

Above Gender – Doing Drag, Performing Authentically, and Defying the Norms of Gender Through Performance in Cape Town

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Abstract

The thesis that is to be presented discusses the performance of drag and gender in Cape Town – namely Bubbles Bar. I argue that the performance of gender on stage through the performance of drag challenges the norms and ideas of gender in South Africa. Through the act of non-normative staged gendered performance, the participants of this study also challenge stereotypes and stigma around this in relation to the social norms and regulations that are asserted on the individual presentation and performance of gender and sexuality. I argue that the performance of gender in relation to the stage asserts the situational character of gender performance through the staged performance of drag. I assert that the staged performance of gender is made authentic by the audience who views and understands the performance as a performance of drag, and a performance of gender.

The performance of drag is considered an act of transgression. Transgression in South African society is policed through acts of oppression, social and sometimes physical violence. This act of transgression is performed through drag which is viewed as an act of non-normative gender performance. The perception of transgression places those who perform gender in a non-normative fashion upon the margins. However, that the performers are acting above gender places the performance on a higher plain.

The theatrical methods, and inclusion of the audience in the performance that are used as a form of entertainment allows the participants in this research project to humanize the gendered performance of non-normativity by education through the art of their performance.

Opsomming

Die tesis wat aangebied word bespreek die vertoning van “drag” en geslag in Kaapstad - naamlik in Bubbles Bar. Ek voer aan dat die opvoering van geslag deur “drag” op die verhoog normas en idees van geslag in Suid-Afrika uitdaag. Deur hierdie nie-normatiewe geslagsopvoering daag die deelnemers van hierdie studie ook stereotipes en stigma rondom geslag uit, met spesifieke betrekking tot die sosiale normas en regulasies wat op die individuele aanbieding en vertoning van geslag en seksualiteit geplaas word. Ek argumenteer dat die uitbeelding van geslag in verhouding tot die verhoog die situasionele karakter van geslag deur die opgevoerde vertoning van “drag” handhaaf. Ek voer aan dat die verhoogvertoning van geslag eg gemaak word deur die gehoor wat die vertoning aanskou en verstaan as 'n vertoning van “drag”, en ook 'n vertoning van geslag.

Die opvoering van “drag” word beskou as 'n daad van oortreding. Oortreding in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing word gepolisieër deur dade van onderdrukking, sosiale en soms fisiese geweld. Hierdie daad van oortreding wat opgevoer word deur middel van “drag” word beskou word as 'n daad van nie-normatiewe geslagsgedrag. Die persepsie van oortreding plaas diegene wat geslag opvoer op 'n nie-normatiewe wyse, op die kantlyn. Deurdat die deelnemers/kunstenaars optree buite die normatiewe idee van geslag, plaas dit die vertoning op 'n hoër vlak.

Die teatriese metodes, en die insluiting van die gehoor in die opvoering wat gebruik word as 'n vorm van vermaak, laat die deelnemers aan hierdie navorsingsprojek toe om die geslagtelike vertoning van nie-normatiewiteit te vermenslik met opvoeding deur middel van die kuns van hul vertoning.

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1. “This Time for Africa” – Introducing the Performance of Drag

It was a cool evening in late spring of 2011, but inside Bubbles Bar it was heating up as Zolani¹ gyrated rhythmically and belly-danced to Shakira’s *Waka Waka*, the theme song to the 2010 Fifa Soccer World Cup that took place in South Africa. I watched Zolani from the audience as her hips sway and tick to the rhythm of the distinctly African-sounding chorus of the song, while the sound of rustling and jingling comes from the beads that have been tied around her waist and ankles. I am enthralled. Kim² and Tracy³, a lesbian couple who are sitting at the same table as I am, expressed their enjoyment by applauding, taking photographs and capturing the moment by taking videos on their cell-phones. I shifted my attention to the right of the stage to take a look at the competition judges. The expressions on their faces seemed to range from excitement, to intrigue and surprise. On this night the first competitive round of the *Golden Heel Awards* took place, and on this night the spectators have come to Bubbles Bar to view the talents that amateur drag performers in Cape Town have to offer. During the break, one of the owners of the bar Luc, confessed that Zolani did not even know that there was a competition taking place. “She merely walked in and asked if she could perform during ‘Open Stage’. When I told her that there wasn’t any ‘Open Stage’ happening tonight, but that there was a competition taking place, she asked if she could enter!” he said with enthusiasm. Zolani is statuesque, slender, strikingly beautiful, and ironically is the only contestant who took part in the *Golden Heel Awards* who does not wear shoes while performing. The *Golden Heel Awards* was created by a regular performer Samantha Knight who hosted *Open Stage* – a weekly amateur drag performance event – at Bubbles Bar, a competition where amateur drag performers were judged on their talents (lip-synched performances, dancing, live-singing) in order to win prizes of make-up, locally designed clothing and the titular award, the *Golden Heel*.

Later that evening after the competition round had been completed; Zolani and I found ourselves sitting on the steps outside the bar to converse, in one of the more quiet areas surrounding the bar. Over a glass of red wine (for Zolani), and a Coke Light (for myself), I

¹ Pseudonym

² Pseudonym

³ Pseudonym

discovered that Zolani had also performed her lip-synched routine in her home country of Kenya, except here in South Africa the audience knows that she is a female impersonator. She was surprisingly soft-spoken and shy, her exaggerated artificial eyelashes hiding her expression as she looked out at the cobbled driveway outside Bubbles Bar and told me that she had been living in South Africa for two years now. I noticed the scar where a bullet appears to have penetrated and exited Zolani's thigh from one side through the other, the flesh puckered into a smooth thick scar and the colour of caramel against her dark brown skin. With some hesitation, I asked her about the scar. "Kenya is no South Africa," she replied.

South African legislature protects the rights of those who live within its borders against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and freedom of expression. These themes of freedom of expression in relation to sexual orientation and the expression of gender are presented within this thesis through an ethnographic study of the act of drag performance. I would like to argue that the nature and understanding of gender performance is situational. In the vastly different contexts of the stage, and the street, gender and gender non-normativity is presented and perceived differently. The performance of gender is not a new topic of study. However with this thesis I aim to relate the understanding of the act of performance of gender to the situation in which it is presented. In this way, the performance of drag speaks to freedom of expression in such a manner that those who perform in drag are able to take to the stage and perform their *characterised* understanding of gender. For many of the participants who took part in this research project, the performance of drag has afforded them the freedom to express themselves physically, vocally and sometimes politically. I argue in this thesis that the staged performance of drag allows the performers to challenge norms and stereotypes about the way in which gender is perceived and understood by making use of illusory character of the spectacle – for the audience is aware of the ruse of the male-bodied performer who performs an overtly feminine character. In contrast to this, I further discuss the act of non-normative gender performance outside of the staged situation that is problematized by the social and sometimes physical violence that many South Africans who do not conform to gender norms and expectations are faced with. The notions of prejudice and stereotypes are discussed in the relation to the social expectation of the perceived gender of the individual. In relation to drag performance, I argue that the individual understands of the performance of gender and the staged performance of drag is authenticated through the

affirmation of the performer by the spectator. I argue that the authenticity of gender is tacitly related to the situation in which it is performed, perceived and understood in. For the drag performers, they are read by the audience as possessing a feminine character while they are upon the stage; however they are also read by the audience as drag performers at this time. With this thesis I will discuss not only discuss the act of performance, but also the ways in which the individual performance of gender is understood to be authentic through the individual's freedom to be him/herself.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The performance of drag that takes place in Bubbles Bar is related to the performance of gender, not just for the individual, but also for the gaze and spectatorship of the audience. By making use of Durkheim's conceptualising of social facts, "...social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual and external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim 1938, 13), whereby:

"Man cannot live in an environment without forming some ideas about it according to which he regulates his behaviour. But, because these ideas are nearer to us and more within our mental reach than the realities to which they correspond, we tend naturally to substitute them for the latter and to make them the very subject of our speculation. Instead of observing, describing, and comparing things, we are content to focus our consciousness upon, to analyse, and to combine our ideas" (Durkheim 1938, 14).

The notion of a social fact, for Durkheim suggests that there are specific ways of acting within society. This implies that there is a normative structure to the performance of an action within society. In a society that views heterosexuality and an essentialised binary view of gender as a norm, those who do not comply with these norms are considered socially pathological, and are thus subject to the social rules and punishments set out by the dominant

collective, often heteronormative, society. By making use of these perceived social facts, I would like to use the situational performance of gender as a method with which to combat and critique essentialised understandings of gender and gender performance. By making use of social pathology and stereotyping as a manner in which homosexuality and gender variance is misunderstood and controlled in society, I propose that the performance of drag makes use of these stereotypes to highlight the fluidity and situational character of the performance and presentation of gender, while making use of the heteronormative and binary understanding of gender as proposed by Simone De Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that "...one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir 1997, 295), is propagated in the act of transformation that the drag performers undertake through the use of dress, make-up and physical action, while the performance of gender in this situation is related to Butler's idea of 'doing' gender in such a manner that "...one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary" (Butler 2004, 1). In the context of the performance of drag, this act of 'doing' gender relates to the act of performing an idea of gender, while the audience reads the performance in relation to their understanding of gender in order to authenticate the gendered performance of drag. This performance of gender is a conscious act whereby the drag performers adopt a feminine persona to entertain an audience. While the drag performers 'do' gender for another, namely the audience, I argue against Butler's notion of performing gender, for the performance of gender in a staged drag performance differs from the performance of socialised gender roles of an individual in everyday life. In this context the drag performer makes use of the suggestion of a femininity to perform a character that they have consciously created. Here the situational character of the performance of gender is brought to the fore. During this act of performing gender for an audience, the audience reads the stage performer as a feminine individual during the act of performance. Relating to Butler, the act is made authentic when the drag performer successfully convinces the audience of the act. What is authenticated here is an act of drag performance. While the performance of gender in this situation is an important part of the performance of drag, this is only temporary, as once the curtains are drawn and the stage lights are dimmed, the drag artist will remove the feminine mask. The character he has created for the stage is no longer apparent to the potential other. The situation has been altered and so has the presentation of gender, when the man behind the feminine mask is read as masculine.

When suggesting a heteronormative construction of gender in society, I would like to make use of Butler's assertion that, "...a norm is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law...A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*. Although a norm may be analytically separable from the practices in which it is embedded, it may also prove to recalcitrant to any effort: to decontextualize its operation...Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce" (Butler 2004, 41). This suggests that the manner in which a heteronormative construction of gender is implemented through the rules and practices that are implicitly enforced for societal cohesion to take place. When these societal norms are challenged, or not followed by individual actors, they are considered to be acting in a deviant or socially pathological manner. For Durkheim, even the presence of that which may be deemed as socially pathological is reacted to in a normative manner, as it is impossible for norms to exist without something that opposes it. In order for one norm to appear morally 'right' by the dominant society, the contrast would have to exist in order to reinforce the significance of the perceived offence, "...assuming that this condition could actually be realised, crime would thereby disappear; it would only change its form, for the very cause which would thus dry up the sources of criminality would immediately open up new ones" (Durkheim 1938, 56). The use of gender norms in this way, are used as a mode of perpetuating and regulating gender expression. When referring to drag performance, these regulated gender norms are presented in a non-normative manner, whereby those who perform drag are portraying a gender that is not traditionally associated with their anatomical sex. These actions of non-normativity thus make it possible for drag performance to be considered as pathological through their deviation from the heteronormative performance of gender, and open to prejudice which reinforces negative stereotypes surrounding those who perform gender in a manner that is not sanctioned by dominant social norms. It is difficult to separate gender norms from the action of performance - the performance of drag - however the action of performing in drag possesses a situational character. The performance of drag in this research paper is related to the staged performance, and the situation of Bubbles Bar. It is read, understood, and authenticated by the audience who are viewing the performance. The act of crossing the norms of gender is recognised as part of the performance.

Relating to the performance of drag and the performance of gender, I would also like to make use of the concept of “the spectacle” as set out by Guy Debord, who states that, “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images...” (Debord 1983, 4), and further that, “...it is a world vision which has become objectified (the spectacle)” (Debord 1983, 5). Here, the gaze of the spectator aims to objectify the performer, and through this objectification perpetuate their understanding of what gender is through the act of watching the performance. Once more making use of the concepts of normalisation and social cohesion, the spectacle of the performance of gender as part of a binary model demonstrates the failure of suppressing the variety of ways in which gender is sanctioned to be performed and presented in society. Opposition to socialised gender roles and gender presentation is fraught with prejudice and may be considered a threat to social cohesion. Yet the ways in which gender is performed in a situational manner can never be universal. On the stage, the situational character of the way in which gender is formulated and understood is made visible through the objectification of the spectator upon the performer. This not only asserts the authenticity of the act of performance, but also the situational character of the performance of gender. Important for the understanding of drag performance from the claims that are made in this thesis, is that gender is not only performative, but that gender is also situational. The manner in which gender is read and understood is dependent on the situation in which it is performed. In the context of drag performance in Bubbles Bar, the situational character is tied to the stage. Relating to this, for my interlocutors the act of performance does not imply inauthenticity. The act of performance on stage brings forth authenticity. Here, the gender that is performed becomes the gender of the individual actor, rather than a gender that is asserted upon the individual based on the possession of anatomical sex. Gender is not found in the genitals that are hidden beneath the layers of clothing. Gender is found in the outward presentation and performance by the individual.

1.2 “I Am What I Am”

It was a Saturday night during the early summery months of 2012 as Lola stepped upon the stage, over six feet tall, even taller in her custom made heels, greeting us all – welcoming us to Bubbles Bar. Her blonde afro moved slightly to-and-fro in the wind created from the fan that gave her respite from the humidity and heat that came from summertime in Cape Town, and more than 50 people standing in a room anticipating the performance. A friend leaned over to tell me that she can’t believe Lola’s make-up has stayed on in the humidity. We had our arms bare in short-sleeved shirts and t-shirts, while Lola is dressed a form fitting shiny black PVC dress. The small stage lit up, and there is applause from the crowd who have been waiting for the much anticipated performance of the night. As Lola introduced herself, her tellingly masculine voice booming from the speakers fitted across the small bar, she explained us that she was going to sing a song that is dear to her. A song that she describes as the drag queen anthem:

I am what I am

I am my own special creation.

So, come take a look,

Give me the hook, or the ovation.

I instantly recognised the song, from La Cage aux Folles’ soundtrack. A French-Italian film, based on a stage production, from 1978 that tells the story of a gay couple, one who manages a nightclub and another who is a drag performer in the nightclub. The comedy ensues from the nightclub manager’s son who brings home his fiancé’s conservative parents, and urges his father and his partner to hide their relationship as well as the content of their entertainment business. The film was remade for a commercial audience in 1996 as The Bird Cage, starring popular actors, Robin Williams, Gene Hackman and Nathan Lane. The film was presented as a light and humorous romantic comedy about people with opposing views being thrown together for the sake of familial love. However, even sixteen years later, the themes of the celebration of difference and the message of not concealing one’s identity is still relevant. These themes have been immortalised in the song that Lola is sharing with us – the audience.

For many individuals who live life in a manner which not sanctioned by gender and sexual normativity, shame and concealment follow suite. As Lola sang this song that night, she expresses the empowerment of self and defiance in the face of a society that rejects certain kinds of difference.

It's my world that I want to take a little pride in.

My world and it's not a place I have to hide in.

Life's not worth a damn,

'Till you can say: "Hey world, I am what I am"

I am what I am

I don't want praise, I don't want pity.

Cheers and whistles emanate from the audience. I sang along to the song, while the tall fair-haired man beside me who had been busying himself with his cell-phone all night finally diverts his attention to the stage. He gleefully belted along with Lola to the lyrics of the song.

I bang my own drum,

Some think its noise, I think it's pretty.

And so what, if I love each feather, and each spangle.

Why not try to see things from a different angle?

Your life is a sham 'til you can shout out loud

I am what I am!

I am what I am!

Lola held a hand up in the air, for dramatic effect, as she proclaimed the chorus: “I am what I am!” with a melodic lilt in her light baritone voice.

And what I am needs no excuses.

I deal my own deck

Sometimes the ace, sometimes the deuces

There’s one life, and there’s no return and no deposit;

One life, so it’s time to open up your closet.

Life’s not worth a damn ‘till you can say,

“Hey world, I am what I am!”

As the song concluded, there is a roar of clapping, cheers and whistles that emanated from the crowd of spectators. I found myself standing there, smiling and clapping, showing appreciation for the performance like many of the other people who stood in that room. While I derived enjoyment from the song from a purely musical perspective, the lyrics suggest a sense of emancipation and empowerment, relating to dominant norms found in society. Although the song had been written decades ago, it is still relevant because it speaks to those who feel marginalised and stigmatised within society. Within the confines of Bubbles Bar, and the walls that barricade us against the outside, an often heterosexual and heteronormative world, a safe space is created for expression and enjoyment for LGBTIQ⁴ individuals. At this moment I felt a sense of community that is free from judgement and stigma with the proclamation that: “I am what I am.”

However, as defiant and liberating it was to sing along to the lyrics that make the statement “I am what I am” in a specified context, every day in South Africa there are many individuals

⁴ Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Intersex-Queer – for the purpose of this research project I use the more inclusive acronym. As this is an “umbrella” term, I wish to include the word “queer” as a term which includes gender variant and gender non-conforming individuals, allies, etc. who may identify as “queer”, but who may or may not personally identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex.

who are not afforded the luxury of performing an entirely liberating existence. It is not only that some South African citizens are opposed to homosexuality and the performance of gender variance, but the acts of violence that are exerted against a growing number of people who are perceived as not complying to the regulations of heteronormativity. South Africa is the only country on the African continent that protects the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ) identified persons residing within its borders with its perceived liberal constitution. Article 16 of the South African Constitution concerns freedom of expression, where we read that “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes (1.b) the freedom to receive or impart information and ideas, as well as (1.c) the freedom of artistic creativity.”⁵ That being said – with the implementation of the current South African Constitution there have been many shortcomings with the enforcement of these Constitutional laws. There are still instances of inequality and discrimination witnessed and experienced by many South African citizens, including LGBTIQ identified individuals and those who perform and present gender and sexuality in nonconformist ways. Cape Town in particular is considered a *Pink City* and glamorised by tourism and media as the “gay capital of South Africa” (even Africa), however this does not mean that those who visit and reside here are free from prejudice and violence when they do not conform to the idealised norms of a largely heterosexual societal environment, that throughout South African history has possessed a lack of understanding and tolerance for those who do not conform to perceived norms. In post-1994 South Africa, since the amendments that have been made protecting the rights of LGBTIQ citizens found in article 16 of the South African Constitution, female impersonation has been able to grow. The Cape Town Pride Parade, as well as the Johannesburg Pride Parade is never devoid of female impersonators. Apart from this, there are various pageants wherein female impersonators compete. The Miss Gay Western Cape pageant was established during the early 1990s, though there has not been a pageant every year since then. The Miss Gay Pride pageant is another well-established pageant that coincides with the Pride Parade. These are examples of a few, not all, female impersonation pageants that take place. Of course there are more pageants that take place, but these are not as regular as that the two that I have mentioned.

⁵ <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#7>

South African legislature has long been preoccupied with the sexual habits of its citizens. In 1957, during the Apartheid era, a time of legal racial segregation, the Immorality Act was instated to prohibit marriage and relationships that crossed the borders of racial groups. In 1969, the Sexual Offences Act would further prevent and criminalise “any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification”, in a manner that would be open to interpretation, prejudice and prosecution through its ambiguous definition (Cage 2003, 13). This was after the instatement of the “men-at-a-party” clause after the arrest of some 300 men who were discovered dancing, kissing and engaging in reported sexual acts at a party in Forest Town near Johannesburg during the 1960s. This clause prevented groups of more than two men meeting in public or private settings, fearing that homosexual or immoral activity was taking place (Cage 2003, 14). Post-1994 however, amendments were made to the South African Constitution condemning discrimination based on race, gender, religion and sexual orientation. With these amendments, there has been a greater possibility and opportunity for the creation of spaces where LGBTIQ persons are able to meet and interact with each other, without the fear of police intervention. More importantly for the discussion that will follow, we are now afforded with the opportunity for the existence of spaces such as Bubbles’ bar, where people of all races, sexual orientations and gender presentations are able to interact with one another without the threat of violence and explicit social rejection. That being said, the legislative freedoms and protection that are made available to South African citizens are not always enforced, even 18 years into a democratic society.

