

## A DRAG HISTORY

As long as there have been stages to play on and screens big and small, actors and actresses have been cross-dressing and appearing in “drag.” This history spans a wide range of historical, cultural and artistic traditions. Examples of drag can be found in ancient Greek, Norse and Hindi mythologies, Roman literature and Chinese theatre.

The term “drag” refers to clothing associated with a gender role when worn by a person of another gender. The origins of the word are debated, but drag appeared in print as early as 1870. One suggested root is 19th-century theatre slang, from the sensation of long skirts trailing on the floor. Drag may be practiced by people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. The term ‘queen’ was considered a derogatory term to describe a gay man since the 18th century. The word has since been reclaimed in a more positive sense.

Since it was illegal for women to perform in theatres in Shakespeare’s time, female roles were played by men or boys. Cross-dressing was a common theme. In *As You Like It*, one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays, a boy actor plays a girl, then dresses as a boy, who then dresses as a girl.

Japanese Kabuki theatre began in the 17th century with all-female troupes performing both male and female roles. In 1629 women were banned from the stage, but kabuki’s popularity inspired the formation of all-male troupes to carry on the theatrical form.

Many operas feature trans-gender roles. Some roles were written for castrati, men castrated in boyhood in order to remain sopranos. Some roles of young boys were written for female voices and are performed by women *en travesti* (pants-trouser roles). The most familiar are Cherubino in Mozart’s *Marriage Of Figaro* (1786), Hansel in Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel* (1893) and Prince Orlovsky in *Die Fledermaus* (1874) by Johann Strauss II.



From college musicals to ballet, cross-dressing has its appeal for audiences. *The Hasty Pudding Theatricals* at Harvard University are slapstick drag shows that have been presented annually since 1844. *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*, an all-male ballet troupe has been performing parodies of classical ballet since 1974.

Contemporary examples of theatre incorporating drag include: *Charley's Aunt* (1892) by Brandon Thomas and the 1948 musical by Frank Loesser based on the play, *Where's Charley?*.

Stephen Sondheim’s *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* (1962), based on an ancient Roman comedy by Plautus.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a 1975 film based on the 1973 musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, written by Richard O'Brien. A tribute to science



fiction films, it features Dr. Frank N. Furter, an alien transvestite who creates a muscle man in his lab. The movie remains a cultural phenomenon in the U.S. and U.K.

*M. Butterfly* (1988) is a play by David Henry Hwang loosely based on the relationship between a French diplomat and a male opera singer.

*Hairspray*, the 1988 John Waters movie starring Divine is a cult classic. It became a Broadway musical, which won eight Tony Awards in 2003.

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998) by John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask is a rock musical about a rock band fronted by a genderqueer East German singer.

*Kinky Boots*, with music and lyrics by Cyndi Lauper and again, a book by Harvey Fierstein, was inspired by true events of a failing business owner who forms an unlikely partnership with Lola, a drag performer, to produce a line of high-heeled boots and save his business. The show opened in 2013, and is still running.

There are plenty of examples of drag in silent films, including performances by Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel. Among the more memorable and current examples are:

Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby singing *Sisters* in *White Christmas* (1954); Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* (1959); Dustin Hoffman becoming the female star of a television soap opera in *Tootsie* (1982);

Barbra Streisand dressing as a boy to study Jewish law in *Yentl* ((1983); Robin Williams disguising himself as a woman to nanny his kids in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993);

*The Adventures Of Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert* (1994) with three men traveling across the Australian outback to perform a drag show; Julie Andrews in the 1982 movie and 1995 stage hit *Victor/Victoria*.



The drag scene as we know it today first started, particularly in the US, in the 1950s. It didn't flourish until the 1980s, when gay culture started to develop.

In the 1950s and 60s, drag was underground and criminalized. After World War II, national paranoia in America was rife. Led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, anything deemed 'subversive' was considered a national risk. In the 1950s the U.S. State Department decided that homosexuals were 'subversive'.

The FBI and police kept records of 'known homosexuals', and printed their photographs in local papers. Police performed sweeps of bars and nightclubs to 'rid' neighborhoods of gay people who were often publicly humiliated, harassed, fired from jobs, jailed or institutionalized in mental hospitals. The wearing of opposite gender clothes was banned and cross dressers were submitted to humiliating 'gender checking' and arrested.

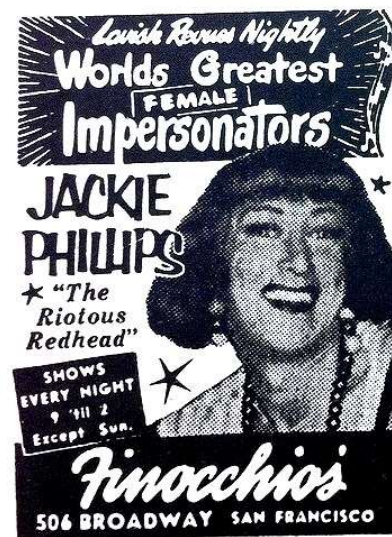


The gay rights movement is thought to have begun in 1969 at the Stonewall Bar in New York. On June 28th, 1969, the police conducted a raid. However, it did not go as planned, and many, particularly the lesbians and drag queens, began to fight back. After drag queen Sylvia Rivera threw pennies at police, three nights of riots ensued. Another drag queen, Marsha P. Johnson, smashed a police car window with her hand bag. It was the first time gay people had come together as a community, and the events at Stonewall ignited worldwide LGBT activism.

Starting in the late 20th Century, groups of drag queens have come together under a unifying identity to perform a charitable or activist function in their communities. Some perform to raise funds for charities, while others protest for LGBT and civil rights. These groups include The West Hollywood Cheerleaders and The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. These groups are consciously reviving the ancient archetype of drag queens as shamans and spiritual leaders.

The most famous drag queen in popular culture today has to be RuPaul. Born in San Diego, he got his start in Atlanta and became widely known during the nineties. He acts, models, writes, sings and even has a Christmas album! *RuPaul's Drag Race* is one of the most successful television competition shows of all time, currently in its ninth season. Ru Paul once said, "I do not impersonate females! I don't dress like a woman. I dress like a drag queen! How many women do you know who wear seven-inch heels, four-foot wigs, and skintight dresses?"

What makes us laugh at drag and cross-dressing? The simple answer is there's something funny about one gender trying to imitate another. A lot has been written about drag queens and queer theory. One of the main books on the topic was written by Carole-Anne Tyler, called *INSIDE/OUT: LESBIAN THEORIES, GAY THEORIES* (1999). She notes that drag queens aren't always accepted within the gay community, as some believe that it reinforces sexist norms,



projects a limited and harmful image of gay people and impedes a broader social acceptance. This opinion is criticized for limiting self-expression and encouraging the idea that there are "right" and "wrong" ways to be gay. Many argue that drag queens aren't being mean spirited – it is just plain entertainment. Or perhaps the true answer is we are all pretty much alike. We are all one.

Some documentaries about drag:

- Paris Is Burning* (1990)
- Wigstock* (1995)
- Dragtime* (1997)
- Queens For a Night* (1999)
- Glitterboys and Ganglands* (2011)
- Danny LaRue: A Fabulous Life in Drag* (2013)
- The Art of Drag* (2013)
- Life's A Drag* (2014)

Sources include  
<https://hashtagdrag.wordpress.com/2013/02/23/fabulous-history-of-drag-part-one/> [www.advocate.com/drag](http://www.advocate.com/drag);

