

Such a Drag...

A Study of Sasha Velour, Nightgowns,
and the false diversity complex of
RuPaul's Drag Race.



By Isaac VanCuren

She stepped into the room and screamed.



A powerhouse entrance on RuPaul’s Drag Race immediately placed her on the map. From the promo of season 9, Sasha Velour, made her mark as the queer art queen from Brooklyn, NY. Throughout the competition based reality tv show, she consistently brought to the table an air of creative unapologetic queer energy back into a series that has tended to exclude “odd” or “less-mainstream” performers.¹

As a gender-fluid drag queen, designer, and Fulbright scholar, Sasha has captivated the queer community with her avant-garde runway looks, highbrow humor, and in-depth knowledge of LGBT History. In the past she has been described as being “too intellectual” for drag and has pushed back defending drag as an art form that observes the world and comments on it using sharp wit that is culturally, politically, and philosophically charged. She’s stated, “Information is the ultimate weapon that queer people need to arm ourselves with.”² But as a performer she has learned to put entertainment first making drag that is creative and clever.

Sasha has been a proactive advocator of various types of drag understanding that at the simplistic terms drag is a sense of world building. You can start with an empty blank stage and create whole world to show and explore emotions and fantasies. With her monthly drag show, *Nightgowns*, Sasha shares the spotlight, inspiring and creating safe spaces for performers. Two years ago the show began with a small audience in Bizarre Bushwick. Now *Nightgowns* has been regularly performed at National SawDust, and has been hosted at the Skirball Center at NYU.

¹ Let me just note that there is still not a show for drag kings, or non-binary drag performers a point I will get to later

² Sasha’s interview with The Guardian, “Sasha Velour: Drag is Darkness turned into Power” Oct. 2017

The impact of RuPaul's Drag Race has not only drastically altered Sasha's career, but has played a large role in the queer community by displaying self narratives which impact the bigger community. The problem is that RPDR gives an illusion of openness and queerness with an intention of fluidity of gender but that doesn't tend to match the action or reaction causing this show to fall back into the continuation of heteronormative, racist, and sexist behaviors. While Sasha has given opportunities to other drag performers that do not confine themselves to corporate, capitalistic, and/or "mainstream" standards, she had to operate through the system in order to succeed in the competition and take home the crown.

I understand the "playful" commentary nature of drag, however RPDR continues to perpetuate sexist behavior by enforcing a gender binary and its patriarchal practice of masculine domination over the feminine. The show is often a standard entrance way into the queer community, especially to young queer people, through its current commercialization via its new platform on VH1³. However, some well intended efforts in the expansion of diversity are mixed with the perpetuation of marginalized position of people creates an ironic illusion of queerness that actually continues a rhetoric of narcissism as liberation⁴. All this coming together and working for the neoliberal capitalistic market. Sasha has found herself within the middle of the battle. With her show, *Nightgowns*, she has been using her privilege as a traditional feminine presenting drag queen to provide a space for other drag performers, blurring the line between drag and performance art. By playing up her baldness and high art, Sasha has operated under the corporate standard with an air of neoliberalism continuing the rhetoric that difference is only

³ A benefit of the global connectivity via wide spread media

⁴ A concept found in Susan Douglas's Essay "Narcissism as Liberation"

recognized and celebrated when it benefits capitalism. Queer potentially resists individualization and competition which is in direct opposition of celebrity status, reality tv, and neoliberalism.

A drag show organizes people, a sort of town hall type feel, where people can talk about and listen to various ideas of gender, success, and family. It challenges the conservative ideas that are plaguing our country. Queer futurity drives away from the corruption of small differences. Being queer never means having to define oneself. José Muñoz tells us that a queer identity is never fully realized or explained or pinned down. It is a fluid hope for a better, more fluid future.

RuPaul has mentioned how they view gender identity as fluid and changing⁵, a view that Sasha also holds. However, the gender performance represented does not clearly denote such an understanding. RPDR continues to ignore the realities and consequences of sexism and sexist stratification. The show is a great platform for discussion of self narrative which reflects onto a global whole. Now moving into a mindset of tolerance, inclusion, and hospitality (not just this show, but little by little a global change). However it still limits the art of being fabulous or fierce to a feminine gender performance, saying that masculinity can never be seen in that light. These subversive ideas should not take away the resilience of individuals who are navigating violent, transphobic, and patriarchal systems regardless of identity.