South Africa is recognised as a country with one of the highest crime rates, internationally. However, it is also a nation that calls for equality and protection of all those who live within the boundaries of its borders by way of its inclusive Constitution. South African law currently does not explicitly recognise the notion of hate crimes – in particular, those crimes that are committed against individuals and/or groups on the basis of their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation. The result of this is that there is currently no statistical information regarding the prevalence of prejudice-fuelled crimes in South Africa. Annual crime statistics for South Africa release information in the categories of rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse of children. Incidents of rape in conjunction with domestic abuse however are not categorised separately (Mkhize, et al. 2010, 4). Many incidents of harassment, based on a prejudicial perception also go unreported, like many other crimes in South Africa, for the fear of stigma, further harassment by police and community members. Often, victims of rape or assault are

subject to insensitivity, blame and harassment when they approach, or report crime to police. One such example, which was only reported on the 30th of July 2012, concerns the attack of Boniswe Mtshali who was beaten unconscious by security guards employed at Johannesburg's Carlton Centre on the 13th of June 2012. The incident reportedly took place after kissing her girlfriend goodbye,⁶ whom she would walk to work, and affectionately kiss goodbye every day. On this day, however, it was reported that the security guards had shouted that: "Some people will never reach heaven," as the attack took place. Boniswe Mtshali regained consciousness three hours later. However, when she and her partner approached the Johannesburg Central Police Station, they were advised by police officers to drop the charges because it was not considered to be an important case, and it was their opinion that the case would be expensive to pursue.⁷ Later, it was reported that one of the security guards involved in Boniswe's attack laid charges of assault against her for allegedly scratching him during the attack (Van Schie, 2012). Sadly, there are countless stories of attacks, on the basis of sex, gender, gender identity, race, etc. that never reach the newspapers, police stations or the criminal courts in South Africa.

Recently, in what appeared to be an attempt to educate the public about violence, "corrective rape" and sexual diversity, the extremely popular television soap opera, *Isidingo*, introduced a lesbian character who was to enter into a relationship with a bisexual female character. The actresses, who portrayed these roles, received an icy reception by some of the viewers of the show, who sent hate messages to the show via various social media platforms, echoing the public outcry and calls to boycott the highly rated and longest running television soap opera, *Generations* when they introduced a kiss and relationship between two male characters. Television plays an important role in the formation, presentation and performance of societal ideals. The old adage of life imitating art and vice versa allows viewers to engage with South African life in an idealised fictional and fantastical realm. Religious enthusiasts and ministers like Pastor Errol Naidoo write open letters to the public urging them to resist the temptations of an amoral and un-Christian secular society, while vehemently inciting hatred towards LGBTIQ individuals and communities, urging that exposure to these "life-style choices" are damaging to society and children whose impressionable minds are susceptible to sin through the public depiction of "alternative lifestyles". At the beginning of 2011, the African

⁶ <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/07/30/carlton-centre-regrets-lesbian-attack>

⁷ <http://www.citypress.co.za/SouthAfrica/News/Guards-attack-woman-for-being-lesbian-20120730>

Christian Democratic Party as well as the Freedom Front Plus barred Parliamentary intentions of publicly acknowledging the achievements of Francois Nel, the South African winner of Mr Gay World – the second consecutive win for South Africa – which led to the Mr Gay World competition being held in Johannesburg South Africa during 2012⁸. It is a standard practice, for those who have achieved accolades to be invited to the South African Parliament to be thanked for their achievements in a public forum. Often these proceedings are met with media interest. It is worth mentioning that these political parties are affiliated with religious groups, particularly Christian groups, and often discriminate against that which is against “Christian morals” – in this case, homosexuality, and more clearly, the Mr Gay South Africa and Mr Gay World competitions, which are considered to “promote” homosexuality. Further tensions arose when the African Christian Democratic Party accused the organisers of the Mr Gay World competition of “provoking” Christians against LGBTIQ identified persons by hosting the competition on Easter Sunday⁹ -a South African public holiday. By hosting the competition on a public holiday, the organisers were able to accommodate more attendees, as many people do not work on Easter Sunday or the Monday that follows it (also a public holiday).

More disturbing evidence of prejudice and discrimination against LGBTIQ identified persons in South Africa, is found in the prevalence of “corrective rape”, where women who identify themselves as – or are even just perceived to be – lesbian, transgender or bisexual are raped in order to “correct” their “condition”, or to “teach them a lesson”. When the television show proceeded to work towards a depiction of “corrective rape”, some LGBTIQ activists were appalled by the story-line, and argued that the portrayal was not realistic, as many of the victims of these crimes are of a lower socio-economic background, are often masculine/butch in their appearance and presentation, live in townships, and are most often black. Race and class play an important role in their experiences which are rooted in the understanding that “black people, women and lesbians remain ‘second-class citizens’ in terms of actual resources, security and status, creating knowledge about black lesbians’ experiences and theorisations of violence against them risks moving ‘black lesbians’ from a discursive terrain of invisibility and marginalisation to one in which ‘they’ are recognised only as ‘special

⁸ http://www.themarketingsite.com/live/content.php?Item_ID=14769 (Mr. Gay World Praise Blocked in Parliament, March 2011)

⁹ <http://www.mambaonline.com/article.asp?artid=6817> (ACDP Slams Easter Final for Mr. Gay World, 7 April 2012)

victims” (Mkhize, et al. 2010, 13-15). There are many South Africans who believe that homosexuality is “un-African,” and that it is a foreign practice. Earlier in 2012, Patekile Holomisa who is the president of Congress of Traditional Leaders publically stated that “the great majority of South Africans do not want to promote or protect the rights of gays and lesbians,” following a submission to the constitutional review committee by the National House of Traditional Leaders which proposed the removal of the constitutional provision that protects individuals from discrimination and prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation¹⁰. In relation to this vehement opposition by some of the members of South African society against same-sex sexuality, gender non-conformity and non-normative gender presentation and behaviour are also the root of (sometimes) violent discrimination. In a 2003 news article by Yolanda Mufweba titled “Corrective rape makes you an African woman,” in which members of the South African gay and lesbian publication “Behind the Mask” are interviewed concerning the prevalence of violence against lesbians, it is stated that “24 of the 33 women who were subjected to hate crimes (at the time of this article’s publishing date) were ‘butch’ women who had been victimised in townships including Sharpeville, Tembisa, White City, Kagiso, Pimville, Alexandra and Kwa Thema among others.¹¹” Since the publishing date of this article, and especially during 2012 there have been an increase in the reporting of crimes against lesbians, particularly in townships, across South Africa. One of the interview participants who partook in the article stated that “I was raped because I was a butch child. I was thirteen years old the first time it happened. My mother walked into the room soon afterwards and said this to me ‘this is what happens to girls like you.’” The sense of the creation of an *other*, by referring to a gender-non-conforming individual in such a manner sends a powerful message concerning the perception of transgression of what is seen as social normativity in a largely heteronormative society. Another interview participant in this article states that, “I hate going back to Soweto; people stare at you as if you are an abomination. The minute I walk into the township, this alarm bell goes off in my head. I feel even worse when I look at my mother and you can see in her eyes she’s thinking ‘this is my child’. I left the township because I refuse to feel threatened on a daily basis.” Eighteen years after the end of the oppressive Apartheid regime, there is still much prejudice that takes place on a variety of levels. Prejudice on the basis of not conforming to the dominant ideals of a homogenous heterosexual society is however still prevalent. Prejudice on the basis of a non-conforming

¹⁰ <http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/gay-rights-body-outraged-by-anc-mp-s-comments-1.1291344#.UEk7Ro0genw>

¹¹ <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/corrective-rape-makes-you-an-african-woman-1.116543#.UEk53o0genw>

physical presentation is almost an almost acceptable form of prejudice in a variety of situations. A non-conforming gender presentation is physically more obvious and is often the source of hatred and discrimination. However, media representation and television aids in the normalisation of issues relating to society. The manner in which people and situations are performed and perpetuated through media representation aids the way in which people living in a specified context understand and relate to the world around them. The images and information transmitted visually through television allows people to view and make sense of that which is taking place in the world around them. This visual representation provides the viewer with a reference point with which they are provided the option to rationalise that which they view upon the screen. This may assist in the authentication of variety of identities and presentation that are present within the situational societal context.

Returning to the “corrective rape” storyline that took place on *Isidingo*, it is in direct contrast to the characters portrayed on the show. Both women are young, white, feminine, of a higher socio-economic standing and live in a cosmopolitan city situation. While the soap opera *is* situated in a fantasy TV-land, there are some people who believe that producers and writers have an obligation to education and realism, as television is often a powerful source of information and idea formation. There are various opposing opinions concerning the effectiveness and the success of the story-arc, however what does become evident is that the media, and performance on stage, screen and in daily life can be effective tools for education, the building of awareness and even activism. The act of performance on stage and screen is viewed in the context of entertainment; conversely the stakes of performance of gender in daily life are not wrapped in this package of entertainment for an audience. When the reality of gender and sexual non-normativity is perceived in a heteronormative society, it is perceived as an act of transgression – the rules placed upon the gendered anatomically sexed body are broken. While the stage gives the performer permission to transgress the norms of society, the same cannot be said for the performance of gender by the individual in the societal context of the street. This does not indicate that neither type of performance is authentic, or inauthentic, but rather that the perception of the performance of gender in these different contexts are perceived to be in one instance as permissible, and in the other as transgressive.

The research that is to be presented here is about female impersonation in Cape Town. Even more so, it is shaped by a post-Apartheid society where discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation still takes place. There are perceptions within a heteronormative situation that socially and medically pathologise those who perform in drag and make judgments based upon the presentation of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation. In previous research¹² I have worked with transgender and gender variant individuals, who possess a gender identity that they (the individual) that are not in direct correlation to their anatomically sexed body. “Transgender refers to those persons who cross-identify or live as another gender, but who may or may not have undergone hormonal treatments or sex-reassignment operations...each of these social practices carries distinct social burdens and promises” (Butler 2004, 6). Although notions of transgressive gender identity and gender presentation are evident in female impersonation, I would like to distance myself from the investigation of being transgender within this research as the concept of *drag* and *impersonation* as an act of *staged performance* may undermine the work that has been done surrounding the concept of transgender. The performance of drag has a temporal character in this research project, while transgender is strongly related to the personal experience and expression of gender identity. The act of drag performance in Bubbles Bar is related to the putting on of a staged performance, where the performers act as feminine characters. I would like to suggest in this way that, at the time at which the research took place, the drag performers/female impersonators who participated in this research identify themselves as male and present a character who is female as part of a staged performance. The individuals who participated in this research only present a female character for the purpose of stage performance and do not present themselves as female in character outside of this sphere.

It is important to note that the use of pronouns “he” and “she”, “him” and “her” are in constant flux and are interchangeable when discussing and describing female impersonators. However, once in *drag*, I use the pronouns “she” and “her” to refer to a specific performer/character. This interchangeable understanding and use of gender pronouns are also used by drag performers themselves, indicating fluidity in the understanding of the portrayal of gender and authenticity by the drag performers themselves.

¹² Anonymity and Inconsistency: Transgender Health Care and Support Structures in Cape Town, South Africa; Prince, L., Honours Research Project, January 2011.

The performative act of drag or female impersonation however does require some clarification. I do not merely speak of female impersonation here as the mere act of wearing clothing that is considered to be characteristic of the opposite gender. If that were true, many women would be considered male impersonators, for their fondness of wearing clothing that is described as “menswear”. What constitutes female impersonation then? As described in the ethnographic events that will follow in this paper, female impersonators/drag performers can be understood to be those male-bodied individuals who make use of women’s clothing, make-up, wigs, and shoes to present and perform a feminine character upon the stage. Included in these staged performances of feminine characters are live singing, lip synching, dancing, stand-up comedy as well as beauty pageants (such as the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant, and the Miss Cape Town Pride pageant). These staged performances of female impersonation can be likened to the donning of a character in the context of the theatre. The drag persona may be an extension of the individual who possesses this persona, but it is not necessarily his primary mode of being in the world. Female impersonation, and further ideas of cross dressing, provide evidence that ideas surrounding gender are not fixed in their construction, as the suggestion of a specified gender is understood through the act of simulation, and performance. While every drag personality might not have the same essential characteristics, but there may be some similarities in the ways in which female impersonation on the stage could be understood.

Let us make use of the Stanislavskian concept of “becoming a character” (a characteristic of “method acting”) as the basis of the staged performance of drag. In this concept of ‘becoming a character’, it is understood that when a personality takes to the stage, he/she is no longer playing himself/herself, although aspects of that individual may be evident in the performance. In Stanislavski’s vision, the actor produces the “experience of being” to be “completely taken over by the play...independent of his will [the actor] lives the role without noticing how he is feeling (Monks 2012, 360).” The theatrical elements that are visible in the case of the performance of female impersonation, the individual suggests his character through clothing, make-up, wigs and action. We make sense of this action, understanding the feminine characteristics through the dress and action of the female impersonator, even though the performance of female impersonation constantly makes reference to and reminds the

audience that the performer is really male-bodied. When the performer believes his/her act of performance, the audience is also able to commit to the actions that are taking place on stage. Where drag performance is concerned, the performer is portraying a female character who is actually a male-bodied individual. For the audience to truly believe this act, the performer reminds the spectators that the feminine guise is merely the mask which obscures the man behind the make-up. During her performance Roxy Le Roux reminds us of this as she removes a lemon from her bra while announcing that Bubbles Bar has a special running on the sale of tequila, as she hands an audience member the lemon she says, "...take this to the bar. I think I need to find some bigger boobs". The appearance of femininity here is thus juxtaposed by the revelation of her male body. This indicates that the process of gender differentiation for my interlocutors is not solely based upon the individual body, or the anatomical make-up thereof, but rather what is presented to us in secondary or tertiary levels relating to sight and suggestion, regarding the cultural meanings that are attached to clothing and mannerisms that are regarded as masculine or feminine (Senelick 2000, 2). However, this implies that gender, and in this case – female impersonation – is to be understood in relation to, and through the gaze of another, in order to make sense of and assign meaning to the act of gendered performance, and by extension the concealable authentic self that is present for my interlocutors.

In drag performance, the construction of a character that is to be performed upon the stage holds great importance for the act of performance. When Luc transforms himself into Lola by use of make-up, clothing, and the blonde afro wig – he reinforces the character of Lola, not only for himself, but also for the audience who recognise the character on the basis of these visual cues. The audience who views the drag performance recognises the feminine character, but does not assume that the performer is physically female, as the performance of drag is hinged upon the audience knowing that the performance of femininity is just an act. Lola does not want anyone to believe that she is really a woman – but rather that she is a male-bodied individual performing *as a woman*. The performance of drag is made authentic by the audience who understand that the performer is acting a feminine character in the context of a staged performance. However, the application of make-up, dress and wigs serve as a mask for the person behind the performer. This does not suggest that the performer does not possess an authentic self. On the contrary, Luc states that he is able to express himself more honestly through the character of Lola: "...she is allowed to say things that Luc would *never dare* to

say...” Through the performance of drag, the performers are afforded a sense of freedom to express themselves more freely and more honestly because the audience is made distant to the performer by the application of the character whose expression is validated through the situation of the staged performance.

1.3 Method

During May 2011, I approached the owners of Bubbles Bar, concerning the proposed undertaking of research at the bar. At first, I would visit the bar informally, while becoming acquainted with the performers, patrons and more importantly – the concept of drag performance.

In order to do fieldwork at Bubbles Bar, I had visited the bar numerous times per week between June 2011 and April 2012. At the bar, I would partake in casual discussions relating to the performance of drag in Cape Town, as well as discussions about the bar itself and the performers. The element of participant observation took place during my performance in drag during the amateur performance nights of ‘Open Stage’, in order to better understand the process of transforming the outer presentation to signify masculine characteristics, and also to better understand the process and act of performing the crossing of gender. During the process of familiarising myself with drag performance and Bubbles Bar, I had applied for ethical clearance by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Stellenbosch in order to ensure that the research that would be undertaken would comply to the ethical standards of the university. At the beginning of November of that year I received notice of ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee, which allowed me to move forward with my research. Following this I would conduct semi-structured informal interviews with patrons and performers who frequent the stage at Bubbles Bar. Finally, I undertook formal semi-structured interviews with four of the performers who perform (or have performed) regularly on the Bubbles Bar stage.

To supplement my understanding of drag in Cape Town, I also attended various smaller drag pageants, as well as the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant, that has gained public interest during the past few years.

1.4 Contextualising Female Impersonation in South Africa

A history of female impersonation in South Africa appears to be difficult to trace from the perspective of theatrical performance. The practice of female impersonation on the stage has a long-running history in theatrical performance that will be discussed in further detail later in this research paper. However, with regards to female impersonation as a form of entertainment itself, there has been a tendency to relate the practice to culture and entertainment surrounding LGBTIQ identified individuals as a community – in particular, female impersonation has, and still is perceived to be related to a gay male “culture”. Writings about gay males cross-dressing for the purpose of entertainment have existed since London authorities started raiding *molly houses* and reporting on these raids and the subsequent arrests from the late 1600s until the mid-1700s. These houses were described as being “scattered across an area north of the Thames, providing clandestine meeting places for men with same-sex interests.” These *molly houses* were also “the site of flamboyant displays of transvestism and effeminacy.” (Hennen 2008, 52)

South African female impersonation however, owes thanks to Pieter-Dirk Uys, and his comedic satirist feminine character – Tannie Evita Bezuidenhout. Tannie Evita is a beloved character in South African entertainment. Since the early 1980s, Pieter-Dirk Uys has developed “in his skits and revues, the persona of an Afrikaner matron named Tannie Evita” (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 61). Sharp-witted and sharp-tongued, Tannie Evita has been able to deliver her critique on previous and present South African society, “Uys has hosted stalwarts of the formerly whites-only Nationalist Party as well. One of them, Roelf "Pik" Botha, danced a suggestive pas de deux with Uys (as Evita) in the show's opening sequence. This image, remarkable in South Africa's virulently homophobic society, lent credence to the idea that participatory democracy may be revolutionizing sexual politics. On the other hand, it may be that many viewers actually perceive Evita not as a male actor in a woman's wig and

clothes, but as a real woman” (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 61). The character of Evita Bezuidenhout is revolutionary in a violent and oppressive Apartheid South African history, not only for her vocal critique of the society around her, but also for the appearance of a man performing as a woman in the public sphere. Although the character of Tannie Evita Bezuidenhout has paved the way for modern South African drag performance, the use of the Stanislavskian method in Pieter-Dirk Uys’ performance of Tannie Evita Bezuidenhout serves the purpose of convincing the audience that she truly is an Afrikaner woman, and not a man in a dress, for that would be a social taboo. Pieter-Dirk Uys explains: “I have made such a huge division between Evita and myself-and have started talking about her in the third person-because she needs that space. She's got nothing to do with me whatsoever now. I give her only two percent of my time. She's so divorced from me that in the press they refer to Evita Bezuidenhout and don't even mention that I'm doing her. And that's fine. That's the way it works. I find that when I do Evita, I have to do her totally for real. I've got to take every hair off my arm, because if anybody sees that fluff, I've lost it. I mean, she is not about balloons. She's not absurd. She's so real that women recognize the femininity in her, and men forget that there's a guy inside” (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 62). The production of the character in this way places her above gender, as it is not the gender of the character which allows her the freedom to express her views in a satirical form, it is rather the character who has been elevated and provided the opportunity to express views that the actor may not be able to outside of that character, “. It was illegal for men to wear women's clothing. There was a law against it. So that was the first law being broken. And when they didn't stop me from doing that, I thought, "What the hell, I can just go on from here!" Still to this day I use her to say things I can't as me” (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 66). However, in recent years, Tannie Evita has faded from the public sphere – releasing books such as *BlackBessie* and *Kossie Sikelela*, a cookbook. When she currently does appear in the media, it is often in the form of a caricature of her in television adverts – but these appearances always present satirical social commentary in the form of comedic representations and critique of political and social actions that take place within the South African context.

Under the Apartheid regime homosexuality was deemed a criminal offence. As mentioned previously, during the 1960s, police intervention in the case of a discovery of a group of men engaging in sexual acts with each other at a residential venue, the ‘men-at-a-party’ clause was instated. The implementation of this clause meant that groups of three or more men were

legally not allowed to socialise with one another, or risk being jailed. During these decades, secret cross-dressing groups such as *Phoenix Society*, described in the 2009 book *Trans*, also existed. However, these meetings were mainly attended by male-to-female transsexual individuals and male transvestites who wished to don women's clothing away from the prying eyes of the public. However, these social groups are associated with transgender support groups and being transgender, which speaks to being the gender that is different to one's sex, and authentically living as the opposite sex. While it is possible for me to make an association of female impersonation with being transgender, it would undermine the concept of being transgender, as impersonation discredits authenticity.

