



The Last Drag Show

STORY AND PHOTOS BY tobias c. van Veen

It is by some combination of accident and some level of providence that we have ended up with a show that does a very good job of representing everything the Quest Drag Show has ever been. . . . It's a sampling of everything we've tried to do.

MAIDEN WONDERLAND

In the Green Room with the Painted People

THE ENERGY BACKSTAGE IS INFECTIOUS, scarcely contained by the scant clothing, gold paint and glitter. Arriving at the Tantalus Twist, Quest University's Last Drag Show, I am surrounded by a handful of drag queens, two green aliens basking in their posthuman nudity, an escapee from an insane asylum with her mouth sewn shut known as Patient Zero, and a cadre of manly janitors. I am uncertain of who or what I am being surrounded by otherwise: here a nipple from taped cleavage, there a shaved buttock and a hairy breast. It is as if I have finally been abducted by the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*—which, for me, was the first time I looked at a boy (oh, Tim Curry) and realized that gender didn't necessarily have anything to do with desire. Navigating sumptuous bodies and brash falsies, I thread my way past the long and sharp claws of Maiden Wonderland, a goth-like creature with black spiderwebs around her eyes and a 19th-century froth of wild hair. Nearly everyone is in a delightful stage of undress, while at the same time, cross-dressing in ways that reveal the imaginative extravagance of gender, or rather, a gendering unbound to the general dichotomy of our species.

Having everyone in close quarters is also a novelty. For some students, this is the first year they've ever been in a university classroom, having undertaken years of education through remote learning and dorm-room isolation. So, this is also the first time since 2019, following the long tail of the pandemic, that the performers have applied their make-up together without isolation or masking. And now it will be the last time.

The first drag show, co-founded in 2017 by student Tierney Hula, a.k.a. Rex Pistols, was named "Tantalus Teasers." Every year it has gone ahead, the name has changed—first to Tantalus Tea, then Truth, then Taboo. It ends with the Twister.

The drag show was not always so readily accepted on campus. Despite there never being a scandal or incident, various interests subtly (and not-so subtly) sought to reign-in the drag show over the years. All throughout, the Tantalus Drag Collective has persevered, only stopping when pandemic restrictions forced it to.

The Last Drag Show is an emotional affair. While everyone backstage is amped for a wild and exciting soirée, thanks to delectable emcee Candy Craving and her cracking wit, the electric atmosphere is nonetheless *twisted*. This is what I imagine the name "Tantalus Twist" implies, given the turmoil

CANDY CRAVING





MAIDEN WONDERLAND



LUCY LOVELESS & KATYA HART



FORNICATUS MOMENTUS

of emotions felt when a much-beloved and prized institution succumbs to the land-grabbing ravages of investor capital.

Quest emerged from bankruptcy proceedings in 2021 after handing over its property, buildings, and assets to Primacorp, a market-driven manager of educational institutions, namely business schools. Taking on Quest's debt, Primacorp lent the university just enough operational funds to survive what turned out to be two more years. At the same time, Primacorp undertook what critics saw as an ill-advised re-branding of Quest, swapping its outdoor-oriented vibe for a biz-school colour palette that seemed to be copped from a local construction company. It's almost like Quest was forced to perform an inauthentic version of itself, putting on corporate falsies for the sole sake of its new owners.

And so, 12 years since Quest first opened its doors, and some 25 years since former UBC President David Strangway envisioned Quest as the ideal evolution of UBC's Arts One program, Quest is closing its doors. Who will tell its history? What stories will remain? And who will believe that, right there in Squamish, was one of the world's most innovative arts and sciences colleges in the world?