The competition and individualistic pursuit of RPDR disengages from the coalition that *Nightgowns* attempts to create, but both shows fall back into a standard appeal to a middle-class, gay, white, cisgender, masculine, male majoritarian center, or the “mythical norm”⁶. We are long overdue in addressing issues of diversity within the LGBTQ+ community.

⁵ RuPaul in an interview with *The Advocate* “*Quiet, Children: RuPaul Has Things to Say About Trump, Awards, and Cops*” August 24, 2016

⁶ Concept coined by Audre Lord in “*Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*” Pg. 116

“Current Fucking Reigning”⁷



As the winner of Season 9, Sasha is now given an international platform and fan base which grants various benefits, but holds more pressure as a queer public figure. The bald provocateur known for pop-art crowns and futuristic drag couture, is not the first contestant to be bald on RuPaul’s Drag Race. She drew inspiration of the beauty of the bald head from her late mother’s battle with cancer and wanted to bring that into the drag community. Sasha has had a privileged educational history born

to a labor history professor dad and to a “Daughters-of-the-American-Revolution Protestant” editor mother. Sasha has travelled all over the world “from university to university.”⁸ A Jewish liberal childhood experience shaped by cultural practices and family traditions rather than allegiances of place or class, Sasha operated in similar contexts as drag, forming an identity in culture with a mixture of pop culture (music, art, and fashion) with queer aesthetics.

Sasha studied theatre and literature at Vassar College with a focus on translation. “Translation became a philosophy for not just thinking about language and culture, but about gender, and how we distill ideas into our own bodies and experiences,”⁹ A Fulbright scholarship to Russia focused on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement under the illusion of being about “political art” to get approved by the Russian government. Sasha had existed in an ivory tower in academia and ended up pursuing a master’s degree in cartooning at The Center for Cartoon

⁷ A song lyric from Bob the Drag Queen’s “*Bloodbath*”

⁸ An interview with Sasha with Forward. “*Inside Sasha Velour’s Talmud of Drag*” Aug 12, 2015

⁹ An interview with Sasha with Forward. “*Inside Sasha Velour’s Talmud of Drag*” Aug 12, 2015

Studies. Sasha began as a comic character before making her way to the stage after evolving and taking more risks, she has established a kind of horror-high fashion drag with a signature brow.

She has used her individuality and oddity by transforming it for global consumption. Her bald head becomes an advantage by placing various items on it. First her iconic velour crown, then a decorative house¹⁰, and now in a historic reveal, rose petals at the height of her season finale performance of Whitney Houston's "So Emotional". This effect does open up the door slightly, but Sasha isn't drastically transforming the drag or queer community since she is ironically falling into corporate consumerist ideology.

The marketing machine has cranked out season after season with a new pack of drag queens. The labor in which these contestant do for the show is insurmountable. On top of the challenges and mini challenge these performers discuss issues concerning the LGBTQ+ community, global issues, eating disorders, family, relationships , etc. The personal narrative is powerful, but we must demystify ideas of identity and power and talk about the transformative communication pedagogy. Understanding how power operates within a changing society and understanding how communication is always already cultural and power is already operating in all communication situations. We must seek to challenge hegemony and change structural changes that are not just limited to reality tv and start conversations about what differences are needed, why they matter, and a destination to move towards. There are small acts of resistance regarding social manners manifested through individuals on the show. However the critical communication pedagogy asks us to recognize the social presence and community actions that enable and perpetuate standards of Eurocentric ideals of feminine beauty through a male dominated culture creating and establishing a synthetic ideal of female.