1.5 Mosques and Coffee-Shops – De Waterkant at a glance

A small strip of a cobble-stoned pavement led me towards a cobblestoned, steeply angled and uneven driveway that very few people dare to park their vehicles upon. To my left, I saw a sign indicating and advertising a yoga studio. To my right, the orange, black, and white sign had been switched on to illuminate the words “Bubbles Bar” against the dark night sky. As I walked towards the entrance I could faintly hear the chorus of Rupaul's “Don't be Jealous of My Boogie” emanating from behind the sound-blocking curtain that separates the outside world from the world inside the walls of Bubbles Bar.

Bubbles Bar is situated in the De Waterkant area of Cape Town. An area that has been described by tourism websites and reviews as “trendy” and sought after by property developers and residential home-owners alike¹³, it is also described as being a “tolerant” neighbourhood and “lively” neighbourhood for its close proximity to Cape Town's “pink strip” on Somerset Road – a small cluster of gay/gay-friendly clubs and bars.

The area has a rich history relating to the establishment and abolition of the slave trade in Cape Town. Sites like the Prestwich Street Memorial, situated on the corner of Buitengracht and Somerset Road, provide a history of Cape Town that is steeped in both prejudice and

¹³ http://www.capetown.travel/attractions/entry/Bo-Kaap_and_De-Waterkant

freedom relating to the downfall of slavery and Apartheid in South Africa. In a press release from the local government and the City of Cape Town on 11 November 2005 it is stated that during 2003, approximately 2000 unmarked graves and human remains were uncovered during excavations for a new property development at the site¹⁴. Now, a memorial park stands on the ground that was once used as a burial site, and an ossuary was erected to house the remains of the unnamed and undocumented people who were laid to rest at the site. A plaque has been erected that reads:

“Beyond the steel gateways lie the ossuaries of the Prestwich Memorial. These ossuaries house the remains of people who had been buried in and around the burial grounds of the Green Point area – between the second half of the eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century. The human remains placed in these ossuaries are from unmarked graves, many of them being slaves and the poor who had been buried outside the formal graveyards. These human remains were uncovered during the course of development in the Green Point area, and brought to the ossuary as a final place of rest. You are invited to reflect upon the ancestors of our city.”

Although many residents of Cape Town and its surrounding areas have never laid their eyes upon the plaque, the legacy of the inequality and injustices that had been committed against those whose remains have been placed in the ossuary lives on. In an area of the city where a specialty car showroom is found on one street corner, and a Harley Davidson motorcycle dealership is found on the following corner, I passed three homeless people begging for money from those passing by and ignoring them as they walked by.

During the course of business development in the area, much of this history is forgotten. On the site where the memorial stands, there is also a trendy and expensive coffee shop that is often mentioned in tourism websites and reviews of coffee shops in the city, often these reviews make no mention of the memorial site. This glossing over of the history of the area is not unique to the memorial site. The gentrified edifice of the De Waterkant area is evident in

¹⁴ <http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/MediaReleases/Pages/MemorialPark.aspx>

buildings such as the Cape Quarter shopping centre. At only a few years old, it has been fashioned with cobblestone pathways and stone covered walls which serve the purpose of making the building look much older – as if it has always been there. Bubbles Bar is situated across the street from the Cape Quarter and bridges the imaginary border between the area of De Waterkant and the Bo Kaap, formerly known as the Malay Quarter. It had been so named after the people who reside in the area, seen as the descendants of the “Cape Malay” people descended from slaves from Malaysia, Indonesia, and various African countries, who were brought to what was then known as the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch East India Company to work in the area. The slaves who were brought to South Africa during this time brought the religious belief and practice of Islam with them. Although there were laws that were put in place in 1642 that prohibited the practice of any religion that differed from the practices of the Dutch Reform Church (Rhoda 2007, 47), this did not deter Muslims in the area. During 1804 the freedoms to practice one’s religion of choice were granted to those residing in the colony and soon after various mosques were established in the areas in and around what is now recognised as the Bo-Kaap (Rhoda 2007, 48). The ninth eldest of these mosques, the Nurul Mohamadia Mosque which was established in 1899¹⁵, shares a wall and a cobble-stone walkway with Bubbles Bar. The Nurul Mohamadia Mosque is said to be the first mosque to have been established with a constitution that defines the rights of the Imam and the members of the Mosque. However, the history of liberation of these areas has been marred with the forced removal of the ethnically diverse inhabitants during the implementation of the Group Areas Act, during the 1960s and 1970s, under the Apartheid regime.

A history of marginalisation in South Africa, Cape Town, and the areas of Greenpoint, De Waterkant, and the Bo Kaap set the scene for a present day “pink city”, and the seemingly diverse groups of people who were thrown together within these few kilometres in the city of Cape Town. A city that prides itself upon a perception of being cosmopolitan. Bubbles Bar found itself situated on the edge of an area of margins and marginalisation, yet was a space for entertainment and expression that was not regularly brought to the fore – all behind a sound blocking curtain that Daddy Cool¹⁶ pulled aside upon my entry.

¹⁵ <http://bokaap.co.za/mosques/>

¹⁶ Pseudonym

1.6 The Bubble – Contextualising the bar

Lola Lou is a French performer who moved to Cape Town with her South African husband who co-owns Bubbles Bar. Tall and slender in frame, but with a voice that fills a room, Lola describes herself as the *drag mother* of Bubbles Bar, while the performers whom she nurtures, and who frequent the stage on various nights of the week are her daughters. There are not many venues in the area that stage frequent drag performances, and none that markets itself as an exclusively drag-centred venue, Bubbles Bar creates an opportunity for amateur drag performers as well as those who are more seasoned performers to have a space in which to express themselves and often entertain others through drag performance. For Lola's *drag daughters*, much of the skills that are employed in their performances are learned and guided by her knowledgeable and seasoned hand. The ease, with which the performers entertain through song and dance, often makes the audience forget about the amount of time and skill that it takes to get up on stage – often for an hour or two. Daddy Cool, co-owner of Bubbles Bar, and Lola's husband, greets you at the door and handles the entrance fee (a paltry R15) upon entrance to the venue. Daddy Cool sets a precedent for the men you will encounter working at Bubbles Bar – his muscular arms exposed in a tight vest regardless of the weather (or his near-60 age). Pushing the heavy sound-blocking curtain aside, I encounter a dark, but sparkly, room. The walls are painted black, the curtains are black, but adorned with ornate masks and shiny beads – while the shirtless bartenders are sparkling too, as their muscular shoulders and chests are covered in glitter.

Bubbles Bar opened its doors in early 2011 in the De Waterkant area of Greenpoint in Cape Town – an area fondly referred to as the gay village by many - it has been described as the only *drag bar* in Cape Town, as other venues across the city and its surrounding areas also stage performances by drag performers, but that is only designated to specific nights and events. At Bubbles Bar, there are performances every night of the week, except Sunday nights during the summer months, and Thursday through Sunday during the winter months. Every week Daddy Cool has to apply for a new temporary liquor license, thus they legally can only keep their establishment open until 2am, as they have been unable to attain a permanent liquor and entertainment license. However, towards the end of 2011 a karaoke

machine and television was installed, as an entertainment license is not required for establishments where karaoke is presented. This creates a space where the audience too becomes part of the show, as the television screen is facing the stage, thus one has to take to the stage in order to perform a song. The instalment of a karaoke machine also has the benefit of giving the performers time to change costumes and attend to their make-up without disrupting the flow of perceived performance to audience members.

My own experience with female impersonation however, is fairly recent and was very limited before this. Prior to embarking on this research, I had only encountered female impersonation in the media (Tannie Evita Bezuidenhout, RuPaul, etc.), films such as “Priscilla Queen of the Desert”, “Too Wong Foo, Thanx for Everything, Julie Newmar” and in tabloids that reported on and seemed to socially pathologise the participants of drag pageants, such as the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant, Miss Cape Town Pride pageant, etc. I struggled to take the art of female impersonation seriously as my own feelings were that drag queens portrayed a stereotype of heteronormative understandings of homosexuality. I had wanted to distance myself from female impersonators, as I felt that the act of a man dressing up as a woman misinformed the public by portraying homosexual males as failed women, as queens, as men who had a desire to become women. In analysing my research I have been confronted with my own prejudices. These were prejudices that existed even in my leadership and involvement in LGBTIQ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Intersex-Queer) student organisations at The University of Stellenbosch. I was not aware that female impersonation did not always have to be related to sexuality and sexual orientation. I did not want to be involved with *that* kind of homosexual who was confused about his/her gender and sexual identity. In doing this research, I had found that my judgements were marred by my own prejudice and discomfort through my lack of knowledge and understanding about drag performance. My misperception of female impersonation could be related to my ignorance regarding the history and function of female impersonation.

1.7 The Outline of the Thesis

At the outset of this thesis I contextualise and discuss the manner in which the performance of drag takes place upon the stage at Bubbles Bar. Here, I build upon the themes that will be discussed in further chapters, namely that of the performance of gender, the performance of drag on stage, stereotypes and stigma, in relation to social norms and regulation that surround sexuality and gender within a South African society. At this point I discuss the performance of drag in relation to the stage, asserting the situational character of gender performance through the staged performance of drag. The argument that is made here is that the performance of gender upon stage, and the performance of drag is made authentic through the audience's reading and understanding of the action that is taking place upon the stage at that time which they view the performance. The concept of transgression is introduced here to understand that the performance of drag is considered non-normative in relation to the manner in which gender is constructed within society. Mentioned here also, is the recent media interest in the performance of drag that has led to the growth in the frequency of drag performance in Cape Town.

In chapter 3 the concept of gender is looked at more closely and discussed in more detail. Here, the themes of heteronormativity and a binary understanding of gender are discussed in order to further discuss the regulatory function of gender norms. Further, the ideas of a theatrical performance in relation to the performance of drag are discussed here, in order to assert the importance of a staged performance when referring to the performance of drag. Here, I discuss the historical significance of the path that has led to modern conceptualisations of drag performance. In this chapter the concepts of vulgarity, authenticity and "realness" are discussed in relation to staged drag performance and drag beauty pageants, as well as the use of drag as a manner in which the performer challenges normative understandings of gender.

With the final chapter of this thesis, I discuss themes relating to use of drag as a means of education and passing of information. Further, the performance of drag here possesses the ability to allow for education through activism. As gender non-normativity is often

aggressively policed through acts of social and physical violence in South Africa, the performance of drag allows the performers to humanise the notion of non-normative expressions of gender through their ability to interact with their audience. This chapter also situates Bubbles Bar in the social and economic context of Cape Town's nightlife. In this chapter, I discuss the manner in which the drag performers are physically marginalised based on the area in which the bar is situated. Here I also draw upon the manner in which drag performers are viewed as being transgressive in their performance of gender. The stigma that follows this perception of transgression places drag performers upon the margins of heteronormative and LGBTIQ communities and society. In an attempt to contextualise the economic instability of running a performance space for drag performers, I draw on criminal activity and harassment in the area to indicate that the bar and its performers are situated on the margins of a society and a gentrified area of the city that is not as safe as it appears. However, I also discuss here that within the context of the bar there is a sense of safety to freely express identity in relation to the performance of gender, while pointing out the nurturing of drag performance that takes place within the confines of the bar.

2. Performing Gender

I have met Luc at the entrance of Bubbles Bar. A tall man with a slight build, we exchanged a kiss on the cheek as we greeted each other. With his short gelled hair, greying goatee and moustache, dressed casually in a t-shirt and jeans and comfortable sneakers, it was difficult to imagine that he was the man behind the glamorous figure of Lola Lou. As he pulled the curtain aside towards the backstage area, Luc knocked on the door to the dressing room. “Are you girls decent?” A minute or two passed as I bobbed my head along to the repetitive drum beat of Rihanna’s “S&M”, a popular song from 2011. The door was opened half-way, and I was led into the tiny, well-lit room that the performers at Bubbles bar used as a dressing room.

Before Bubbles bar was established in 2011, the venue was used as a small nightclub in the De Waterkant area of Cape Town. What once was a women’s bathroom had been converted into a dressing room for the performers. It was the first time that I had been in the space in a number of years. The performer for the evening, Vida Fantabisher was carefully but quickly applying her make-up, a skill that was acquired through Lola’s tuition, as well from her background in acting. The various pots and tubes that seem foreign to me were arranged on the counter in front of her. She dabbed at various containers with different sized make-up brushes as she applied various shades and textures to her face in order to create the appearance of a feminine contour. Also applying make-up for the evening was Samantha Knight, the host of ‘Open Stage’, at Bubbles Bar – a Friday night event for amateur drag performers who wish to take to the stage. I had known Samantha Knight since 2010. Before becoming a staple at Bubbles Bar, we became acquainted through our work together on the committee of the LGBTIQ student organisation at the University of Stellenbosch. One of my first experiences with the drag persona of Samantha Knight was at the organisation’s closing function for that year – a Tim Burton themed costume party. One hour before the party was to start, I was asked to DJ for the evening, as well as support Samantha Knight’s performance by doing the sound and music alignment for her performance. At the end of the evening, after the performance and party had ended, we had to clear the rented space of all our equipment and party decorations. Samantha, still in full drag proceeded to take down and carry the

speakers and sound equipment. Amanda next to me says: “I can barely walk in heels, let alone carry heavy equipment down stairs in them.”

Returning to the make-shift dressing room, Vida Fantabisher exclaimed: “I don’t like to call myself a drag artist or a female impersonator, I am a drag queen! I don’t want people to think that I am trying to be a woman or that I want to be a woman. I want to be noticed for not being a woman. I want people to know that I am a drag queen. I don’t want anyone to think that I am a woman.” Vida makes suggestions towards the stereotype of how drag is understood, and makes use of the stereotype as a starting point for the act of performing in drag. Those who perform in drag make no attempts to hide the fact that they are really men. The artistry and entertainment lie in the fact that they are men, performing as what is seen as a woman, but the audience knows that they are men. In this way, the performance of drag is authenticated. The mask here is important, for it provides the audience with the knowledge that they are spectators to be entertained by an act of performance.

After we had finished clearing and cleaning the venue for the Tim Burton-themed party, someone in the group suggested that we go to a nearby nightclub to dance and celebrate the success of the party and our organisational skills. As we piled ourselves into cars for the short drive we all met up at the nightclub and stood in the queue outside the nightclub. Samantha was there, standing next to me in make-up, still wearing her dress, wig and high heeled shoes. I noticed some people looking at us. I suppose that we stood out from the crowd, because I too was in drag, dressed as Edward D. Wood from the Tim Burton film *Ed Wood*, a fictionalised tale of the B-grade Movie director, actor, screenwriter, producer, author and editor who was as famous for his badly received films as he was for his cross-dressing habits. With my hair slicked back and a pencil-thin moustache, fashioned from clipping synthetic hair that is often used for hair braiding and clip-on pony-tails attached to my face with eye-lash glue, wearing a navy blue blazer and a waistcoat to mask the contours of my breasts, I stepped forward, finally at the front of the queue. The bouncer, a tall heavy-set man with a shaved head, and a neck appears to exceed the width and breadth of his head, dressed in a black shirt and a black leather jacket looked at Samantha and I and curtly told us the price to get into the nightclub. “Ten Rand for girls, and twenty Rand for guys to get in.” he looked at Samantha and I with hesitance and confusion, not knowing how much to charge us to enter. It

was quite apparent that I am female-bodied, and that Samantha is male-bodied, nevertheless our appearances in dress and make-up did not correlate with the expected norms relating to our physical bodies. I told him “she’s my girlfriend”, attempting to make light of the situation, but he did not laugh at my joke, as he maintained a stern facial expression. Eventually Samantha paid twenty Rand to get into the nightclub – I was charged ten Rand.

As Samantha turned her head towards me, she quickly shook it in disagreement, “I don’t like the term ‘drag queen’,” said Samantha, responding to Vida’s exclamation that she prefers being referred to as a drag queen. Samantha continues, “For the longest time, when someone referred to me as a ‘drag queen’, I would cringe,” she said as she stretched the corners of her mouth, baring the bottom row of her teeth, with a look that suggested disgust. To Samantha, the term ‘drag queen’ carried a stigma, seen as something vulgar and misunderstood. The stigma around the term has taken away from the integrity of the act of the performance and the amount of work put into it. The nature of the term ‘drag queen’ for Lola and Samantha had become something far too over the top. It had become crass and developed a bad reputation for the representation of the performance of drag in film, television and print media. Lola posited that while the film, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, put drag on the map to some extent, it also changed the way people viewed it and the manner in which people portray it. “Priscilla ruined the art of drag. It ruined the idea of the ‘dame’, and turned drag into something cheap. People think that they can put a shower curtain on for a dress and an egg carton on their heads and they’re instantly a drag queen. There’s much more to it than that,” says Lola, as she frowned and shook her head from side to side. For Samantha, the stigma around drag for many people surrounds the idea that men who wear women’s clothing want to be women. “Before I met Daddy Cool,” said Lola, “there were so many times when I would be talking to a guy...you know flirting with him, and the minute I told him I was a drag queen he would be out of the door! It’s because they think that we want to be women, when really most of us are just guys like the rest of them.” For the performers at Bubbles Bar, performing in drag is about just that – performing. “I don’t want to be a woman...but I play one on stage.” Here, the notion of drag performance is misunderstood in two vastly different methods. On the one hand, drag performances are not authenticated by the misappropriation of the apparent desire to cross-identify as having a strictly feminine gender identity. For the drag performers who participated in this research, this identification does not apply to their act of performing in drag, as their manner of performing drag is temporary, situational in

relation to the stage and transformative in the sense that they are afforded the opportunity to don the mask of their feminine character – even if it is just for one night during the week. On the other hand, for the performers at Bubbles Bar, when the exaggeration of drag is taken too far and is performed too outlandishly, or too over the top, the artistry becomes a perverted parody of a drag performer. For the performers at Bubbles Bar, performing drag authentically possesses a delicate balance between the subtle and the overt. If drag is performed too subtly, it may not be viewed as a drag performance. Conversely, if drag is performed in too outlandish a manner, it becomes what is considered by my interlocutors to be vulgar comedy, a parody which may even offend the audience. This disconnect in how drag can be understood means that the spectators do not necessarily read the performance as a drag act, but as something else altogether relating to parody or the desire to be perceived as a female-bodied feminine individual. Where does that leave the performance of gender in relation to drag then?

The performance of gender is situational in Bubbles Bar. For the performance of gender to gain authenticity and validity upon the stage, those who perform at Bubbles Bar, are often unable to perform in a subtle manner, and make use of stereotyping in order to convey their character. Writing on the legendary drag performer, Danny La Rue, Underwood states that, “...the performers regard themselves as clowns and extend and exploit the accepted liberty of clowns to ‘talk dirty’ far beyond the limit which would otherwise be accepted in public. And there is an added dimension for, while it is generally supposed to be more permissible for men to ‘talk dirty’ about sex than for women to do so, that opinion is maintained by the drag performers but because they appear as women, their jokes seem more *risqué*” (Underwood 1975, 18), indicating a sense of transgression in the performance of drag. The manner in which the performers present their feminine characters to the audience is exaggerated in the manner in which the performers are styled. Their clothing is always tighter, shinier, and more extravagant than what one would generally view a feminine identified individual wearing on a day-to-day basis – after all, the performers are meant to be on stage. This exaggeration translates to the make-up that drag performers apply to their faces as well. The lines which they draw upon their faces in the process of feminising their appearance are paradoxically severe, often making use of colours and shades that are rarely seen on individuals off stage. The performers’ movement upon stage too represents the suggestion of femininity in an exaggerated form, with large and over-the-top physical movements to further assert the

feminine drag persona. Stereotyping and stigma are concepts that are situational and carry various meanings depending on the circumstances. By making use of exaggeration, drag performers challenge stereotypes – it is through this act of exaggeration that performance of drag seems more like a performance, an authentic performance. When the performers at Bubbles Bar present femininity in the exaggerated form, they often make use of the stereotypes surrounding male effeminacy in their physical action, often overtly dropping a wrist, or flirting with audience members in a mock-coy manner. Furthermore, they playfully represent stereotypes of women during their performances by exaggeratingly performing feminine innocence and coquettishness or feminine hyper-sexuality through flirting with audience members, sometimes taking a seat upon a male audience member's lap during the performance.

