a "device," Kelly says that even taking his wig off is a staged gesture, that the shedding of the costume and the ostensible restoration of order is just as "put on" as the drag show itself (Levy). The entirety of "Paved Paradise" is "gender performance" (that is, a man acting like a woman), but if becoming a man is part of the performance as well, then how do we know when the acting stops? How do we know when we're watching something "real?" The answer is that it's *all* real, and it's equally all staged: the reveal in Kelly's act takes us into the labyrinth of gender with no string to follow back home.

Gender becomes, as Butler says, "an imitation without an origin," "neither true nor false" (188, 193).

This revelation challenges us, it pushes our buttons, yet at the same time its inherent liberation is exhilarating. The audience cheers the heady sense of freedom that comes with stretching the limits we have created for ourselves. In so effectively subverting gender constructs, Kelly takes us all the way to the edge of the cliff, lets our stomach get butterflies as we experience the thrill of looking down. Then he goes one step further by taking off the wig. He shoves us over, yet catches us before we drop, leading to such a rush that we have to cheer. "Paved Paradise" strains our boundaries to their extreme, yet stays *just* safe enough (as a stage show) to keep its audience from becoming too frightened. John Kelly's drag is exciting because it is somewhat akin to cognitive bungee-jumping, with trust in the fiction of theater as the cord.

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