¹⁰ Was worn on Episode 11, Season 9 of *RuPaul's Drag Race "Pride Ball"*

Political Change: A Lesson in Drag at *Nightgowns*

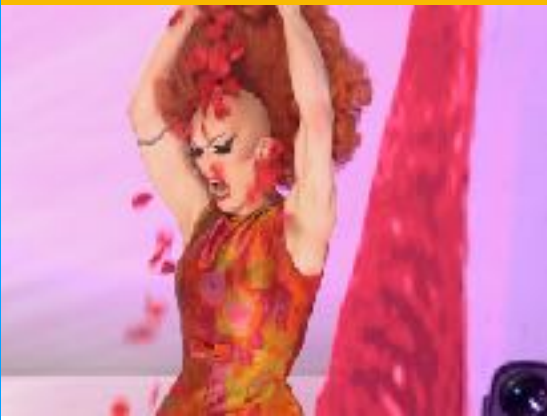
After her opening number Sasha gives a motivational and educational speech to audience at *Nightgowns*. She is a hostess, a teacher, and of course the headline performer. As she sits on stage throughout the show she changes from participator to audience

member, however she is disconnected from the group as a whole. The audience is split up into standing and seated tickets in the highly theatrical space. It is an odd opposition to the gay bar/club layout. No longer do you tip dollars, all transactions have become digital. The sense of a drag community seems blurred in the space due to the wide history of the tipping exchange. The show becomes a high art performance night that has been curated to connect different forms of drag. Sasha is on the road become another RuPaul.

Transformed through the cash prize of \$100,000, global platform, and rapid sales of Velour merchandise¹¹, *Nightgowns* has been reconstructed into a nonprofit organization raising money for queer people in need around the country. With a mixture of performances celebrating the diversity of Brooklyn drag, a raffle including art work and merchandise, all concludes with a meet and greet. The night becomes a whole experience. Performers include drag kings, queens who are assigned female at birth performing drag, non-binary performers, and of course drag queens. In the future Sasha would like to take the show on the road connecting city drag and rural drag communities. Transforming consciousness through education and representation while nurturing values of civility and compassion, Sasha aims to share the spotlight with her community and encourage growth and activate drag's political roots.



¹¹ Mixture of Accessories, Prints, Magazines, Book, and Apparel available on houseofvelour.com/shop



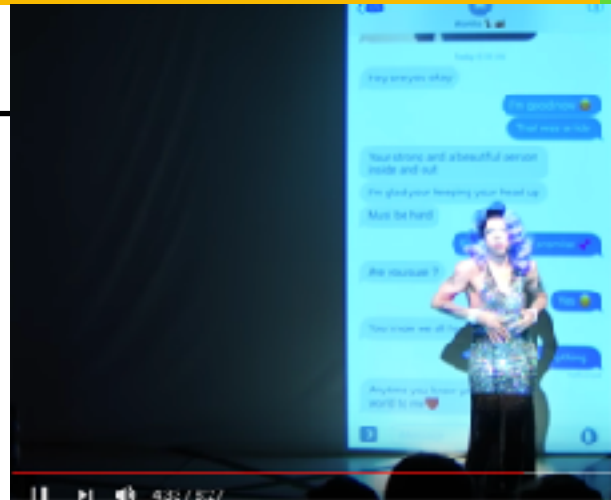
So Emotional: A Sense of Home, Family, and Love

A drag family with its kinship becomes a support group where interpersonal relationships are to be forged. The House of Velour now incorporates Sasha's chosen family and biological family. Papa Velour, Boyfriend Velour, and even greyhound Vanya Velour all have joined her chosen family. It's encouraging and beautiful to see the combination of the two since not everyone has family that wants to be involved in their queer lives. With family members introducing her to fashion and classic cinema it's hopeful for queer youth. Drag shows are now seeing a current trend of young queer people with their parents. These biological family ties help break away from queer isolation and the immediate need to form a queer family, but does so in a productive way that fuses the biological and chosen family into one.

Nightlife is often the only space that feels safe for people who often feel marginalized in everyday society. However that isn't available for queer youth. With the popularity of RPDR more youth are tuning into the show, but most do not directly identify with the predominantly gay male contestants. Little girls are not given equivalent queer role models. We should be moving into the interrogation of the many ways in which gender performances manifest both individually and collectively allowing for a robust and critical discussion that affects both cisgender and transgender bodies and identities. Thus addressing issues of diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and the mainstream media in which RuPaul and the art of Drag finds themselves a rising part of. An increase of personal narrative, LGBTQ+ history, and validity in vast forms of gender expression aim to connect a wide queer community through large media enabling conversations regarding politics, media, and law.