Nonetheless, this playful performance of stereotypes provides the audience with the tools with which to understand the performance of gender by the drag performer through a process of negation. Stereotyping and the stigma that may follow from this against certain people can range from the jokes that are made about 'dumb blondes', or people with red hair, to the hatred and prejudice surrounding racism and homophobia. However, when we take gender into consideration, the ways in which gender is constructed and portrayed is often quite stereotypical and essentialised, e.g. "this is the way in which women ought to behave", "act like a lady", "all men like drinking beer", "boys don't cry," etc. Gender and gender presentation are constructions that across various societies, and in South Africa, considered as stable. The performance of drag challenges this assertion by presenting the performance of gender as being in relation to the context in which gender is viewed and perceived, when the male-bodied individuals who perform in drag are understood and believed to possess tacit characteristics of femininity when they are upon the stage. Much of the literature that is made available, relating to femininity and masculinity concerns Western thoughts about these constructions. All too often we find that there is an assumption that contemporary Western ideas about masculinity and femininity are the universal norm, writes John Beynon in the book "Masculinities and Culture" (Beynon 2002). Yet, these norms are not the same for all people in all societal contexts.

Conversely, through colonialism, the spread of dominant religions and the media, these norms concerning the manners in which to be a man or a woman in society have become dominant across the world and in South Africa. Durkheim asserts that ideas surrounding these norms are constructed and made dominant through the process of implementation through inheritance, "...in reality there is in every society a certain group of phenomena which may be differentiated from those studied by the other natural sciences. When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my own sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited them through my education" (Durkheim 1938, 1). Durkheim's notion of social facts relates to these dominant ideologies surrounding gender in that there are 'collective representations' within society that coercively compel people to behave in certain ways that comply with the dominant ideology concerning masculine and femininity in alignment with their gender and sexual presentation in order to maintain the stability and structure the behaviour of society's inhabitants so as to not challenge the stability of the normative construction of gender within society. This also compels the individual to 'fit in' to the category that society places him/her in, in order to avoid social and medical pathology. As Durkheim puts it:

"If I attempt to violate the law, it reacts against me so as to prevent my act before its accomplishment or to nullify my violation by restoring the damage, it is accomplished and repairable, or to make me expiate it if it cannot be compensated for otherwise... In the case of purely moral maxims, the public conscience exercises a check on every act which offends it by means of the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of citizens, and the appropriate penalties at its disposal. In many cases the constraint is less violent, but nevertheless it always exists" (Durkheim 1938, 2)

Performing in drag upon the stage at Bubbles Bar, we find that when the behaviour of individuals differ from these societal prescriptions. They are often seen as deviant and quite often there is a stigma attached to these 'deviant' behaviours that in many cases leads to prejudicial behaviour. "...a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs as *regulatory*

operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.” (Butler 2004, 43), the regulations that are placed upon the ways in which differently sexed individuals ought to perform gender greatly narrows the variety of ways in which individuals are allowed to perform gender socially. However, the social implementation of these restrictions fail to recognise the variety of ways in which a great many people do not fit into a mould that is exclusively masculine or exclusively feminine, “gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalised” (Butler 2004, 42). In this way the performance of gender and the gendered performance of drag are used to indicate failure of a binary gender system, by not recognising the variety of ways in which masculinity and femininity may be performed. In this instance, the performance of drag is posited as being above gender and the expectations of gender that are placed upon a sexed body. When Pieter-Dirk Uys states “that’s why gender is so interesting. I have made such a huge division between Evita and myself-and have started talking about her in the third person-because she needs that space,” (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 62) he indicates that the persona of Evita is an entity separate from himself. The character is indicated through the expression of a gender on his body in a specified context – during the act of performance. Even so, the presence of the male sexed body juxtaposed with the performance of a femininely gendered persona is one that is deemed transgressive as it disrupts and challenges the hegemonic presentation and understanding of both sex and gender.

Judith Butler posits the idea that those in possession of a specific body are considered deviant, and are seen as pathological by a dominant hegemonic and heteronormative societal structure if they do not comply with that structure’s norms and regulations. “...gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions” (Butler 1991, 24). By making those who do not comply with the socially dominant ideals and behaviours the *other*, the normativity of the heteronormative and hegemonic society is enforced, and deviance is policed – often through prejudice and stigmatising of that which is considered as taboo. Nonetheless, when we look at the literature

surrounding masculinity and femininity, it can be difficult to say exactly what masculinity is. Is masculinity only related to the body and the way it is presented? Or is there something inextricably tied to behaviours which are perceived as masculine and the perception of male bodies?

In his book, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, George L. Mosse writes that masculinity "...was regarded as of one piece from its very beginning: body and soul, outward appearance and inward virtue were supposed to form one harmonious whole, a perfect construct where every part was in its place. Modern masculinity was a stereotype, presenting a standardised mental picture, "the unchanging representation of another," as Webster's Dictionary defines stereotypes. Such a picture must be coherent in order to be effective, and in turn, the internalised visual image, the mental picture, relies upon the perception of outward appearance in order to judge a person's worth. Stereotypes objectify human nature, making it easy to understand at a glance and pass judgement" (Mosse 1996, 5). Using Mosse's terms relating to the stereotype of modern masculinity, watching Luc perform as Lola perform on stage, her physical persona suggests femininity with a variety of blond wigs, long, dark eyelashes and form-fitting dresses and gowns. However, her singing voice, stature and speaking voice provide markings of masculinity that at first glance is shocking or even confusing. Making use of Mosse's argument in the understanding of masculinity, the performance of drag renders the understanding of gender incoherent in such a way that different gender presentations have become blended and intertwined. This intertwining of performance and gender representation renders gender as unstable. This sense of instability that is inherent in the performance of femininity by a male-bodied individual appears to produce a perceived inauthentic social fact. Thus, we find that the ways in which masculinity and femininity are perceived and understood are rooted in stereotypes. What is understood to be masculinity and masculine behaviour are circumstantial, and relate to what the behaviour of men ought to be within a specific societal context.

One way of looking at masculinity is to look at the physical aspects of what is perceived to be male and further than that – masculine. The exterior, the musculature of the male body, the way in which men are clothed and outward behaviour are all parts of that which physically constructs an individual as masculine (Schlechter 2008, 5). "Only the intervention of

someone else can establish an individual as an *Other*. In so far as he exists in and for himself as sexually differentiated. In girls as in boys the body is the first of all the radiation of subjectivity, the instrument that makes possible the comprehension of the world: it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts” (de Beauvoir 1997, 295). The ways in which masculinity is constructed through clothing and action is differentiated through the manner in which femininity is constructed in relation to and in opposition to masculinity. In “The Second Sex”, de Beauvoir posits a binary between masculinity and femininity. They are constructed as polar opposites, where men and masculinity are constituted as the cultural subject, and its polar opposite –femininity – is constituted as the natural object. Ideals surrounding masculinity and femininity are not free from stereotyping.

Masculinity and masculine ideals are structured and enforced within society through that which is symbolically male. Masculinity and masculine behaviour in contemporary society is understood through the lens of virility, aggression, and sexual adventure, which can further produce behaviours such as machismo, misogyny and male dominance. These stereotypes surrounding masculinity are made visible and obvious to us, even through media representations of what men ought to be. Relating to these gendered categories, Samantha told me that, “...growing up in a small Afrikaans *dorpie*¹⁷, I was supposed to fit into some box. I either had to be a ‘blue’ boy, or a ‘pink’ girl. But I’m neither a ‘blue’ boy, nor a ‘pink’ girl.” She said, relating to the manner in which socialisation relating to masculinity and femininity are constructed. Looking at the South African versions of internationally syndicated magazines such as Men’s Health, as well as other fitness magazines, muscular “manly” men adorn the cover. Inside the magazine, we find various articles ranging from fitness guides to gaining “Six-pack abs” and a muscular back and arms, to “manly” guides to nutrition, followed by guides to seducing women and giving your sexual partner an orgasm. The masculine individual is thus a typified construction. To be “manly” in contemporary understandings is essentialised and thus a stereotype, as stereotyping depends on “unchanging mental images” (Mosse 1996, 5), with “no room for individual variations”. To conform to masculinity and masculine behaviour would mean that all men who identify as such are attributed with the ideals of the whole group. However, this in itself is a stereotype which is

¹⁷ town

valid for the situation in which it is applied. For Mosse, stereotypes “have become the equivalent of a negative judgement: it is those marginalised by society who are said to be stereotyped”. In the October 2012 issue of the FHM (For Him Magazine: It’s A Guy Thing), an article titled: “20 Reasons Why It Would Totally Rock To Be Gay”, relies on stereotypes about gay men in terms of positive and negative consequences relating to the subject matter. Number 16 on the list states that “you both enjoy the same types of porn,” relating to the enjoyment of pornography between partners in a relationship. Their consequence to this merely states that: “We don’t really have to go there, do we? You know what kind of porn you’ll be watching.” Further the article tackles the topic of “...being sodomised...the most terrifying thought imaginable...” as well as making reference to stereotypes surrounding dressing well, being able to dance, and “rocking at karaoke”, which carries the consequence of “...being pelted with bottles by the rugby crowd for making them look bad.” I would like to argue that the context in which the individual finds himself/herself affects the nature of what is considered dominant and who is marginalised. Lola suggested that: “*I’m not weird...I’m perfectly normal – In my world. A straight man in Bubbles! Now that is weird!*” This indicates that in spaces that are frequented by LGBTIQ individuals, it is heterosexuality, and in particular the heterosexual masculine male who is marginalised here. Recalling a past event, Lola told me that: “One time, when we were still in Warsaw, I was hired to perform at a lesbian party. I arrived with most of my make-up and outfit on with Daddy Cool on my arm. As we walked in, he was holding my hand. He was wearing a tight sleeveless top...you know, exposing those muscles of his...and the girls just saw this man, this *alpha-male*...because, you know he is an alpha-male, and the girls they just turned and looked at him so viciously. Because, you know...how *dare* this *man* be in our space? I’ve never seen him look so scared before! He spent the rest of the night in the dressing room, and asked to leave as soon as I was finished performing,” laughed Lola. However, in a world that is dominated by heterosexuality and perceived gender stability, it is LGBTIQ individuals who are marginalised, and following this those who perform in drag destabilise gender norms and masculine ideals.

“I’m a creep...”

Lola sang over the heavy guitar-riff of the popular Radiohead song that I used to listen to repeatedly during my high-school years, bringing forth a sense of awkward nostalgia in me.

“I’m a weirdo...”

She continued from the stage, while her eyes shifted from looking at individuals in the audience, to looking at no one in particular.

“What the hell am I doing here?”

I don’t belong here...

I don’t belong here...”

She bellowed as she pulled the microphone further from her mouth as she increased the volume and intensity of her singing voice, and drew it closer as she reached the final lyrics in an almost broken singing-whisper. There is a duality and ambiguity in the performance of drag that has its niche on the stage inside Bubbles Bar, but seems out of place in most other contexts. As I dropped the ash of my cigarette into the ash-tray in the “smoking alley” next to the sound booth, a young man who introduced himself to me as Michael¹⁸ told me that: “I don’t know exactly what it is about Bubbles...but I feel really at home here.” he said, as he took another swig of his beer and adjusted his black t-shirt, smoothing it down over his jeans. “I know what you mean,” I replied. “Maybe it has something to do with the lack of pretence that I often see at other clubs and bars...” “That’s exactly it!” Michael exclaimed. “Here, I don’t have to worry about being looked up and down, people checking out what I’m wearing for the night, or whether or not I’ve made the effort to shave my beard. I guess I kind of feel safe here, and I don’t feel weird about just being myself while going out and having a good

¹⁸ Pseudonym

time...” he smiled, as we watch a man in dress pants, and a dark blue blazer climbing the pink pole in the middle of the dance-floor, while his friends danced around him and cheered him on. On the other side of the room, two women were dancing sexually in a sexually suggestive manner, grinding up against one another to the rhythm of Maroon 5’s “Moves like Jagger”. In the dancing crowd, I spotted my friend Tracy¹⁹, who describes herself as a “butch” lesbian, spinning a tall gay man in a tight sleeveless top around on the dance-floor. Once the cycle of their spin had been completed, he paused and grinded his backside in her crotch. She animatedly raised her eyebrows and grinned widely as he laughed and waved to his boyfriend who was seated at the bar. “See, that’s what I like about this place,” Michael said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to any other bar or club where you can see this mix of people enjoying themselves to this degree, without worrying about what others around them are thinking. I mean if this crowd was behaving like this in most other venues across Cape Town, they might get looked at funny because they don’t necessarily conform to what everybody else is doing.”

Luc described Bubbles Bar as “...a multi-cultural, multi-gender, multi-racial space where no one can be weird.” In many places outside of Bubbles Bar, the act of men performing as feminine individuals is strange, and subject to social intolerance. For Daddy Cool and Luc, the space of Bubbles Bar, is a space of acceptance and safety where those who do not conform to the norms and standards of gender and sexuality are able to perform their identities in the way in which they feel comfortable. This sense of acceptance allows the patrons and audience members of Bubbles Bar to express themselves freely through their acceptance of the performance of drag, for the prejudice and social pathology surrounding the rejection of heteronormative regulations of sexuality and gender performance are not enforced in the same manner within the confines of the bar. Writing about tolerance in his sociological debates surrounding postmodernity, Zygmunt Bauman states that, “...tolerance requires the acceptance of the subjectivity (i.e. knowledge-producing capacity and motivated nature of action) of the other who is to be ‘tolerated’; but such acceptance is only a necessary, not the sufficient condition of tolerance. By itself, it does nothing to save the ‘tolerated’ from humiliation. What if it takes the following form: ‘you are wrong, and I am right. I agree that not everybody can be like me, not for the time being at any rate, not at once; the fact that I

¹⁹ Pseudonym

bear with your otherness does not exonerate your error, it only proves my generosity'? Such tolerance would be no more than just another of the many superiority postures; at the best it would come dangerously close to snubbing; given propitious circumstances, it may also prove an overture to a crusade. Tolerance reaches its full potential only when it offers more than the acceptance of diversity and coexistence; when it calls for the emphatic admission of the *equivalence* of knowledge-producing discourses..." (Bauman 1992, xxi-xxii). However, it is not merely tolerance that is asserted by Daddy Cool and Luc relating to the freedom of expression of their patrons and performers, but acceptance. Their aim is that everyone who performs at, and visits the bar is treated with respect and from there the entertainment and fun can ensue. Daddy Cool's assertion that "this is not a zoo," provides a sense that within the confines of the bar they aim to avoid pathologising those who wish to perform an act of self-expression. When the audience admires the drag performer upon the stage, they authenticate the act of performance. The performance that has become authenticated is one that challenges, and in some way transgresses the normative ways in which masculinity, femininity, and everything in between is understood. For Luc, the act of performing as Lola provides him with a sense of freedom "...doing drag...it's something that makes me feel special. It is a special thing, being Lola. When I'm on stage, I'm more than a man, and more than a woman, I'm above gender – I'm Lola."

2.1 Transgressing Normative Gender In the Media – A Drag Explosion

I felt a tap on my left shoulder as my eyes were adjusting to the lights of the theatre are being increased in their brightness. "Hey, aren't those the *drag queens* from the movie sitting in front of us?" asked the woman sitting next to me in a failed attempt at a whisper. "Yeah, I think so," I replied as I looked at the three feminine figures seated in the row in front of me in a Nu Metro Cinema at the V & A Waterfront. The film, "Glitterboys and Ganglands" had just been screened as one of the few South African films to be screened at the annual gay and lesbian film festival – Out in Africa. The documentary film followed a few of the contestants of the Miss Gay Western Cape 2010 drag pageant that took place at the Joseph Stone Auditorium in the Cape Flats area of Athlone – a married drag performer who occasionally finds her way into local tabloids with her aspiring underwear model husband, a mechanic who is competing in the pageant for the first time, and a pre-op transsexual who also partakes

in female beauty pageants and works at the McDonalds in Greenpoint. The crowd applauded as the day-time mechanic rose from her seat. The topic of her knowledge of, and employment as a mechanic was raised in the documentary as a source of humour. Her colleagues at the garage expressed their initial discomfort with having to work with a gay man, but stated that they did not have a problem with it now, as she has proven to them that the stereotypes surrounding gay men, and particularly the effeminacy of drag performers were faulty, if she was able to perform the same work and duties as they were. To combat their perceived discomfort surrounding homophobia, and their fears surrounding femininity, she had given each of them a woman's name with which to refer to each of her colleagues. The paradox of gender and performance, and the situational characteristic of the performance of gender were made evident here. Her make-up was impeccably done, her light brown hair styled into a short bob – I would not have known that she was a drag performer had I not just seen her on screen moments ago. The film gained some critical and public interest and soon after its screening at the Out in Africa film festival, an edited version of the documentary was screened on the local television channel SABC 2.

In the distance I saw a tall, long blonde-haired, femininely-dressed individual standing in front of the entrance of Bubbles Bar as I turned the corner to enter. I had arrived before the show scheduled for that evening had started. Roxy Le Roux stood outside, sipping a clear liquid from a glass through a black straw, as she waited for more people to arrive to *Killer Karaoke* the night that she hosted at Bubbles Bar. The 'bouncy' disco-beat of Mika's Love Today could be heard from the entrance as Roxy bobbed her head from side to side as she lit a cigarette. Roxy is one of Lola Lou's daughters and a former barman at Bubbles Bar. "I met Lola about two years ago," she told me later, "I was out clubbing one night and I stepped outside for some fresh air and a cigarette. Lola was outside too...well, not as Lola, but as Luc you know. We got to talking and she told me that she performed in drag in Warsaw and in Brussels and had started performing at a local restaurant. She showed me some pictures of herself in drag, and I was in such awe. It was then that I asked her if she would give me some tips if I ever got the opportunity to do drag. It just so happens that I managed to book a show two weeks later, and that's how Roxy got her start...that's how I became her adopted *daughter*, so to speak. Then when Bubbles Bar opened in 2011 I managed to get into performing on a regular basis." I enquired how Roxy came to the idea of performing in drag. "I was always interested in performing arts. And I was always curious about drag. Now with

TV shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* that have become popular, particularly with gay men, more people are looking at drag with a sense of intrigue. If it's not intrigue about doing drag, it is intrigue about seeing live drag. Drag has been around in Cape Town for a long, long time, but now it's as if there has been a drag explosion – a drag *awakening*, if you will. I think that the media has helped to turn the way in which a lot of people look at drag from disgust, into intrigue. Here in Cape Town, I think that the shift has partly been thanks to positive interest in the pageants and also Bubbles Bar.” Visibility and exposure have played an integral role in the recent popularity of drag in Cape Town, “I mean, when there's a drag queen around, you can't not help *but* look at her!” exclaimed Roxy, with a smile. The performance of drag challenges the idea that the performance of gender is an essentialised and stable performance. For the spectators viewing drag performance, “the concept of “spectacle” unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena. The diversity and the contrasts are appearances of a socially organised appearance, the general truth of which must itself be recognised. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is *affirmation* of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere **appearance**” (Debord 1983, 10).

Discussing drag in popular films and the media with Lola, she agreed that it is a growing trend, and that the performance of the characteristics of gender in ways that are different to the heterosexual norms of understanding gender is gaining a great deal of media interest, which indicates that more people are thinking about gender outside of traditional, essentialised and static rules. The crossing and blending of what gender is understood to be makes the performance of gender subject to the situation and context in which an individual finds him/herself. For the performance of drag, the more extreme crossing of gender is unique to being performed on stage, or in front of the screen, but always for an audience. The spectators are “in” on the ruse, but in their applause and appreciation for the art of the act of transgression and the straddling of the imagined lines of gender performance and presentation, they are authenticating the state of flux of which the context of gender is performed in “a moment of *performance* where you might step out of the fixed identity in which you were seen and reveal other aspects of the self...as part of an overall project of *more fully becoming who you are*” (hooks 2006, 247). Lola thought that, “Crossing the lines of gender is becoming the *ultimate* performance. I'm not just talking about “Priscilla Queen of the Desert”, but more recently we've seen Cate Blanchette playing Bob Dylan in “I'm Not

There”, Glenn Close in “Albert Nobbes”, Felicity Huffman playing a transgender woman in “TransAmerica”, and even Meryl Streep in the role of a Rabbi in “Angels in America” some years back. Okay, so those were all women, but now we have TV shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* that are making people sit up and take notice of drag as an art form. From what I understand, drag was never an art form over here in Cape Town. It was always clubby, and trashy, and vulgar – but here people can see that it takes skill to perform and do drag. I think that Bubbles has played a part in keeping drag going in Cape Town. It has played a part in keeping the art going...”

