

A BRIEF INTRO TO DRAG





INTRO

Drag as an artform has been thrust into the mainstream spotlight because of shows like Rupaul's Drag Race, showcasing the hard work and exceptional talent that goes into being a drag queen.

Unfortunately, despite Rupaul's Dragrace UK being just as popular, it cannot show more than the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the diversity of Drag, especially British Drag which is significantly different from the polished, well known USA style of the performance art.

Origins

The origin of the word DRAG has been argued about and speculated upon for many years, even one internet source saying that it's an acronym for DRessed As a Girl. This is a myth, as Drag has always been about more than female impersonation. The most common theory is that because it was first used in British theatre in the 19th century referring to men playing women, that it referred to the long gowns that the actors wore that would drag along the ground. And this nod to opulence in costume and a gender performance still describes what performers do.





Panto

Drag is by its very nature extravagant and over the top, like a lot of theatre in the past, a perfect example being the pantomime, an English Christmas staple.

The role of the Panto Dame is still a highly paid and respected role to play in theatre. And like the Queens of Drag, the Dames of Panto have elaborate costumes, larger than life make up and wigs, huge personalities and a great amount of charisma and talent to keep the rowdy audience entertained. The difference is that A Dame is part of an ensemble, whereas a Queen can rule the stage as a solo act.

The Queen

Panto led into Music Hall in Britain with more variety acts putting on a show, where gender impersonators were gaining huge popularity, and with Vaudeville (a similar variety show structure) hit the USA, we started seeing the term 'Drag Queen' being used for the first time. It is believed that the term was first used by William Dorsey Swann, a previously enslaved African-American in Maryland who hosted what we would think of as Drag Balls in Washington DC for other previously enslaved men. He was quoted as saying that he was the 'Queen of Drag' and those he helped and influenced referred to him as the Queen for his leadership in the community.



BURLINGTON BERTIE FROM BOW.

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Drag Kings

Women have been dressing and performing as men for the same amount of time as men as women. Drag Kings also have a rich history.

With Kings such as Gladys Bentley and in today's scene Adam All and Landon Cider entertaining and pushing the boundaries in drag.

You can go to www.dragkinghistory.com to read about all of the male impersonators throughout history.

Alternative Drag

It is important to note that Drag is not just one gender pretending to be another, it is a performance of gender, as expression, entertainment or as a political statement. The queer community, who have often looked outside the box when it comes to how society sees things, use drag to shine a light on the expectations and the mask that we all wear to appear as beautiful, feminine or masculine. Many drag artists are non binary and trans, using drag in new ways to shock people in terms of gender bending. Great Drag often illicit an emotional response, joy, shock, anger, confusion. I think British Drag tends to aim towards bringing comedy and silliness, whereas USA drag tends to aim for awe and perfection. We need both and more.





Want more?

Drag has no limits, no rules or expectations. There are as many kinds of drag as there are performers, and thanks to the surge in interest in drag there are now more performers than ever. With more venues booking drag acts, I encourage you to go to a drag show of some kind. You'll have a great time, and support the artists who are changing the world.

ALTERNATIVE
CURRICULUM