Aja's Narrative

“Autobiographical work is especially popular form for queer writers and performers and for the readers and audiences. In part this is because autobiography fits into the model of identity politics on which lesbian and gay liberation is founded.”¹² During the May 2017 *Nightgowns* show at National Sawdust,



Aja, another contestant on season 9 of RPDR and fellow Brooklyn queen, gave a lip-sync performance to Emili Sande's "My Kind of Love". Using a mixture of videos, texts, and facebook posts/comments, Aja expressed her journey through the reality tv show and the harassment she had received from fans regarding her acne scars. This cyber bullying self narrative reflects an awareness of different online environments' impact and interactions among performer and fans. The dynamics of dialog, productive discomfort, and discloser comment on the permanence of the written record while also showing a highly judgmental community. The different mediation of our current society has impacted the drag community in creating and expanding the notions of what it means to be a drag performer/artist/celebrity.

Before stepping on the show Aja was a semi-famous instagram drag queen, the backlash from the fans shows a strong investment in drag. The crazy fans hopefully are able to reflect on how the drag queens are not just characters, with this emotional dynamic performance attempting to shine light on the strict standards of beauty RPDR has taught the audience to expect. The show has a pattern of avoidance, denial, and evasion which lines up with ideas of post-racialism or antifeminism.

¹² *O Solo Homo* by Holly Hughes and David Roman Pg. 10



“Gender is a construct; Tear it apart”¹³

The shortcoming of RPDR limits the already existing inequalities the LGBTQ+

community faces on a day to day basis. It comes down to problematization, or lack thereof, of the intersecting identity markers of gender and race on television media. The show promotes the marketing of a minority subculture for mass consumption. This calls for a restructuring of the system that tends to consume most programming. RPDR fails to move past gay and lesbian conceptualization of gender and sexuality.

Queerness is about gender play. But has transformed into a strict label of sexual identity. The drag community has both affected the representation of gender-queerness in television and has been affected by the heteronormative structure of media that’s coded with dominant ideology. Either RuPaul should begin to reflect on the multiplicity of identities or more shows should give room to the drag king community, non-binary performers, and even queens who are assigned female at birth performing drag, who are leaps and bounds behind the visibility that drag queens benefit from being on RPDR, the most prominent stage for drag performers. It’s still difficult to make it as a drag queen if you have not been on the show.

RuPaul finds that if a female were to do drag it loses the irony that makes drag queens entertaining. It’s ironic that RuPaul relies on a dominance that hinders and harms women, using the patriarchy as a reason to justify a policy that excludes women from competing. I have to give credit where credit is due since the show not only tells history in the queer community, but also informs young people about the rich cultural heritage that their brothers and sisters before them have created. There are always episodes and challenges revolving around theme of gay-pride,

¹³ Lyric from “C.L.A.T.” ft. Aja, Alexis Michelle, Peppermint, and Sasha Velour.

HIV/AIDS awareness and education, and education about historically significant gay and drag related issues. However, it is pretty limited in its scope and “it’s an erasure of queer bodies in broader cultural canons that continues to privilege heteronormative modalities.”¹⁴ With a binary rhetoric and a layer of misogyny infused with the show connects to Foucault point in the *History of Sexuality* that “one’s own behaviors, attitudes, gender presentations and sexualities is taken away.”

It is a continuation of corrected gender expression with the creation of a desexualized queer subject for mass consumption which is consistent with a neoliberal post-identity that is incomplete opposition to Judith Butler’s notion of gender identity that states “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”¹⁵. All of us who are queer can loosely be labeled as solo performers since we have had to fashion and form and identity around our gender and sexuality, and drag is only one manifestation of this creation process.¹⁶ Identity is a social construction, it gives people a sense of being, and sets a guidelines for ways of acting. Identity is inextricably connected to power. Power is the ability to control situations, outcomes, and circumstances. The circulation of power within a “*malestream*”¹⁷/mainstream setting continues the categorization of identity and difference limiting the access to resources and the upward social mobility.