“My Mom sent me to a military school in the hopes that she would get a little soldier. Needless to say, she got a drag queen,” says the contestant “Sonique” from the television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in the premier episode of the second season. Masculine behaviour is policed and enforced in a manner that portrays it as essential in nature, as behaviour that is true for all men at all times across time and societies. Deviations from these masculine norms are seen as something strange, and these behaviours negatively stereotyped as “unmanly” and in relation to this feminine and effeminate. The performance of drag plays with these essentialised characteristics and places the performance of gender in context where it is seen as situational. When I see the performers at Bubbles Bar upon the stage, the way in which I understand gender is in flux. An a priori understanding of what gender is, and what it should be is thus situational and subject to the context in which it is performed. There is a sense of an authentic gendered performance that is made meaningful through a perceived inauthentic guise. This paradoxical character of the performance of gender was evident in Roxy’s appearance on an Afrikaans television show.

“Dames en here, jy dink jy weet; maar jy weet nie!”

[Ladies and gentlemen, you think you know; but you don’t!]

“Please, put your hands together for Roxy Le Roux!” The host of *Jou Show Met Emo Adams and Wikus*, Emo Adams bellows from the live-recorded performance of the show that has been broadcast on the Afrikaans television channel, *Kyknet*. A silhouette of a feminine figure appears behind the screen placed upon the stage. She raises her arm, twirls her wrist and flicks her hair as she sings the first few lines from Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive”. It is

evident that the voice that is coming from behind the screen is a man's voice. As she steps out from behind the screen, the camera cuts to reactions from the audience. Some people laugh, while others cover their mouths in astonishment and surprise, but most applaud and cheer.

The performance of drag operates in relation to the stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity, while not being altogether an act of overt femininity or masculinity. That the performers who do drag possess masculine characteristics does not prevent them from being able to perform in a feminine manner. For the performance of drag to be understood as being an authentic drag performance, the audience has to accept these paradoxes and stereotypes, but still be willing to accept that their performance of gender upon the stage is believable as a drag performance, and not something that is too subtle or too exaggerated to believe.

In the following chapter the concept of gender is looked at more closely and discussed in more detail. Importantly, the themes of heteronormativity and a binary understanding of gender are discussed in order to further discuss the regulatory function of gender norms. Further, the ideas of a theatrical performance in relation to the performance of drag are discussed here, in order to assert the importance of a staged performance when referring to the performance of drag. I will continue by discussing the historical significance of the path that has led to modern conceptualisations of drag performance. In this chapter the concepts of vulgarity, authenticity and "realness" are discussed in relation to staged drag performance and drag beauty pageants, as well as the use of drag as manner in which the performer challenges normative understandings of gender.

3. Creating Gender – The Stage and The Standard

“You know, sometimes you confuse me,” Zolani²⁰ said to Kim²¹, who often goes to Bubbles Bar in costumes that range from Sailor Suits, to steep heels and clothing that closely resemble women’s fashion from the 1950s, “sometimes I think that you are a real woman” she continued, much to the shock and amusement of her girlfriend and I as we try to mask our laughter, while Kim raises her eyebrows in shock. She did not look pleased about having her feminine appearance be mistaken as part of a staged performance.

What *is* it then that makes a *man*? Furthermore, what is it that makes a woman? The binary categories, where men and masculinity are on the opposite scale against women and notions of femininity, are not enough to encompass all people in the world, and they are certainly not fulfilling when discussing female impersonation. What then is gender? And what is the importance of presentation and performance when discussing these complex terms? For Irigaray, “...being a woman is equated with not being a man” (Irigaray 2007, 64). The complexity of this statement made by Irigaray lies in the difficulty of trying to establish what a “man” and what a “woman” is, as well as that which markedly differentiates these genders from one another.

The Oxford Dictionary presents gender as a mass noun that refers to the state of being male or female, that is typically used with reference to cultural, or social distinctions, as opposed to biological ones. When used in grammar, particularly in languages such as Latin, French and German, gender is used in order to class certain nouns – this is loosely related to “natural” distinctions of sex. The etymology of the word, gender, refers to genre which connotes ideas of “race, stock, family, kind, rank, order, species, and sex. Following the erotic connotations surrounding the word sex, gender was then used to indicate the sex of a human being in the 20th Century. What, then, does the word sex refer to? Making use of the Oxford Dictionary once more, sex refers to the categories of male and female, based on the reproductive functions of humans and various other living organisms. Another definition refers to sexual

²⁰ Pseudonym

²¹ Pseudonym

intercourse. The etymology of the word sex refers to the Latin *sexus*, which refers to the state of being male or female and gender. The word is used to divide and differentiate between those who possess a male or female anatomy.

In the definitions surrounding the concepts of sex and gender, we find that these concepts are difficult to define and explain. The concepts of sex and gender are difficult to define in a manner that is consistent to all people in all situations even though sex and gender appear to be bound to one another in the characteristics of their definitions as sex suggests an expectation of gender. In her discussion of gender binaries, Judith Lorber posits the idea that sex and gender is made use of in a manner that each concept is interchangeable, while ideas and meanings surrounding these terms often refer to various ideas surrounding sexuality, physiology or biology, and even social status, “for an individual, the components of gender are the sex category assigned at birth on the basis of the appearance of the genitalia; gender identity; gendered sexual orientation; marital and procreative status; a gendered personality structure; gender beliefs and attitudes; gender displays; and work and family roles. All these social components are supposed to be consistent and congruent with perceived physiology,” (Lorber 2005, 76) she states as she sets out a heteronormative and binary understanding of what gender ought to be. Nevertheless, gender is different from sex, but it is not completely separate from it. At birth, the human being is ascribed a sex from anatomical make-up that is usually considered evident from the appearance of male or female genitalia. These imply gender identity, a gendered sexual orientation, marital status, and procreative status in accordance to the societal context and ideals within which an individual may find him/herself in. Gender roles in a specific society are then perpetuated upon the understanding and interpretation of the sexed body of male, or female. These assumptions that are placed upon the sexed body can be taken further, as Butler posits the idea that “gender is not exactly what one ‘is’ or ‘has’,” but rather that gender is “the apparatus by which the production and normalisation of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performative,” that is assumed by gender (Butler 2004, 42). Butler implies that the notion of a sexed body is related to ideas and social norms around gender. Filling in these spaces Lorber places an emphasis on the sexed body while emphasising the importance and impact that the societal situation of the individual surrounding the formation of gendered expectation upon a body of a given sex. Gender and gender norms thus relate to the various cultural meanings and prescriptions that are

associated with, or attached to the biological sex of an individual in a multicultural societal context. In this way, there is an indication that Western contemporary understandings of the heteronormative binary referring to gender is inherently flawed, as men are assumed to be masculine and women are assumed to be feminine, often by default in all societal situations. Raewyn Connell, who writes extensively on the concepts of masculinity, gender and power relations, states that, while masculinity *refers* to the male body, it is not *determined* by it – meaning that the body does not dictate the gender and sexuality of the individual, and subsequently that the gender and sexual presentation of the individual does not strictly indicate the sex of a human body. Thus, we can infer that gender is related to the biological make-up of the human body, but it is not subject to it. Furthermore, ideas surrounding gender and sex role socialisation are mistaken in essentialising dominant views surrounding gender and sex for that which is normative (Connell 2009, 95). I would like to challenge ideas surrounding the binaries that are placed upon a sexed idea of gender by discussing the assumed transgressive nature of the performance of drag in relation to social facts – where a male-bodied person performs and presents a female character in a staged situation such as Bubbles Bar through a discussion of male performance of femininity in the theatre to highlight the importance of theatricality in the performance of drag in Bubbles Bar.

Artistry and theatricality are important elements of performing in drag. When Zolani mistakenly reads Kim's appearance as being a drag performer, she to a certain extent undermines Kim's gender identity through her physical presentation. The performance of drag in Bubbles Bar is an appropriation of overt femininity, through make-up, dress, physical action, etc. used in order to suggest a feminine character which is used to entertain an audience. It is significant to make a distinction between drag and transgender in this research project, as being transgender is not used as a means for entertainment for an audience. Judith Butler describes being transgender as the experience of cross-identifying, or living as a gender that is different from one's assigned birth sex and perceived gender. Butler describes this as referring to those who may or may not have undergone hormone treatments and/or sex reassignment surgery (Butler 2004, 6). Furthermore, someone who is transgender can be described as having a strong sense and insistence that their gender is different from that gender which is assigned to them at birth (Morgan, Marais and Wellbeloved 2009, 7). Thus, when we refer to someone as being transgender, we refer to the gender identification of a person rather than the anatomical sex ascribed to them at birth. While there is a perception

that drag performers are transgender, this is not correct in all circumstances. When discussing the performance of drag in Bubbles Bar the gendered feminine performance is temporary and theatrical with the aim of entertaining an audience. The audience too is aware of the ruse of the feminine presentation of the drag performer, which the performer makes use of to engage and entertain the audience. That is where the theatricality of the performance lies. When the drag performer successfully convinces the audience of her performance, the performance of drag is made authentic. Differing from this, the self-identified transgender individual is not involved in a staged act of gendered deception to entertain an audience. Here gender identity is essential to the lived experience of the individual. Where the performers at Bubbles Bar are concerned, there has been no apparent insistence that they as individuals wish to be identified as female outside of the performance of drag. On the contrary, it is an important aspect of the performance of drag that the performer be recognised as not being female, but rather an actor performing femininity. The act of drag performance thus is a conscious form of performance which differs from Butler's notion of gender as performance, where an understanding of gender is always established through the performance of gender – whether it be on the stage or the street. This difference is established through the drag performance which is made more feminine than feminine through overt use of make-up, dress, and action in order to suggest to the audience that the performer is acting as a feminine character. When the performer demonstrates to, and convinces the audience that she is more womanly than women, the character who she performs becomes an entity that is considered to above gender as she circumvents traditional understandings of gender roles and gender role socialisation.

3.1 The Theatre in Drag

“Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness” constituted through discursively contained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex” (Butler 1990, viii). For Lola, the act of performance in drag is theatrical in its nature. “It’s theatre! I always say that it is like playing Napoleon.” she says in reply to the idea that drag performers want to become women. The suggestion of femininity in drag is there to guide the ruse of a male performer performing as a feminine character with the knowledge that the audience is aware of the man

behind the make-up. Like the audience knows that the actor portraying Napoleon on stage is not *really* Napoleon, the audience too is aware that the drag performer is not really female. Stripped from the modern-day drag culture that is related to the “gay/queer community” or the “pink village”, historically female impersonation as an act of performance has its roots in the theatre. This demonstrates that female impersonation as an act of performance is a fairly common practice that has taken place in various societal contexts over the course of history. The performance of drag within the context of Bubbles Bar is exclusively for the aim of performance. The performers here have no interest in being considered a feminine character outside the realm of the staged performance

3.1.1 (Wo) Men on Stage

The Oxford Dictionary describes the word “drag queen” as a noun, describing men who dress up in women’s clothing, typically for the purpose of entertainment, while a female impersonator is a male entertainer whose performance consists of dressing and acting like a woman. Lola considers female impersonation to be the “umbrella term” with which to refer to a variety of individuals who perform feminine characters in the context of entertainment.

Female impersonation has not strictly been a Western theatrical practice. Japanese Kabuki theatre has a long-running tradition of male actors assuming feminine roles – the *onnagata*. Kabuki can be broken down etymologically as such: ka-bu, which is explained as ‘song’ and ‘dance’; while ki is described as being skilled in, or a skilled person. The word, kabuki, has its origins in the word ‘kabuku’, which means ‘to slant’ or ‘to tilt’. Kabuki as such is rooted in a conceptualisation of ‘queer-ness’, that which is different from the norm, that which is strange. Nonetheless, as Japanese culture is understood as being rooted in conservatism, there is a tendency to separate the *onnagata* from erroneous Western understandings of drag, where there is a stereotype that the female impersonator *must* be a homosexual in order to fulfil his role, as a heterosexual male would have no reason or desire to portray a feminine role because he is a *man*, and holds all the essential characteristics that go along with *manhood*. One of the most famous *onnagata* to ever grace the Japanese Kabuki stage is quoted as stating, “Why should women appear when I am here? There is no woman

in all of Japan who acts as femininely on stage as I” (Senelick 2000, 82). With this statement, Nakamura Utaemon asserts that it is not the physical body that merely suggests the performance of gender in the context of the theatre. When gender is performed upon the stage, the act is of greater importance than the reality of the body. The circumstance calls for acting and the suggestion of a character, thus when the performer successfully performs a feminine character, while the audience is aware of the man behind the mask, the act of impersonation is successful and made authentic with relation to that context.

Nevertheless, the onnagata does possess a great deal of similarity to the Western understanding of female impersonation. While modern inclinations of female impersonation breaks the illusion of realistic femininity by means of overcompensation through hyper-feminine dress and performance (more woman than woman herself?), the onnagata of the Kabuki theatre too, does not attempt to pass as an *authentic* woman. The onnagata of the *no* theatre (named after Ame No Uzumo, the goddess of music), are to portray the feminine roles upon the stage; however this is done in a masculine manner in movement and behaviour. As Kabuki theatre performance is a realm that is dominated by males, dress, gestures and behaviour are used as codes which gender the characters on stage. The illusion of femininity in this context however is depicted in a masculine manner. Thus the onnagata has been ascribed a feminine character, but does not present itself as female. The suggestion of femininity is merely ascribed through the mask that is worn. In Japanese Kabuki theatre, the onnagata cannot be a woman by way of tradition; nevertheless the onnagata cannot be a woman because a woman is physically a woman in her body and movement. In terms of Kabuki theatre, a woman cannot act as a woman – that is not theatre that is not an illusion – as she is herself a woman. (Senelick 2000, 100) Thus, the character of a woman must be played by a man in order to suggest femininity. Japanese Kabuki theatre thus suggests that there is nothing extraordinary about a woman portraying woman – and the theatre has to suggest something extraordinary.

The onnagata and female impersonation can also be compared to Chinese opera. The earliest records of female impersonation in Chinese theatre/opera is from the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907), which informs that during this time men would portray female roles, and women would portray male roles (Similarity to Shakespeare’s *12th Night*). Later, during the Qing period

(1644 – 1911), female impersonation would still be a feature of Chinese opera. During this dynasty period, singers in the theatre would also be employed as prostitutes, with the female impersonator being reported to have been the most popular. Later, during the 18th Century, the Emperor Qianlong banned the performance by women in the Beijing opera. Thus, the roles of women would have to be portrayed by men (Senelick 2000, 110-111). A contemporary example of this can be found in David Henry Hwang's reinterpretation of the Puccini's opera "Madama Butterfly", as "M. Butterfly", where a French diplomat named Gallimard becomes infatuated with a Beijing Opera female impersonator named Song Liling. Similar to modern intimations of female impersonation and the performance of drag, the feminine characters of the Beijing Opera who were performed by men, were performed in an exaggerated manner. The female impersonator in the Beijing Opera is always heavily made up, wearing beautiful jewellery and clothing, while performing speech and song in an exaggerated high pitched voice. Different to the onnagata of the Japanese Kabuki theatre, the acting profession was viewed as immoral, thus the female impersonator too was associated with this stigma.

Female impersonation has been a historically significant practice in theatre; where in the past women were often not allowed to perform on stage. Thus female roles were performed and portrayed by men. A popular understanding of this is found in Elizabethan-era (Queen Elizabeth I) theatre in England, from 1558 - 1603. Significant to the staging of productions of William Shakespeare's works, were the adolescent males who performed female roles on stage. These adolescent males were dressed femininely in order to portray their female roles. Thus, a popular belief is that the term *drag* has its roots in these Shakespearean actors being 'dressed as girls'. Later, in the Western world, female impersonation would be the territory of music halls and circuses, as the dame comedian came into being. For Lola, this is where drag as a performance art gained its prominence. The grand dame comedian, found in music halls and circuses gave rise to "the idea of the drag queen as being over the top because it was something that was found in pantomime," she says. "Because of this more often than not, villainous pantomime character, drag queens were seen as being in bad taste, they were vulgar, cheesy, bitchy characters who were considered as being in bad taste," she continues. This spectacle portrayed the female impersonator as lascivious and comical figures in the entertainment industry. During the mid-18th Century, female impersonators were prescribed as being related to homosexuality, upon the discovery and reporting upon London's *Molly-*

houses. These Molly-houses can be considered to be a precursor to the modern *gay bar/club*, as a venue where men and cross-dressing men would socialise and could be intimate. However, as homosexuality was illegal at the time, these establishments too were illegal.

However, the manner in which we understand female impersonation today has its roots in cabaret and music-hall theatre as glamorous and comedic performers who made no attempts to disguise the fact that they were really men (Rupp, 2003). In the context of cabaret and the music hall, a *drag queen* is constituted in relation to the definition that “drag has been defined as ‘women’s clothing worn by men’ (*Penguin English Dictionary*) but the drag act is more generally accepted as female clothing worn by men for the purpose of entertainment. The word ‘drag’ is said to be derived from the drag of dresses as distinct from the non-drag of trousers. At all events modern drag has come a long way in a short time; from crude pub entertainment spawned as a giggle over a drink and such activities as Drag Queen Contests, to the superb impersonations by versatile performers” (Underwood 1975, 17). At first, these drag performers would perform live-singing, however as time and technology changed, lip-synching was introduced. This technology may have served as a way to open up the performance of female impersonation even further, as more people were able to take to the stage to perform a range of talents including dance and comedy as part of a feminine persona. For Lola and Samantha, these undertakings and understandings of drag relates to the stereotypes existing surrounding drag performers as over-the-top gay performers who are “lip-synchers” who are overly theatrical. Even though Samantha does lip-synch her routine for the most part, there are other drag performers who sing live and even a DJ who works in drag whose presence is felt in the “gay village” of Greenpoint and De Waterkant. “All the vulgarity surrounding the ways in which drag queens perform – getting drunk, swearing and insulting the crowd – the bitchiness, makes some of us who perform have to differentiate ourselves by calling ourselves *Drag Artists* or *Cabaret Artist* to get some respect...so people didn’t think we were trashy. In Poland, I worked as a *Cabaret Artist* for a long time...” The use of the vernacular category of the *Cabaret*, or *Drag Artist*, serves to give the performers a more respectable title. Just because the drag performers are physically male does not mean that they cannot be “lady-like” in their performance. This form of respect by changing the title of the drag performer also places an emphasis upon the work, and the artistry that goes into the preparation for a good drag performance.

3.2 Beyond the Vulgar Queen

“There is no place for vulgarity here at Bubbles,” stated Lola matter-of-factly, “I don’t want to hear ‘fuck this’, ‘fuck that’, ‘fuck, fuck, fuck’, while throwing shot glasses at the audience from the stage,” Lola continued, responding to the question of why she refuses to hire some popular drag performers who perform at a nearby restaurant situated in Somerset Road.

“There’s a lot of bitchiness out there in the drag world,” Lola sighed. Samantha lighting a cigarette, finally finished styling her hair adds, “When you’re a drag, you put yourself out there. You say to the world ‘here I am, I am a queen!’” gesturing her hands towards her chest. She continued, “...and you have to be so strong within yourself. You have to be so strong to get up on that stage. And sure, you’re going to get looked at, and there are going to be those people who are going to laugh at you, or mock you – so you have to be a bitch to get up on stage. But Vida and I have it easy here at Bubbles” asserted Samantha, relating to the unconventional form of performing gender on stage. Those who come to Bubbles Bar, do so to see the staged performance of drag, an act that is not put on with such regularity in other venues.

“I don’t want my girls to behave in a crass way when they are on stage here,” said Lola of the performances at Bubbles Bar. “I know that we’re all here to have a good time, but there has to be a line somewhere. There is no place for ugly words and behaviour here.” Oxford Dictionary definitions of vulgarity state that to be vulgar, means to lack sophistication or good taste. Vulgarity also relates to coarseness and rudeness, often relating to explicit and offensive references to sex or bodily functions. Lola refuses to allow performances of vulgarity in Bubbles Bar, as “the audience pays to come here...and they don’t get paid to be insulted” inferring that there is a certain level of mutual respect that is shared between the audience and the performers. If the audience respects the performers in such a manner where they allow them to express themselves through the act of drag performance, the performer should afford the audience the same type of respect.

When I asked Lola how she would describe the bar, she described it as "...multi-cultural, multi-gender and because of that, no one can be weird here. The way I see it, and the way that I want to keep it, is that Bubbles is a safe house for those who love drag. It's a safe environment. All the girls here help each other out when they need it. They support each other when they need the support. Because I didn't have a teacher, or this kind of supportive environment, I want Bubbles to be that, especially for the younger or newer people doing drag now." Almost every performance at Bubbles Bar is met with applause, whether it is on a grand scale or a small one. During the amateur performances on Friday nights' *Open Stage*, Samantha often tells the crowd: "It takes balls to wear a dress," and reminds the audience to applaud after each performance regardless of the quality of the performance. "I don't allow anyone to be made fun of here," says Lola. "I want everyone to feel safe." This suggests that there is an air of professionalism surrounding the staging of performances at Bubbles Bar. Generally, the audience does not attack the performers in most other stage performances, and vice versa, so the performances at Bubbles Bar should not be any different. However, there are instances in other venues when the audience may heckle the performer, or the performer may behave in an unruly and vulgar manner towards the audience. "I need to be respected. In order to get that respect, I need to be respectable," says Lola. "That's why I don't allow any vulgarity in my house...okay, sometimes the girls get a little carried away with the drinking and the partying with the crowd, but that never takes away from their performances. My drag queens are always professional." Relating the diverse group of people found within the confines of Bubbles Bar, Lola states that "South Africa is fragile. Like the stage, the society we are in is a very vulnerable space. Disruption can break it. That's another reason why I don't allow vulgarity. Vulgarity can fuck it all up." There is always the potential that individuals may become offended by the behaviour of the audience and even the behaviour of the performer, if their actions were to take a vulgar turn. This, in turn possesses the potential to damage the reputation of Bubbles Bar, as well as its performers. The damage of reputation in this sense may impede the traffic of patrons, as well as performers who would otherwise attend performances or perform at the bar.

In the following section I return to the act of performance on stage in relation to the authenticity of the performance through the formulation of a character for the stage.

3.3 Drag *Realness* on Stage – Performing Your Version of Authenticity

Samantha Knight introduced me on stage as the only drag king to perform at ‘Open Stage’ that Friday night as I stepped onto the stage, my palms sweaty as she passed me the microphone. For that night, I am one of two people performing a version of masculinity upon the stage at Bubbles Bar. The upbeat introduction of Jason Mraz’s “Butterfly” starts booming from the speakers, as I tried to control my nerves, remember the lyrics of the song and hope that the beard and side-burns that I had attached to my face does not slip from its position as my face nervously becomes covered in perspiration. I tried to focus my attention on one or two people who were standing in front of the stage in order to make my performance seem authentic to the audience, and mask my nerves. I had invited a few friends to watch me perform as “Johnny Deep” that night, hoping that I do not make a fool of myself. If I do, at least I know that my friends would applaud at the end. As I sang along to the music and attempted to connect with the audience, I realised that I had switched verses, and sang the wrong lyrics at the wrong position in the song. Samantha noticed my mistake and confusion, and smiled at me and nodded at me indicating that I should continue. As the song ended, I bowed to the audience. As I smoked a cigarette outside to calm my nerves, Luc came outside and congratulated me on my first performance at the bar. I had previously come to the bar dressed as “Johnny Deep”; however this was the first time that I performed on stage at the bar. The character of “Johnny Deep” was always dressed and styled in a similar manner: always dressed formally, with a waistcoat and tie or bowtie, and always in possession of facial hair in order to emphasise a masculinised jaw-line.

Similarly, Luc told me that Lola as a character too has a specific style that indicates that he is performing as Lola. “When we came to South Africa and I started performing as Lola, Daddy Cool and I sat down and figured out what we wanted Lola to look like. Moving here was a new start for us, and I wanted to give Lola a new start too. But we had to make her recognisable. That’s why whenever you see Lola on stage, because you see her in one of her blonde wigs, darkly made up eyes, and her dark (form-fitted) dresses and gowns, you instantly know that it’s her.” As homage to their drag mother, Roxy and Samantha too always

dressed their characters in blonde wigs. This way of styling each character in a unique and recognisable manner gives a sense of authenticity to the character that is being performed. Even if the character only exists in performance, the recognisability and the memorability of the character gave her a sense of realism – that she exists in the world through memory and recognition. This process of signification gives the performance of the drag character a sense of authenticity. This performance of gender upon stage is recognisable as a character when the audience gains familiarity with the character that performs upon the stage. In this situation, when drag is performed on a regular basis, the audience becomes familiar with what is recognisable about the character. The performer who knows what is significant about his/her drag character brings life and authenticity to the character that is performed upon the stage. The performance is produced through this process of signification that is read and understood by the spectators in order to interpret the production of performance and gender.

Discussing this process of signification, Debord posits that, "...the language of the spectacle consists of *signs* of the ruling production, which at the same time are the ultimate goal of this production... the spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides" (Debord 1983, 8). For the performance of drag to gain authenticity, the performance of gender still has to take place within the confines of the signs of the dominant hegemony. In this way gender can only be recognised as masculine or feminine through the use of the signs of the ruling production. Yet the performance of drag is at the same time a paradoxical and liminal performance of gender, whereby the signifiers of what gender ought to be is both questioned and perpetuated. When Samantha Knight performs "Somebody to Love," barely moving, holding the microphone with both hands, wearing a pink dress and a fur collar, she is performing femininity in a girlish and innocent manner, calling out and beckoning the audience with arms stretched out in elbow length, silken white gloves: "...can anybody help me...find somebody to love?" Roxy Le Roux performs a more overtly sexual form of feminine performance as she sings "Roxie" from the film soundtrack of Chicago. "They're gonna recognize my eyes, my hair my teeth my boobs my nose!" as she saunters through the audience, winking, blowing kisses and kissing audience members on the cheek. Although the audience is always fully aware of the performer's male identity, they are accepting of the performer's temporary status as feminine during the act of performance. In Debord's words

“...reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society” (Debord 1983, 8). In Bubbles Bar, the authentic reality of the performance of gender is produced through the act of staged performance which is viewed and its reality is validated by the spectator.

Reflecting upon my performance as “Johnny Deep”, I realise that I had not been magically transported into a realm of masculinity. Transforming my face and body to resemble that of a man’s body gave me sense of exhilaration as I feel that the transformation is an act of transgression to some degree. However, underneath the facial hair and behind the masculine mask of this character, my identity of self has not changed. “It’s theatre, it’s an act!” says Lola, relating to the performance of drag. The way in which gender is performed and perceived in and out of drag is authenticated in different situation by the recognition and acceptance of the gaze of an other, another, and the spectator.

The following section further explains the significance of character formulation, in order to demonstrate the way in which the mask of the character allows the performer to transform himself for an authentic performance of self, and drag.

3.4 Behind the Mask – The Self and Authenticity

“Sometimes when I go out with my friends, they ask me to do a Roxy Le Roux number, and it makes me a little uncomfortable and shy...I can’t just snap in and out of Roxy mode. I need her make-up and her dresses to get me into character.” Peter told me as we sat on the stairs leading up to the mosque and parking lot in Vos street. He was dressed in a white shirt, black skinny tie, tight fitting black pants and comfortable men’s shoes for a change while being at the bar. Drops of sweat covered his brow after dancing with, and spinning around a woman who came to Bubbles Bar with some of her friends to celebrate her bachelorette party. As part of their bachelorette party uniform, each woman had fitted a pair of pink bunny ears atop her head, while the bride-to-be held a pink, plastic *pimp-cup* encrusted in plastic jewellery. Lola, wearing the blonde afro-wig and a tight fitting black dress, decided to incorporate her

into the show that night. “Come over here darling... now I know that you are getting married soon, how soon is it?” asked Lola, as the woman replied that her wedding would be taking place within the next two weeks. “So, as you’re probably going to spend most of the rest of your life *having* to dance with the same man, I want you to look around the room...” Lola said as she gestured an open hand towards the crowd, “and I want you to find yourself a man – a man that looks like he can *dance*.” Upon picking Peter up out from the patrons of the bar that night, Lola exclaims, “Oh sweetie! I ask you to find yourself a *man* to spin you around on the dance floor, and you bring back one of my *daughters*!” The crowd responded with cheers and laughter. Next to me a young woman, Sadie who visits Bubbles Bar frequently, leaned over and asks me who that man is. “It’s Roxy – out of drag.” I respond. She raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes in surprise, “Wow...I would never have guessed!” As we continued our conversation outside, “I’m actually very shy...” he said, smiling and looking into eyes, to convey honesty and sincerity,”...even though Roxy is in some ways an altered extension of myself, Roxy has her own outgoing personality. She has her own domain in the drag world, even though Peter is sewn into the hem-work of her dress.” Peter said with a brief laugh, alluding to the intertwining of the character and the self.

“When I created Roxy, I had to sit down and create this character...even though there are definitely parts of me in her...I had to decide what kind of a person Roxy would be. I had to decide how she would dress, how she would speak and how she would interact with other people.” Peter said as he sipped from his straw and wiped the sweat from his brow. “First and foremost, I see myself as a performer. With Roxy, I find artistry in styling a female character and maintaining it. That’s why I just can’t break out of character when I have to be Roxy – because Roxy and Peter don’t share the same character.” It takes Peter approximately an hour to transform into Roxy, “two hours if I have the time” he confirmed. “The mask of Roxy, the make-up, makes me feel that I am her. And through Roxy, I feel that I have more freedom and confidence to approach people and talk about certain things.” The idea of the mask follows the other performers at Bubbles Bar. When I asked what is significant to Lola about the act of putting make-up on, Lola explained to me that the make-up and the character is like “...putting on a mask. That mask protects me to some extent and makes me feel safe and comfortable enough to approach all those people out there and to go out on stage. Because I feel safe behind the mask, I’m able to express all these things I would never dare to express as Luc.” Recalling a short documentary that Lola participated in, while in Warsaw, chuckling

at the memory Luc informed me that "...there was one part in the film where I was sitting in front of the mirror...busy doing my make-up," he gestures, mirroring Vida as she applies what appears to be powdered blush to her cheekbones, "...and I look into the camera through the mirror and say: 'I used to be a very shy boy...*now*, I'm Lola.' I mean, can you imagine how ridiculous that sounds? But it is true...I am very shy..." Nodding her head Samantha interrupted, "I know exactly what you're talking about. Doing drag, and being Samantha has taught me to fake having a voice. Now, I really do feel that I have a voice." The confidence that is built by the act of performing in drag is largely impacted by the act of putting on the mask of the character. Through this act, the performers find themselves being able to communicate and express themselves in front of large groups of people. An act which would otherwise not be undertaken by these individuals. Vida disagreed with Samantha and Lola, as she shook her head, "For me, this is just a character. It's just an act. It's probably because I am an actor, but for me it's more about the transformation and having fun. I enjoy being seen as a drag queen." For Vida, the act of transformation relates to the outward appearance that is altered from a masculine presentation to a feminine presentation and back again. Vida is transformed into the drag persona during this process which allows her to perform a character that does not exist outside of the staged performance. Vida's assertion that the performance of drag for her is just an act indicates that the exaggerated performance of her character suggests that she does not wish to pass as a woman, but as a drag performer.

3.5 Passing and Pageants

"Jubee! Look at me! Jubee! What about me!" a high-pitched voice echoed throughout Seapoint Civic Centre, searching the auditorium for the source of the annoying screams I realised that it is a young man wearing white pants and a navy blue blazer who was jumping up and down, in an attempt to gain the attention of one of the hosts of the 2011 Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant, Jubee – a contestant from the second season of Rupaul's Drag Race. Lola had just performed a song, while the contestants have been getting changed for the next round of the competition. Upon the announcement of the evening-wear portion of the competition, the man in the blue blazer returned to his seat. Kim, who was seated next to me realised that he has just taken a seat directly behind us, she grimaced and I responded with a pained expression.

The auditorium lights dimmed slightly as the sound of music started blaring from the speakers that were placed around the auditorium, indicating the commencement of the next portion of the evening wear portion of the competition. The Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant, takes on the format of traditional beauty pageants, however the contestants of this beauty pageant are men. As the contestants took to the stage, one by one in their beautiful ball gowns, most of them sparkly, many of them floor length, the audience responded to their favourite contestants with applause and cheers, and high pitched screams that emanated from behind Kim and I. Each contestant had the opportunity to partake in the introductory performance – a dance number in which the hosts introduced each contestant – a swimwear portion of the competition, evening wear, and finally a costume portion that had to relate to the theme of that year’s pageant. Following this, the ten judges deliberated and chose a top five from the group of contestants who had to answer questions posed by these judges based on a random draw. The evening culminated in the crowning of Miss Gay Western Cape and her two runners up. I am reminded of the *drag balls* of New York, portrayed in the documentary film, “Paris Is Burning”. Explored within the film, are the extravagant *Ball* competitions, in which various contestants have to “walk” along a runway that is similar to the pageant stage. These contestants are consequently judged upon the “realness” of their drag, their beauty, the beauty of their clothing, and their dancing ability (Paris Is Burning, 1990). The parallels that can be drawn with the *drag balls* of New York and the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant, as well as various other pageants that take place across Cape Town, relate to the beauty and the “realness” of each contestant. While the contestants of the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant are all wearing stage make-up, upon closer inspection, the contestants appear to be wearing more natural make-up that gives them an appearance of looking more womanly, more feminine and more realistically female.

A week after her performance at the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant, I approached Lola with the topic of pageants. “Miss Gay Western Cape? It’s growing, it’s growing in waves...but that’s pageantry, not cabaret. What we do here at Bubbles is closer to cabaret.” I nodded my head in agreement, but I was not entirely certain what she meant by this, so I enquired further: “What I mean is that their make-up is different, they have a more natural look. Even their clothing is different. Of course if you’re going on stage you have to look like

a girl who goes on stage – not like you're on your way to Shoprite,” implying that while those who partake in pageants look more like women, while Vida states that “I want to look like a drag queen. Drag queens look like drag queens. They don't look like women. I don't want to be mistaken for a woman.” The authentic performance of gender upon the stage thus has a different characteristic when related to pageants. The realism of the make-up and clothing that the contestants of these pageants wear situates these performers closer to the understanding of female impersonation. Where the performance of drag is hinged upon the spectacle and the authentication of their exaggerated performance of gender, those who perform in pageants gain respect and accolades for beauty and realistic representation of femininity that is more closely related to female-bodied individuals who partake in beauty pageants.

The drag performers at Bubbles Bar suggest femininity without looking the part of the naturally female. Their make-up is a little too obvious and larger than life; their clothing is bigger, brighter and tighter than what you would find on the average woman. “People are paying to see you!” explains Lola. However, these differences are what make the performers distinctive in their drag performance. The audience has come to see a drag performance. Lola explained her own mask, “I can express more than a man, and I can express more than a woman in drag. **I am above gender.**” These circumstances in which the performers find themselves bring attention through the act of performance, and confidence by performing through the mask. During the act of performance, the presentation of some sort of gender is unavoidable. The use of gender as part of a staged performance allows the audience to identify with the performers upon the stage. However, gender is always related to some form of societal regulation with regards to the manner in which the individuals who make up the collective are able to understand the presentation of gender. Although the performance of drag does not fit into the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity with relation to men and women the suggestion of a gendered expression allows the performers to form a basis upon which to build their characters. It is with regards to the binary understanding of gender that Lola is able to assert that she is above gender. As the drag performer does not strictly fit into one category or another, the category of the performance of drag as a non-normative form of gender expression gains authenticity from the manner in which the performance takes place in this staged situation following an understanding of the theatrical act of performance by the performer and the audience. For drag performance to be considered

a staged performance, it has to be read through its theatrical elements. This separates the performance of drag from non-normative performances of gender in day-to-day life. There is more acceptance relating to the staged performance of drag, as opposed to the expression of gender outside of the staged situation, that does not comply to the largely heteronormative binary understanding and assertion of gender surrounding personal expression and freedom.

What Happened in Kuruman – An Interlude

I had been drinking my morning coffee while perusing various news websites – just like most other mornings. It was the 14th of June 2012, and there was a winter chill in the air, but what I had been reading that day sent a chill down my spine that has nothing to do with the winter air. The breaking story today on LGBTIQ news websites as well as some of the mainstream media was the gruesome murder of Thapelo Makutle, the 23 year old winner of the recently held Miss Gay Kuruman – situated in the Northern Cape - drag pageant. My face became flushed, and I felt the anger in me rising as I read the details of Thapelo's murder. The news of Thapelo's murder came after months of reports surfacing concerning vicious attacks against out LGBTIQ identified people, as well as those who are perceived to be Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Queer. For the past three Monday mornings before the news of Thapelo's murder was brought to the fore, there would be news of another LGBTIQ individual who had been raped, murdered, or both. In the weeks that followed, each Monday would be the same. Statements made by the local police, and from a local LGBTIQ organisation reveal that, following an argument with two heterosexual men – apparently about Thapelo's sexual orientation and gender identity – the previous night, Thapelo was discovered in his rented room with his throat slit so severely that his neck was held together by a piece of skin, while his genitals were cut off and stuffed in his mouth. The news about Thapelo follows an earlier, as yet unsolved murder of a lesbian woman in the same area, who had her genitals cut out and a bottle inserted into the wound.

I did not finish my coffee that morning.

4. The Drag Queen Gauntlet – Drag, Activism and Education

The hill leading up to Bubbles Bar is steep and uneven. Fondly, we referred to it as the *drag queen gauntlet*, for if you could make it up the hill in high heeled shoes, you could make it to the stage. It was a cold evening at the end of June 2011 in Cape Town, and I was about to attend a special event: “United Against Corrective Rape”, at Bubbles Bar that aimed to raise funds and build awareness for Luleki Sizwe, a safe-house for survivors of corrective rape in Cape Town. As I paid my entrance fee of R30, I was given a key ring with the *Gay Flag of South Africa* on it, depicting the Rainbow flag, which had become a world-wide symbol of the LGBTIQ community, with the lines of the South African flag drawn across it. Gay Flag of South Africa is a project that aims to support LGBTIQ communities in South Africa through visibility. They sell and distribute the Gay Flag of South Africa, as well as having their pictures taken with the flag at numerous public events. Their ambassadors also promote and sometimes even wear the flag, fashioned into form-fitting dresses at events at which they know that there is a possibility that they are to be photographed at. In the Lifestyle section of The Sunday Times newspaper, Drag Performer *Lola Fine* was photographed wearing a dress made from the Gay Flag of South Africa in a short article titled: “Queens Rule”.

As I entered Bubbles Bar, I realised that the venue was much fuller than I had anticipated. It was a week-night after all, and most people needed to go to work tomorrow morning, an old friend from university, who I run into, tells me. I could not find an available seat. I could barely find a place to stand without being accidentally burned by someone else’s cigarette. I noticed a young woman dropping the ash from her cigarette into an empty beer bottle which she held in her other hand, as she tentatively took another drag from her cigarette. As I looked across the room, I recognised some friends of mine as well as a few other people who I had become acquainted with during my undergraduate studies at university. Occasionally, I would wave at a familiar face in the crowd. Walking across the room to greet an acquaintance would be too much trouble at this point as minor pangs of claustrophobia began to set in. As I scanned the room, the crowd appeared diverse in age, sex, gender presentation and race, but still felt distinctly

middle-class. Most are well-dressed and well-groomed. Despite the cold weather outside, it was swelteringly hot and humid inside. Near the stage, I noticed a fan that had been switched on, and I jealously wished that I was standing across from it. Just then, Lola Lou took to the stage with a long lean leg peering out from a thigh-high slitted corseted dress made from some sort of synthetic material, as the lights became slightly dimmed and the music started booming with the back-track of the title track from the film *Burlesque*, which starred Cher and Christina Aguilera, however, she had changed the lyrics to describe Bubbles bar. As the chorus draws near, instead of singing: “Welcome to burlesque...” Lola sang, “Welcome to Bubbles...”

In recent years, there have been a great number of media reports of attacks on LGBTIQ identified, and LGBTIQ perceived people in South Africa. One of the first prominent media reports of this was the murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana, an 18 year old lesbian who was murdered on the 4th of February 2006 in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Since then there have been numerous reports of lesbians in townships who have been murdered and/or raped because of their sexual orientation and perceived masculine identity that does not conform to the gender ideals that are set out for women in South African society. Media reports have dubbed the rapes of lesbians as “corrective rape”. This implies that lesbians, many who are perceived to be masculine-identified or “butch”, are raped in order to “correct” their socially transgressive behaviour and physical presentation, in order to make them become “normal” and heterosexual. Luleki Sizwe is a Non-Profit-Organisation (NPO) that was started by Ndumie Funda that supports survivors of “corrective rape”, in 10 township areas across the Western Cape. On the NPO’s website, the details surrounding the name “Luleki Sizwe” are provided. The first part of the name is taken from Luleka Makiwane, who was an out lesbian who passed away in 2005 from HIV/AIDS related causes that were a result of her rape by her male cousin who wanted to prove to her that she was “a woman, and not a man”²². The second part of the name, Luleki Sizwe, is taken from Nosizwe Nomsa Bizana’s name. Like Luleka Makiwane, she too was an out lesbian. Nosizwe Nomsa Bizana was gang-raped by five men, and in the process was also infected with HIV/AIDS. On December 16 2007, she passed away from Crypto Meningitis. Nosizwe Nomsa Bizana remained silent about her rape at first, for

²² <http://www.lulekisizwe.com/who-we-are/>

fear of stigma from her community. Thus, Luleki Sizwe came into being to provide support and information to others who have experienced similar ordeals.