¹⁴ *Discontents of Being and Becoming Fabulous* by Benny Le Masters

¹⁵ *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler Pg. 25

¹⁶ *O Solo Homo* by Holly Hughes and David Roman Pg. 6

¹⁷ A term coined by Cornel West in “The New Cultural Politics of Difference”

In this neoliberal environment, RPDR and *Nightgowns* fall into a homonormative¹⁸ state in which the individual is given a consumer identity. This has plagued mainstream LGBTQ+, but drag can help bring political change. Drag performers continue to speak up against racism, sexism, harassment, and more which aids in the conversation and continuation of the “horizon of being” as Heidegger would put it. Diversity in artistic form, content, and terms of identity discuss a context of a larger culture and history in which we live. It enables, entertains, and mobilizes us. I have to acknowledge that Sasha Velour understands that she is “not inventing anything new with drag,” however it is a representation that hasn’t been popularized on RPDR. The show provides an outlet through which they can more truly express themselves while understanding that it is all done through a framework that puts high emphasis on beauty and humor while slipping in strength, political awareness, and cleverness.

I have to remember that RPDR is a competition based show. One that relies on the concept of exceptionalism. It makes gender performance a competition where one knows how to perform a role better than the other. However in the past the show has had been explicit in its exploitation especially for people of color, who experience systematic racism, for not staying true to their “racial realness”. This means keeping to one’s ethnic/racial identity, a requirement not enforced for the white and Asian characters on the show. This policing of racial identity for certain minority performers re-inscribes them as fundamentally “Other”. While on the other hand, Season 3 winner, Raja Gemini was praised for her androgynous looks, but mainly her ability to embody a plethora of non-white racial “Others”. She effected not only a blurring of gender, but also a racial blur of sorts.

¹⁸ Homonormative is a word that addresses the problems of privilege we see in the queer community today as they intersect with White privilege, capitalism, sexism, transmisogyny, and cissexism, all of which end up leaving many people out of the movement toward greater sexual freedom and equality

While Raja was condragulated¹⁹ on her gender blur, contestants Milan and Milk, season 4 and season 6, respectively, were eliminated and highly criticized for wearing suits. Milan was attempting a tribute on Janelle Monae's iconic suit and Milk presented a RuPaul masculine suit with a bald cap and all. It becomes clear that genderqueer drag queens and those who wish to portray anything more than a binary expression of heteronormative gender are not valued and will not be successful on the show. Even though drag always has been more about the blurriness of gender rather than these two extremes.

RPDR has been criticized in the past for its attitude towards trans performers. Several contestants came out as trans during or after their participation on the show. In the first few seasons there was the saying "You've got she-mail" which word play attempts to poke fun at the complex and often misunderstood conception of drag and being a transgender person. In spring 2014, the trans community reacted to this saying and then argued that the series should eliminate all uses of the terms. The show no longer uses the derogatory term. Through communication it helps break away from the "traditionally gay male venture" the show tends to highlight or enable.

LGBTQ+ youth people deserve to know that this history was made by more than drag queens. A queen may have thrown the first brick at Stonewall, but there is little talk about the drag king who threw the first punch. Many historians have spoken of the "tough cross-dressing lesbian" who was clubbed in the face by a New York Police Officer. That king was the late Storme DeLarverie²⁰. It is important to look at the level of police brutality and repression, and continue to talk about how it was a combination of gender-nonconforming homeless teenagers,

¹⁹ A term coined by RuPaul, a play on congratulations

²⁰ More information about Storme on Stonewall can be found at <http://www.stonewallvets.org/StormeDeLarverie.htm>

drag queens, trans women, trans men and drag kings who really were at the forefront of the fight. The political climate has shifted in this country very abruptly. Maybe it hasn't shifted as much as it seems, but certainly, my awareness of what's going on is very different now. I can recognize and understand that this was a privilege of innocence and ignorance that my identity as a white gay cis male allowed.

Freedom has been turned into an individualistic pursuit that is disengaged from coalition organization. Individuals are forced to develop creative potential and cultivate an identity without challenging the normative center. But queerness wants us to escape the normative center scope. Drag and queerness should be a place to be what we dream of, try new things, and create new worlds. We should imagine ourselves differently and then bring that imagination back into the world. Ultimately adding to the Queer Utopia which values safety and difference, but understanding the temporal/spatial dimensionality in relation to a futurity that plays on present and past in order to balance displacement of queerness.²¹ That's the way to make a lasting impact on the world of drag and . . . to make actual differences in the queer community.

Foucault focuses on the law, freedom of speech, and codes of sexual morality as three areas where the mechanisms of power have to change.²² A combination of individuals being active and queer in their liberation pushes against the old power and old structures that limit modality. It is a foundation for queer throw that can be used in a plethora of disciplines not necessarily art, since institutional power needs to be dismantled and examined down to its roots establishing a “whole new economy”

²¹ Concepts development by José Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*

²² Concepts that can be found in *The History of Sexuality*

It's continued discussion about what drag and queerness currently is, what it has been, where we can move it to and reshaping what it can do and is allowed to look like. Drag, at its core, is about honoring yourself and your own unique way of being a gendered, queer person. Sasha is promoting uniqueness and expression through fashion/art that stays true to yourself with her platform. It's a promotion of resistance against conservatism and highlighting the importance that queer people refuse to follow rules about surface labels and presentation.

In conservative systems, non-binary people, trans people, people of color, and women are never going to be valued and safe. Drag resists conservatism in the most basic way possible, and also in the most effective way possible because it's improper when it comes to looks, which is everything in conservative systems. Conservatism is all about surfaces and labels and presentation, and drag says, "*no, we refuse to follow any rules about that*"²³. It's also fun and freeing, and that, in itself, is oppositional to cultures of fear and hate. Categories in the drag community are/have been taken way too seriously. The boundaries of pageant drag, artsy drag, comedy, and more need to be dissolved in order to go against the homonormative standards that mainstream media has presented.

As a show that provides a lucrative launch pad for careers of Drag Queens, RPDR needs to expand its categories and take a mixture of drag and identities in order to dissolve boundaries that promote heteronormative standards. With queens going on to have world tours, releasing albums, appearing in fashion campaigns and runway shows, and now the occasional movie and comedy special, these opportunities should be opened to the entirety of the queer community. Given that fans of RPDR gather in bars and homes for viewing parties, its important especially now within this anti-intellectual, anti-information, and anti-historical moment, to understand and

²³ Sasha Velour in an interview with The Atlantic: "Sasha Velour and Drag's Permanent Revolution"

form relationships with bodies that comprise the multiple, multifaceted, intersecting identities which aid in expanding our individual (interpersonal) and collective (community) relationships.

Sasha as a Drag Superstar seems to understand her role as a community leader and about inspiring people to live life the way that they believe while also inspiring and educating people to be engaged and aware. All in order that we don't repeat again and get lost in the queer temporality. We must build a history and global community that doesn't lend itself to binary systems and oppression. It's clear that she is using *Nightgowns* as a platform for conversation in the advancement and expansion of drag as an art form. Sasha's encouragement of challenging gender leaves a legacy that beings to open up queer culture with a historical, political kind of drag. Sasha is using her power and privilege in order to combat the illusion of openness and queerness. We still have a long way, but its good to see and know that there is change along the horizon.



Picture Sources

Cover - Lucas Blair Photography / lucasblairphoto.com

Pg. 2 - Episode 1 Season 9 of RuPaul's Drag Race 'Oh. My. Gaga.!'

Pg. 5 - David Ayllon Photography

Pg. 7 - Screenshot of youtube clip "Sasha Velour's NIGHTGOWNS at Bizarre"

Pg. 8 - Photo from the Season 9 Finale of RuPaul's Drag Race

Pg. 9 - Screenshot of youtube clip "Aja | NIGHTGOWNS 2 | "My Kind of Love"

Pg. 10 - Photo from "C.L.A.T" Music Video

Pg. 16 - From the NightGowns website

Pg. 17 - Promo photo from RuPaul's Drag Race season 9

Pg. 18 - From the series by Lucas Blair "Drag Race Look Book"