After the introductory ballad, “Welcome to Bubbles” has concluded, Lola, wearing her blonde afro-style wig that has become characteristic of her performance in drag, welcomed us all to Bubbles Bar, and began the evenings proceedings by telling us about the purpose of the fund-raising event: “Dear ladies and gentlemen, my darlings, for the first time ever, every one of my daughters who perform at Bubbles Bar during the week will be performing on the Bubbles stage tonight.” The crowd applauded, and there are some cheers from the audience. As I looked around the room, everyone seemed excited for the evening ahead and the performances that were about to commence. Each of the seven performers thanked Ndumie for her work with Luleki Sizwe. The Princess, the only black drag performer at the event, who made reference to her school years at a prestigious boy’s school in Cape Town, recounted her first meeting with Ndumie: “The first time I met Ndumie, I was getting into my BMW outside Rosie’s Pub, about to go home after a night out in the gay village. I noticed this black *dyke* walking towards me, and she asked me for a lift home to Gugulethu (a township in Cape Town).” The Princess proceeded to tell us that he did not live in the township, but he gave her and her girlfriend at the time a lift home. After a number of songs, and a long night of performances, The Princess invited Ndumie onto the stage. Ndumie took hold of the microphone and thanked everyone for their support. Her voice cracked as she told us the story of how Luleki Sizwe came into being. Her speech was over very quickly, as she thanked the organisers and the performers. Shortly afterwards, I spoke to some of my fellow audience members about the event that had just taken place. Many of them expressed feelings of being inspired, and feelings of hope concerning activism surrounding LGBTIQ issues.

“I don’t like to do *normal* charity work,” states Luc one evening as he took a drag of a cigarette, inhales and exhales a medium-sized puff of smoke. Leaning back into his chair, getting comfortable he continued, “I’m not going to donate coats to the homeless or whatever, or raise money for babies with AIDS, because you know what? There are *tons* of other people out there donating their time and money to those people. When I give my time or money to charity, I want to give it to the gays, the lesbians, the bisexuals, and the

transgender people out there who need it. I've tried helping the homeless around me, I give them money and food and conversation, and what do I get in return? I get robbed!" Luc speaks bitterly and angrily referring to some of the underprivileged and homeless people who pass by Bubbles Bar on a daily basis. Speaking to certain people who pass by often and offering time and money to them, a recent burglary at Bubbles Bar bore witness to a friendly face being the source of the crime. I have never felt unsafe within the confines of the bar, however there have been many occurrences of pick-pocketing that have taken place by both patrons and previously employed staff. While the confines of Bubbles Bar provide a sense of security, as a space where freedom of expression is protected and promoted, it is not free from the social violence of the outside world. Bubbles Bar can be perceived as a bubble, wherein the spectacular world of drag performance is made separate from the world of violence and oppression of stigma, corrective rape and the lacklustre implementation of constitutional legislature. Yet, in this thesis I argue that, for my interlocutors Bubbles Bar is not a bubble that is entirely separate from the world at large, rather it is a space where they are allowed the freedom to transform and perform.

4.1 The Bubble and The World Out There

"Hey! Don't you have manners?" Tracy said loudly as a young coloured man pushed past her to get into Bubbles Bar. Tracy and I were huddled under my umbrella, smoking cigarettes outside the bar while we protected ourselves from the light autumn rain. "This place is getting a bit dodgy," Tracy's girlfriend Kim tells us as we peer into the bar through the small window in the door. Looking out onto the street, I notice two people begging for money from passers-by, further down the street a man who appears to be loitering tells those who pass him by, "Hey! Sister! What you want? I got 'shrooms, MDMA, coke, for you. What you want?" It was 2:30 am, and most of Bubbles Bar's patrons had left or moved on to one of the other bars or dance clubs that are situated in Green Point that serve alcohol after 2:00 am. Bubbles Bar was only in possession of a temporary liquor licence and was situated closer to residential areas than the other bars and clubs in the area. Thus, they had to comply with the City of Cape Town's zoning regulations that stated that they are only able to serve liquor until 2:00 am, while other establishments that are situated within the business district of Green Point

were allowed to serve liquor until 4:00 am. The street where Bubbles Bar is situated was quiet; not letting on that it is a Friday night in Cape Town. Halfway through a sentence I noticed a large brown rat that scurried out of a drain a few metres away from where we were standing. I let out a frightened high pitched scream, which Tracy and Kim found hilarious. Still laughing, Tracy said, “I think that is our cue to leave. You know you’ve been out in the city too late when the rats come out to play”.

4.1.1 Marginalisation in The “Pink City” – Violence and Social Coercion

Bubbles Bar is situated on the outskirts of the “gay village” in the De Waterkant area of Green Point in Cape Town that centres around Somerset Road. Standing outside Bubbles Bar, you are given the treat of seeing the back entrance to the Cape Quarter shopping centre, which looks like it has been carved out of rocks and given cobble-stone walk-ways, which provide the visitor with the feeling that the Cape Quarter shopping centre has always been there. In reality, the Cape Quarter has only been in existence for a few short years. I vividly remember visiting the now-defunct nightclubs, Bronx and Sliver during my first and second years at university in 2005 and 2006, that were situated in that space. There, I gained my first glimpses and experiences of a LGBTIQ Cape Town. Inevitably, after witnessing various police raids and a strong police presence within these nightclubs, the venues were sold to property developers and demolished to make way for the shopping centre. Almost 3 years later, Bronx Action Bar would reopen across the street from where it once stood. However, the venue was sold to make way for a new development, just weeks before the murder of the Bruno Bronn, aged 50 and the owner of the establishment. On the 8th of February 2012 news reports confirmed that the body of Bruno Bronn had been discovered by his domestic worker (Nicholson, 2012). Police confirmed that his body had been found with his hands bound and tied in front of his body and that there were markings found along his neck, although a cause of death was not released at the time. Within days four suspects were arrested, one who was formerly employed as a bouncer at the nightclub, and are currently awaiting trial in connection with the case. Since the murder, the establishment has been demolished. For those who frequented the “pink strip” of Somerset Road, it is strange to see the empty space where Bronx Action Bar once stood. Bronx Action Bar became an institution of sorts on the “pink strip” of Somerset Road. In some of the media reports surrounding the bar, it had been

referred to as the “home” of the “pink strip”. Although it gained the reputation of being seedy and possessed a sexually-charged air about it, it would still be the bar that many people would frequent after 2:00 am, when some of the surrounding establishments would close their doors. Having a conversation with some friends about the closure and demolition, most of us reminisce about our first outings to a “gay bar”, speaking with nostalgia about that first time – for most of us Bronx Action Bar was the first “gay bar” we went to. Months after it has been demolished, I still have to remind myself to adjust to the idea that the establishment is truly gone every time I pass the construction site that it has become. Oppression and marginalisation are not strictly tied to acts of violence. Relating to the business of Bubbles Bar, there are aspects of geographical, social and economic marginalisation that affect the success of the establishment.

At the edge of the Cape Quarter, across the street from Bubbles Bar, there is a “gay owned” restaurant and bar that has successfully stayed in the same venue since 1994, that is LGBTIQ friendly. However beyond Bubbles Bar, which is flanked by the Nurul Mohamadia Mosque – one of the oldest mosques in Cape Town, established in 1899²³ – there are no more explicitly LGBTIQ friendly restaurants and bars. However, there are a number of expensive-looking blocks of flats that have been built in the De Waterkant area as it is marketed by tourism websites as well as real estate developers as being a trendy neighbourhood to visit and live in. Behind this, the beginnings of the colourful houses of the Bo-Kaap, an area that was known as the Malay Quarter during colonial times as well as during the Apartheid regime, is situated. The area in which Bubbles’ bar is situated is populated with different groups, which is not to be unexpected in what many people would consider a cosmopolitan city. The history of racial segregation from the Apartheid regime is visible in the placing of what is different to the dominant hegemony on the margins. Behind the gentrified edifice of the De Waterkant area, that gives the appearance of a quaint nostalgia relating to the colonial era architecture that has been barely touched by modern times, the formerly predominantly coloured/Cape Malay Muslim area of the Bo-Kaap is found. Similarly, Bubbles’ bar is found to be hidden away from the more public and more stereotypically “gay” spaces – the bars and nightclubs that cater to Cape Town’s gay community - found on Somerset Road. When referring to the “gay” bars and clubs that are situated on Somerset Road, my intention is to emphasise that

²³ <http://bokaap.co.za/mosques/>

these spaces are considered gay friendly, which for many people means that they are more comfortable within these spaces that are frequented by other LGBTIQ people. These establishments are considered to be free of the homophobic gaze that may be directed at people of the same sex dancing with each other and public displays of affection. However, these venues are much like any other bar or nightclub that provides a cash bar, loud music and the possibility for socialisation with other people. Apart from certain establishments that employ “go-go boys”, muscular males who dance on bars and small stages, wearing tight shorts or bathing costumes and nothing else, staged entertainment is not frequent in any of these establishments. This is what sets Bubbles Bar apart from these establishments, where staged entertainment is an important factor in the experiences and expectations of the patron.

In April 2011, The Weekend Argus published an article titled: *Pink Palace Noise a Drag for Waterkant Locals*, that targeted Bubbles Bar and a few other nearby establishments for being irresponsibly noisy. Here, the business owners are placed at fault for the waning of the desirability of the area. The idea that these establishments where drag entertainment takes place are at fault for the degeneration of the area places the business owners in the role of the transgressor. The implication of this suggests that the perceived socially transgressive act of drag performance has played a role in crumbling the reputation of the area. According to Lola one of the nearby residents has been struggling to sell his flat for the price that he wants, and blames the nearby city noises for this. In particular, drag performance has been blamed for much of the noise, with the complainants stating that the drag performances take place at full volume until at least 2:30 am. The area is known for its nightlife and venue owners are confused by recent complaints to local authorities, especially when the venues in question stop serving alcohol and other drinks at 2:00 am, which often results in patrons leaving the bar around this time. Since these complaints were made, Bubbles Bar has moved downstairs where the sound can be more contained as there are fewer windows for sound to escape. However, the area still possesses a sense of danger and undesirability once night falls. The area surrounding the bar is lined with trees and dark spaces where people often go to smoke marijuana and meet drug dealers to purchase illegal substances.

However, Lola does not strictly attribute the move downstairs to the complaints from the nearby residents. As she took a drag from a cigarette while we were seated in the backstage

dressing area, Lola with some remorse and anger alleged, “Our ‘silent’ partner, a businessman who owns a few other places in the area, crooked us out of so much money...we didn’t know how much money we were losing until we took control of the bar.” Uncertain of what Lola meant, I asked her to explain why she held this belief. “I never wanted to open a bar myself...Matthew²⁴ came to us with the idea of opening a drag bar, and promised us that he would take care of the business side of things and we would just have to take care of the creative side of things, you know putting on the shows and stuff. We just had to provide half the money to open up the bar. He didn’t hold up his side of the deal, and we ended up having to do everything ourselves anyway. Daddy Cool and I were stuck, we have our money tied up in the deal and there was no way to get out of the business without losing a lot of money – and I mean *a lot* of money. We’d be out on the streets if we lost that kind of money. And then where would I keep all my dresses and wigs?” Lola jokes. Lola gets up from her chair and leaves the room to go into the office. I was left alone in the dressing room, which was filled with cigarette smoke by now. Every surface had various make-up containers on it and there were a few dresses hung up on hangers near the door. A minute or two passes and Lola returned and lights another cigarette. “Where were we?” She quickly wiped her nose with the back of her hand, “Oh yes, that bastard Matthew!” she continues, speaking quickly. “That’s when we decided that the only way that we could get out of this mess is to take out a loan and buy him out of the business. Now we’re stuck, and we just have to make things work,” she states as she played with a cigarette lighter.

4.1.2 Bills, Bills, Bills – An Economy of The Margins, a Performance at The Margins

“So we’re not going to be able to pay all of our bills this month, girls,” interrupted Lola as Vida and Samantha applied the finishing touches to their make-up. “We’re almost R6000 under,” she continued. Vida and Samantha did not appear to be phased by this announcement by Lola. Most nights, the bar is not very full, averaging on about fifteen to forty patrons per night from Thursday through Sunday. Because of this, Lola and Daddy Cool decided to only have the bar open from Thursday to Sunday every week during the winter months, as

²⁴ Pseudonym

opposed to Monday through Saturday during the rest of the year. Even so, there have been many Monday nights during the summertime that there are barely five people seated at the bar, having a casual after-work drink.

While Bubbles Bar appeals to those who enjoy, and are interested in drag performance, it is not a successful business endeavour. For some this is due to the exclusive nature of the styles of performance that take place upon the stage. However, for those who perform upon the stage at Bubbles Bar, and many of those who attend performances, the niche style of performance is exactly what makes Bubbles Bar such a unique space for them. There is no other establishment that is used exclusively for drag performance. A few streets away, on Somerset Road's "pink strip" there is a restaurant that hosts a drag performance one night per week. Nearby, in the cosmopolitan and entertainment driven area of Long Street another drag group performs once a week, which brings a different clientele to the venue than most other nights at the venue. During the rest of the week this venue is filled with a predominantly heterosexual couples and single people. There is no entertainment provided other than DJ's and the social activities that surround most bars, such as dancing and drinking. There are other venues that host drag performances in the surrounding areas of Cape Town; however these are usually once off competitions and performances, such as the Miss Body Beautiful competition, The Miss Gay Valentine competition and the Miss Gay Peninsula Competition. For those who perform regularly at Bubbles Bar however, the act of performing at the bar provides a supplementary income. Roxy Le Roux is a qualified massage therapist at a nearby hotel and spa and also partakes in workshop theatre performances. Vida Fantabisher is a Post Graduate theatre student, while Samantha Knight is completing her studies in dance and theatre performance at a nearby theatre school. "Performing here gives me an opportunity to express myself in a different way than at the theatre school," said Samantha. "Here, I am in control of every aspect of what I get to do on stage, the way I dress, the kinds of make-up I choose to wear and the types of music that I get to perform to," she continues, "at school I am at the mercy of a director. Here I am my own director." The financial gains of performing at Bubbles Bar are not profitable for the performer. The drag performers here do it for the passion that they possess for the craft, as well as the opportunity to express themselves through stand-up comedy, dance, and music in a manner in which they may not be able to in other fields in their lives. For Lola and Daddy Cool, Bubbles Bar holds more significance financially, as they hope to eventually turn the bar into a profitable endeavour. "I give my all

to Bubbles Bar...I design the posters, do the marketing and organisation of the shows,” states Lola. “I studied to be an artist, and worked as a photographer for many years...but Lola was always there for me. She was always my passion, and in part that is the driving force behind keeping this place going. I love Lola; I love what she (the character) has brought me. Lola has even brought me *daughters* you know?” I smiled and nodded my head, straining to hear Lola speak as we stood in the smoking area just to the side of the main performance area and dance floor of the bar. “Roxy was my first daughter here in Cape Town, and then came Samantha...who I basically see as a younger version of myself, we’re so similar! And now, now I also have Vida!” Questioning Lola about what she means by this notion of daughters, she responded, “They’re my drag family...they’re my daughters and I give them love and attention. I try to nurture them and help them with their performances, their make-up and their clothing for performances. Becoming a drag performer doesn’t happen overnight, you know? When I lived in Warsaw, there were a few older queens who gave me love, and who gave me advice concerning my performances. I think that it’s my duty to spread that knowledge and that love to my daughters, so we can keep drag alive and help it grow. Besides, it is a lot of work...but we can’t expect the audience to keep coming back if we don’t put the effort in.” However, this effort is not always met with a great deal of financial gain. As Samantha and Vida are both performance art students, they assert that it is their love for the stage that keeps them coming back to perform. Samantha has found a great deal of growth in her knowledge of performance, as she is in control of all aspects of her performance and character. While she and Vida do not get to choose the roles they play upon the stage relating to their education and training in performance art, when they perform at the bar they are given the freedom to explore different aspects of performance and character formulation through the control that they are afforded in relation to their performances upon the stage.

Still, being a drag performer certainly is not a financially lucrative endeavour in Cape Town, I am told by Lola and Daddy Cool. Drag performance is not a full-time occupation for the performers at the bar. “Most of us do it, because we love drag...and because we love being on stage,” states Lola. “The performers are paid a portion of what we earn from the cover charge at the door,” said Daddy Cool, “It’s not really something most people make a living out of. At least we let the regular performers have some free drinks on the nights that they perform.” Alcohol is used as a form of appreciation, but it also appears to be a coping

mechanism concerning the marginalised identity with which the performers are faced. Even though the performers are appreciated upon the stage in Bubbles Bar, the performance of drag still carries a stigma of effeminacy and is viewed negatively as something strange and “freakish” by many people in Cape Town. Bubbles Bar is popular with those people who enjoy the performance of drag; however this does not constitute a large portion of people who visit the city of Cape Town and the De Waterkant area during the evenings in search of entertainment.

Being placed on the margins of the De Waterkant area has also brought its share of negative attention to the bar. There have been incidents of sexist and homophobic insults being shouted at the performers by some audience members, and on a few occasions physical violence, which would result in Daddy Cool, exercising his muscle and having to remove some people from the space of the bar. When men who he perceives to be heterosexual enter the bar, Daddy Cool sternly warns them that “this is not a zoo. This is a place to have a couple of drinks and enjoy a show. So I don’t want any funny business, right?” Most who enter laugh his words off, but there are a few people who turn around and leave the venue.

“The gay male subculture expanded and became increasingly visible in large cities” (D’Emilio, 1997), this is apparent in a city such as Cape Town that is marketed as a “pink city”, and is for many people seen as the “gay capital” of South Africa – and in greater respects it is seen as the “gay capital” of Africa, because of a perception of Cape Town’s liberal nature regarding same-sex sexuality. Green Point and the De Waterkant area has become the hub of this “gay capitalism” through its perception of being the “gay village” in Cape Town. Every year, thousands of people stream into the city to attend the Cape Town Pride Parade, as well as the Mother City Queer Project (MCQP) party, both taking place during the summer months. Samantha Knight too shares this sentiment that Cape Town is a gay capital, as she comes from a smaller town in the Karoo, where being gay is still vehemently stigmatised. “For Afrikaans people in small towns, being labelled a *moffie*²⁵ is one of the worst things that can happen to you. A lot of people don’t understand that there is nothing wrong with being gay. They think that there is something mentally wrong with you if

²⁵ An derogatory Afrikaans term that is similar to the word faggot/fag.

you are gay...or that you want to be a woman. And being a drag queen...well that's even worse...Cape Town is better, but not *much* better.” There is always a strong drag performer and drag queen presence at both MCQP and the Cape Town Pride Parade, Samantha was even hired to perform at MCQP, however, once the festivities have passed so does the adulation, acceptance and attention. While the drag performers often see themselves as the most visible people within the LGBTIQ community, there are those who would rather have them hide their masked faces, perceiving them to be a detriment to the prospect of normalising homosexuality and LGBTIQ individuals in a largely heterosexual environment. “Because the queens are often the most visible, they are often the easiest to knock down,” said Samantha relating the harassment to the marginalisation of being recognised as a drag performer. Drag performers in the city are often easy targets for prejudice as they are made representatives of the actions social deviance by those who wish to assert social control and social norms in the manner in which Durkheim describes social facts. This perception of social deviance is related to non-normative presentation of gender that the performers present upon the stage at Bubbles Bar.

Drag performance is not widely sought out form of entertainment in Cape Town. While there has been a great deal of growth in the frequency of drag performance across Cape Town, it is still considered a niche form of entertainment. There is a lack of financial security that burdens Bubbles Bar that can be attributed to a range of factors. That the bar is separated from the “Pink Strip” of Somerset Road means that there are many people who are unaware of the existence of the bar, because they never see it. Nonetheless, the lack of exposure to drag performance plays a part in the lack of understanding of the performance art. There are many who sneer at drag performers, as males who perform a non-normative gender expression are considered undesirable and deviant. “To be womanly is to be more definitively queer” (Howard 2001, 213), and the performance of drag is socially wrapped up in social stigma. There are many people who want nothing to do with *men like that* who are perceived to possess a negative stereotype of being gay by dressing up and performing in a feminine manner. However, this perception is not necessarily accurate, as the performers transgress gender and social norms in an act of theatrical performance.

There was a sudden blast of music as Samantha Knight opens the bathroom door that leads from the bar, where a group of people danced and watched a seemingly drunk patron as she attempted to slide down the pink pole that had been installed in the middle of the small dance-floor in Bubbles Bar. “Hey sweetie,” Samantha says as she entered the bathroom, while I washed my hands. She gave me a squeeze around the shoulders and we air-kissed hello, to avoid any accidental make-up removal. “Can you believe that some guy just told me he wanted to take me home and have sex with me?” Samantha chuckled, and then shook her head in disgust. “I mean, can you imagine having sex in this get-up? It takes me forever to get in and out of this dress and wig, and now he wants to just rip the dress off of me?” Samantha looked at me for confirmation, as I widened my eyes and shook my head, not knowing what to say. She checked her teeth for any lipstick marks, then continued, “You know, I don’t understand these guys that flirt with drag queens...they want to take you to bed, but they will never date you or walk around in the street with you. It’s almost as if we aren’t gay men to them, just because we put on a dress and get on stage. That’s why I always say that it takes *balls* to do drag. You know, to let people know that not only does it take bravery and confidence to get on stage like this, but that it also takes a man to do it. It takes a *man* to look like a **lady**.” I nodded my head in agreement with Samantha. “Anyway, I’ve got to get a drink at the bar before my next set on stage”, Samantha says, as she sauntered out of the bathroom in a shimmering gold dress that is reminiscent of fringed dress that Tina Turner wore during a performance of “Proud Mary”. “Gender-bending males prove undesirable – even the radiant, resilient drag queen of *Brazen Image*, whose partner insists s/he abide by rigid on – and offstage roles. To be womanly is to be more definitively queer...” (Howard 2001, 213). According to the performers at Bubbles Bar, those who perform in drag are often rejected as romantic partners by other gay men, because they are perceived to possess the characteristics that are not sexually desirable to them. For the drag performers at Bubbles Bar their performance of gender on stage differs from their performance of gender in other categories of their lives. While they are often perceived as womanly through their performance of femininity in the context of a staged performance, the performers who participated in this research identify as gay men. “Drag, in this environment, is considered to be in the realm of art and performance and to have no implications for members’ gender identity or sexual practice/desire/identity.” (Valentine 2007, 90)

4.2 The Stage and The Street – Acting Out a Gendered Performance

There was a smell of the ocean, as I looked out towards the waves crashing out into the distance onto the rocks of Cape Town's shoreline. I had taken a seat on the balcony at the café that I had arranged to meet Roxy at. I was early, so I ordered a coffee while I played with a cigarette lighter. I had informed the waitress that I will be expecting someone, yet I had only been provided one menu. I was slightly annoyed, as I was already nervous about our meeting. I was afraid that I would not recognise Roxy when she arrives, as I had never formally met the man behind the make-up.

Roxy Le Roux was one of Bubbles Bar's original performers, as well as the host of the now discontinued Killer Karaoke that took place on Wednesday nights until the early months of 2012. Roxy boasts a lengthy résumé for someone who has only been performing for approximately two years, with various performances in and around Cape Town, Stellenbosch, The Klein Karoo Kunstefees and (at the time of our meeting) an upcoming performance on *Jou Show, Met Emo Adams*, a television program that airs on the Afrikaans television channel, *Kyknet*.

Finally, Roxy arrived and we hugged hello as we each take a seat. Embarrassed, I confessed that I did not know how to refer to the man sitting across from me, as we had not officially met before. The performer that I am accustomed to seeing on stage, had long blonde hair, was tall, strong, was perfectly made up and was rarely seen out of a short skirt and fishnet stockings. Yet the friendly looking man seated across from me is casually dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans, sported closely cropped curly hair and stubble in the form of a 5 o'clock shadow. I had never noticed how hairy his forearms were before this day. At sleeve of his t-shirt, I also noticed some hair peeking out from his shoulder. I had never noticed how "manly" Peter looked before. I suppose that I had been convinced by what I have been conditioned to see upon the stage.

Sometime after my meeting with Peter, I was puzzled by my thoughts and reactions to his obvious presentation as a male. How was it that Roxy, the character is a part of Peter when she appeared to be hyper-feminine and he, so masculine? If we are to make use of the Stanislavskian concept of “becoming a character” (a characteristic of “method acting”), then it is understood that when a personality takes to the stage, he/she is no longer playing himself/herself, although aspects of that individual may be evident in the performance. In the case of female impersonation, the individual suggests his character through clothing, make-up, wigs and action. We make sense of this action, understanding the feminine characteristics through the dress and action of the female impersonator, even though the performance of female impersonation constantly makes reference to and reminds the audience that the performer is really male bodied. This indicates that the process of gender differentiation is not solely based upon the individual body, or the anatomical make-up thereof, but rather what is presented to us in secondary or tertiary levels, regarding the cultural meanings that are attached to clothing and mannerisms that are regarded as masculine or feminine (Senelick 2000, 8). However, this implies that gender, and in this case – female impersonation – is to be understood in relation to, and through the gaze of another, in order to make sense of and assign meaning to the act of gendered performance.

It was Saturday night and I was celebrating a friend’s birthday at a popular *gay nightclub* that is situated in Parow’s industrial area. It is a medium sized venue with ample seating; however it fills up very quickly after 11:30pm. As I stood in the queue of the cramped bathroom, from one of the stalls emerged someone who appeared to be a very attractive woman, wearing a short leopard print dress despite the winter chill that still lingered in the air outside. A moment passed, and I realise that she was one of the drag performers who featured in the Lauren Beukes documentary about the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant “Glitterboys and Ganglands” that had been screened at various film festivals across South Africa, as well as at film festivals in Europe and North America. An edited version also aired on the local television channel, SABC2. A young woman admired her dress and starts talking to her, eventually asking her what her day job is. Upon finding out that the female impersonator is actually a mechanic by day, the woman exclaimed: “You can’t be a mechanic! You’re so feminine...” indicating that the sense of a paradox when relating to the performance of drag as the performance of gender sees female impersonation as more feminine than femininity

itself, however in a different context this performance of femininity may be viewed in a completely different manner:

“Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. The conventions which mediate proximity and identification in these two instances are clearly quite different. I want to make two different kinds of claims regarding this tentative distinction. In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality” (Butler 1988, 527).

The construction of gendered norms and the policing of the ways in which individuals should perform gender provide a way to understand the more concrete models through which social order is enforced. At that point I am no longer able to follow the rest of their conversation as I was next in line, and a bathroom stall has just opened up.

Judith Lorber posits the idea that drag does not necessarily involve homosexuality, an identity that is often still viewed as being transgressive in a society that still prescribes heterosexuality as the norm. An example of homo-prejudice and the promotion of heterosexuality can be found in recent media reports that the House of Traditional Leaders (Contralesa) wished to abolish the use of the term “sexual orientation” in the past amendments to the South African Constitution, where equality and protection is afforded to all of South African citizens. This part of the South African Constitution which protects South African citizens against discrimination was to come under scrutiny and prejudice where traditional leaders held some

sort of jurisdiction. Thus, female impersonation too becomes a form of transgression because it deviates from what some people view as the norm, for female impersonation affords the opportunity for a male to temporarily change the way in which his gender is perceived – even if it is just a little bit.

What is interesting to me about this gender play is that drag/female impersonation sets up conceptualisations of *masculinity* and *femininity* in such a way that it becomes pure performance. It becomes an exaggerated gender display, and this reveals to us the pretence that gender holds and becomes. This may be what appeals to many people about drag, in terms of female and male impersonation, that it plays with the forbidden. It transgresses, or subverts the dominant ideals of male and female, of masculinity and femininity.

4.3 The People’s Drag – The Entertainer Versus The Activist

The topic of activism and political action within drag is one that is met with both interest and ambivalence. As I watched Vida apply her fake eyelashes to her existing ones in a quick and careful motion - she is in a hurry as she is meant to perform on stage in about an hour’s time - I apologised for taking some of her time and attention away from the task at hand. Vida had only been performing in drag for a few months and is the only one of Lola’s daughters who was not present at the fundraiser for Luleki Sizwe. When I enquired about what she wishes to communicate with the world through her performances, she responded “I don’t really have a message when I’m on stage, performing. I just really like doing drag. I like the art of the transformation and I like the way I look once I have transformed myself. Mostly, I’m just having fun and I want everyone else to have fun too.” Sitting at the mirror next to Vida is Samantha, in the applying a more natural looking layer of make-up than her usual on-stage make-up. In a t-shirt, jeans and a scarf, the drag persona of Samantha is barely recognisable without the drawn-on arched eyebrows and the blonde wig the character normally wears. Samantha’s hair is cropped and reddish brown in colour. A few minutes later, she rubbed gel-wax between her palms, warming it up and making it more malleable and applies it to her hair, styling it to make it look as if she has just rolled out of bed. “I agree that it is fun,” replies Samantha, “but it can be more than that. For me, doing drag allows me to be more of

myself. Coming from an Afrikaans community, I've been taught that there are no grey areas. You either have to be a blue boy or a pink girl. Except I didn't fit into one of those boxes, and there was no place for greyness while I was growing up." Samantha uncapped her mascara and brushed the dark liquid on her eyelashes in a sweeping upward motion with her lips parted slightly. Still looking into the mirror, she continued, "Growing up gay...growing up a *moffie* can be extremely difficult. And even doing drag can be tough and lonely. But being on stage...it tells people that it is okay to be who you are. It is okay to be gay. And more than that, it is okay to be a drag," she says turning her head she smiled at me. "That's what I want to convey on stage. You don't have to be an understudy, but you have to be the leading lady in your own life. You are the best you there is, so all you have to do is be yourself." The words which Samantha asserted are powerful, but the doubt in her voice made me feel as if she was convincing herself to a certain extent. There is irony in Samantha's reiteration of "...all you have to do is be yourself," however, because drag performers appear to be more outlandish than other people through their performance of drag, their appearance puts many at ease because they appear confident and at ease with themselves while appearing different from everyone else.

Even though Lola had been involved in activism and fundraisers, she stresses that: "I am an entertainer, not an activist. I believe that through the fun that we have with each other, however without pushing, we can learn to embrace each other." Commenting on some of the other local performers who push a political agenda, often through fierce social commentary: "You have a voice, and you have to use that voice...but you don't have to preach to them. You have to trick them into listening to you through the fun." "But you have to bring a little honesty to the fun," interrupted Samantha.

Sipping on a cup of coffee, Peter told me that Roxy, through being a comedic character attempted to humanize the drag performer on the stage. Roxy prefers to interact with the audience who has come to see her. She makes jokes, brings people onto the stage to interview them, and talks about her "personal life" (the character's imagined personal life) in order to make the audience see her as a real person, and to break the barriers between the audience and the performer to authenticate the experience, so that all parties at hand can become familiar to each other - even if it is just for the duration of the show. Peter referred to Roxy as

“The People’s Drag” because of this. Connecting to this, Roxy also performed in areas and venues where people may not necessarily be exposed to drag performance. Peter feels that this allows him to educate people about various forms of identity and identification through doing this, as many people are set in their ways, and in their ideas of the world and people within it. Ultimately, Peter declares that his hope, with the character of Roxy, is to use her character to unmask prejudice through the exposure of a man performing as a woman. As drag is made visible through the contrasts of dress and behaviour, through exaggeration it may allow for more attention – although, sometimes this attention may be negative in nature.

Female impersonation/drag performance in some ways contest and confirm the stereotypes of what men and women are “supposed” to be in society. The binary categories are homogenized into typification, that all men are meant to be a certain way, and all women are meant to be a certain way. While drag performance often makes use of exaggerated gender markers, as well as purporting stereotypes and gender inequality, it is because it is a person of the opposite sex portraying a man or a woman that subverts the general gendered view. “Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs to some other group i.e. an act of expropriation and appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that “masculine” belongs to “male”, and “feminine” belongs to “female”. There is no “proper” gender, a gender that is proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property. Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (Butler 1991, 21). While the performance of drag destabilises the perception of masculine and feminine ideals and presentation, transgressing norms set out within society is often a dangerous exercise within South African society, where fluid performances of gender are not embraced, as being part of a concrete social order relating to gender ideology.

Going back to that sunny day spent with Peter, he agreed that obvious political agendas can be alienating for the audience. Taking sip of water, he cleared his throat and continues: “Political drag has to keep up a *front*. They consistently have to give the same ideas and views. In order to be a political drag artist, means being more one sided and more straightforward concerning your thoughts and beliefs. Roxy on the other hand does social commentary, which means that I always have to keep up to date with what is going on in the

world, and what is going on around me – let’s call it the social politics. I do that to engage more with the crowd. If we all keep an open mind, we can understand each other a little better. At the end of the day, everything is political. I’d much rather have people listen to what I have to say and to express because I want to, rather than pushing my agenda down their throats.” Peter took another sip of water and removed a cigarette from my pack and lighter which I had left on the table. “Through Roxy, I want to teach people that don’t just have to tolerate each other, but that we also have to love each other in order to relate to each other and have fun. I always try to engage with the audience, you know by bringing members up on stage and having those mini-interviews with them. In that way, I think that we can build friendship and trust, even if it is just for just a short while. But because we’re friends, you’re not going to antagonise me, you’re not going to heckle me, because we’re friends not. That reaching out helps us to trust one another. The message that I’d like to portray at the end of the day is that anyone can shine through taking initiative and doing something about it.”

Yet, it is not just the audience who takes something important away from the act of performance. “Three years ago, I was diagnosed with HIV,” Peter starts, “I really needed something larger than myself, to make me feel more positive about life. When I was younger, I dressed up a lot, much of the time I was dressing up as a girl. I don’t know why, but that girl’s name was always Roxy. I chose the surname Le Roux to make her seem more South African. She’s a coloured character who pretends to be white, which is a play on some coloured people who try to pass for white in Cape Town.” The character formation is interesting to some, because of the juxtapositions of Roxy’s identity as coloured/white, man/woman, blonde/brunette, etc. “Once I take the make-up off however, I am a coloured guy – and a shy one at that. However, looking at both Peter and Roxy, I can honestly say that Peter has grown and gained *so much* confidence through Roxy. I’ve learned to speak my mind because of Roxy, which is something that Peter never used to do. More importantly, Peter never used to do anything for the community, for *any* community. But with Roxy, I am allowed to do that.” For Samantha, this gain in confidence is also something she attributes to the character of Samantha Knight. “Visually, I am acting. And as a dancer, I have been trained to act to some extent. But through Samantha, I have learnt to accept and express to others that I am a cute boy, but I can be a sexy woman too.” She continues that “...drag has taught me how to fake having a voice...and now, I feel that I really do have a voice.”

Samantha and Roxy inform me that much of the confidence that they have learnt to express on stage is attributed to Lola. I watched Lola and Samantha are helping Vida into a corset. “Of course you can fit into it! Roxy used to wear this same corset.” Lola assures Vida, who is putting up some protest as she and Samantha are squeezing her into it. Vida is much shorter than the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Roxy. “I didn’t have anyone to teach me how to do all of this,” states Lola. “I learnt as I went along. I picked up some tips from many different queens. It was trial and error for me – with a lot of errors. Looking back, for about ten years of my career I looked really hideous – and they paid me tons of money while I looked like that,” she laughs. “Now, when someone asks me for advice, I give them a chance...and if I see them actually taking my advice, I can choose whether or not I want help them more. My daughters work hard at what they do, and I will help them as much as I can.” Finally, she and Samantha had finished doing up Vida’s corset, which gave her short frame an hourglass silhouette. “I think that I have always been a teacher, as much as I didn’t want to admit it to myself. I taught art, I taught children, I taught adults, I taught English, and now I teach drag.” she said with a smile draping her tall slender body across her chair reaching for another cigarette. Through the act of performance and teaching drag, Lola has taught her spectators that gender and physical bodies are not static and standardised, and that there are varieties of ways in which gender may be portrayed. Even though the context of the stage is important for the performance of drag in Bubbles Bar, this opens up the possibility for situational and even temporary performances and presentation of gender which is understood and performed differently through and by different individuals.

5. Concluding Statements

The performance of drag in Cape Town's Bubbles Bar has a dual characteristic of presenting more traditional understandings of gender, as well as gender non-conformity. By making use of the act of performance, the understanding of gender is made situational as the performers take to the stage in order to perform in such a manner that is considered to be outside the realm of the manner in which gender norms ought to be performed. South African constitutional legislature protects the freedom of sexual orientation and the freedom of expression, which in this case would include the freedom of gender presentation and expression. These constitutional freedoms place South Africa in a unique position on the African continent, where many countries still oppress and criminalise homosexuality. However, even though those who live within the borders of South Africa are meant to be protected from harassment, the sparse implementation of legislature still allows for discrimination and social, and sometimes violent, opposition against LGBTIQ individuals and those who perform gender in a non-conforming way. Through the performance of drag, the participants in this research project demonstrate that they are able to rise above the norms that are asserted surrounding the presentation of gender. As they transform themselves to present the gendered character that is not tied to their physical sex, they are able to demonstrate the performative character of nature. In this context, their performance of drag and their performance is made authentic through the spectator who joins them on their journey of transformation and reinforces this performance by reading and understanding their actions upon the stage. Thus the method through which gender is understood is through the situation in which gender is performed.

Those who perform in drag are the most visible members of the perceived LGBTIQ community, as Roxy says: "...when there's a drag queen around, you can't help but look." The performance of drag is a form of entertainment; however, this form of entertainment allows the performers and the spectators to think of the performance of gender as a situational act. While the audience is aware that the performer possesses a male body, the time during which drag performance takes place the audience perceives him as feminine, by use of the suggestive characteristics of make-up, dress, and action. The performance of drag is made

authentic through this act of suggestion. Vida's assertion that "...I am a drag queen...I don't want anyone to think that I am a woman..." provides the understanding that the performance of drag does not necessarily require the performer to possess the desire to permanently alter their anatomy. By making use of the suggestion of femininity through action, dress, and make-up, the performance of drag is related to the theatrical performance of a character. When the performers at Bubbles Bar present themselves on stage, they perform as drag performers, and not women, although their appearance and action implies femininity. Thus, in this situation when their performance upon the stage is viewed by the audience who read their performance as being feminine in its characteristic, but are aware of their physical status as male-bodied individuals, their gendered performance of drag is made authentic by their gaze and understanding. The performance of drag in this context is marked by the performers' ability to successfully straddle the lines of subtle and overly exaggerated performances of femininity. This act of performance is an action of escapism from the performer's norms surrounding the gender of the performers physically sexed body. However, when social judgements based upon the performer's gendered anatomy are juxtaposed by the presentation of feminine performance, those performers are able to express themselves more freely and more honestly to their audience and themselves. The escapism of the mask behind which the drag performer finds himself provides him with the opportunity to express his true, authentic views and feelings.

However, in relation to social facts surrounding the manner in which society regulates the way in which gender ought to be presented and performed by the anatomically sexed bodies of individuals, the performance of drag is considered an act of transgression. The perceived social pathology of a male-bodied individual performing in a feminine manner (or vice versa), allows for the formation of negative stereotypes and stigma surrounding the socially unexpected action of presenting gender in a non-normative fashion.

These transgressions are policed and often places those perform these non-normative expressions of gender are often placed at the margins. In relation to Bubbles Bar, the bar is physically placed at the margins of the "Pink Strip" of Somerset Road, while those who perform in drag at the bar are often socially and sexually marginalised under the assumption that they possess the desire to be women, when they merely perform on stage in a feminine

manner. However, these acts of marginalisation are often violent when relating to the presentation of the non-conformity of gender outside of the confines of the stage. In South Africa, there have been countless acts of social and physical violence against those who do not conform to the heteronormative binary and rules surrounding gender and sexual presentation in daily life. The performance of drag thus challenges the harshness of social coercion by vigorously performing a non-normative gender presentation, displaying that during the act of performance – they are above the norms and regulations of gender.

The manner in which gender and gender performance is understood and understood as authentic is dependent on the situation in which it is performed. The performance of drag brings forth the variety of ways in which gender may be performed, read and understood. However, for the performance of gender to be made authentic within a given situation, it must always be observed by another. The authentic performance of gender is situational. Gender must be understood in the context in which it is performed for and perceived by another.

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