Quest's impact extended far beyond the classroom. Not only will its loss lead to a measurable impact on Squamish's economy, it is the erasure of its culture that will do incalculable harm to Squamish's future. For Quest was no ordinary university: its small seminars integrated applied learning with Indigenous outreach; its classes often explored B.C.'s great outdoors; and its program eschewed majors, instead calling for students to craft a "question" that navigated through a hybrid approach to both the sciences and the arts. Quest produced some of the most inventive young people I have ever seen, organizing arts festivals, DJ nights, and all manner of activities all throughout town. Including drag shows. And though every teacher says such things of their students—I taught at Quest for seven years as an itinerant sessional in the social sciences and humanities—I can only say that I've never seen students achieve so much with so little, with a disproportionate number admitted by top graduate schools.

As for me, I am fighting back some tears as I shoot and capture what will be my last visit to campus. The doors were shuttered on April 30. What will happen to the campus is anyone's guess, and it appears that even Primacorp doesn't know. Atop that hill is an empty carcass of what was once a thriving culture of curious intellect.

But the show must go on. The performers are waiting in the wings. The audience is semi-sloshed and already titillated. What follows is a series of on-the-fly interviews, excerpts, and images from Quest University's Last Drag Show. Long may the bared-naked spirit of Quest fly free!

Maiden Wonderland

MAIDEN WONDERLAND, performed by 2023 graduating student Gerhardt Troan, has been performing in the Drag Show since its second edition in 2018. His character comes into being—or rather, in his words, *becoming*—with every performance, dying onstage during his second appearance, and being resurrected, like a phoenix from the ashes, for the very last Drag Show this year.

"It's an overwhelming and powerful feeling. I feel so much joy and so much pride in what everyone has created, and so much love for everyone. And also a great deal of terror, honestly, and a great deal of sadness," Troan says. "This might not be the last time I play this character, but this will be the last time I play this character in the context of her creation. So, the rebirth is fitting but also tragic in that sense. When I'm on the stage in an hour, I will be actively saying goodbye to... all of this. And that's deeply impactful for me. It was literally on the stage of the Quest Drag Show that I considered the possibility that I'm not just another straight guy, which was a harrowing experience in many ways, the most public possible space in which to experience an internal realization like that.

"But a lot of what has kept me going through the character

is how Maiden Wonderland has grown with me. I am always using her to explore griefs, uncertainties, anxieties that I don't quite understand myself. So, the resurrection of Maiden Wonderland to the tune of 'I Will Never Die' is also about letting go of loves that no longer work for you. Ultimately all of this is figuring out how can I, and how can this character, carry on without Quest? Without that in the world, what does this mean? And I don't know yet."

David Attenborough's Bastard Aliens

PAINTED BLUE AND GREEN, it is difficult to miss the alien beings performed by second-year Quest students Isis DeVries and Jake Linnon. Both of them are uncertain of their futures—"we have to transfer out of here," says Linnon—and it hits me how difficult it might be for the two to be separated following the collapse of Quest. I asked them, why perform as some kind of alien?

"I'm trying to get outside the human into posthumanism," says Alien Isis.

The performance hacks the familiar narratives of National Geographic to create a mock alien documentary, entitled "Fornicatus Momentus." By sampling the audio narratives of David Attenborough, Isis cut-and-spliced his voice so that it sounds like he is describing a new alien species, one that has very different genderings than us Earthlings are used to.

Isis describes the process: "In our piece I stole clips from David Attenborough, and on purpose changed the gender a few times. It says 'her,' then 'his', then 'they.'"

"While figuring out how to move our bodies we were mostly looking at insects," Isis adds. "What actually came to be our show is still very primate, as we are super-primates... but we try to move and be like an alien insect, like a preying mantis."

While the choreography and audio presentation evidently took extensive work, the look itself was beautifully improvised in the coming-together of the characters in the green room. "I came up with the look in the last three hours," says Isis. "I wasn't going for anything other than obviously not of this world," they say, pointing out the geometric designs that adorn their body paint from head-to-toe.

Jake credits the invention and idea all to Isis, while reflecting on the process. "I like being painted and trying to get into the mind-state of an alien creature. I think I kind of combine all the things I've seen on National Geographic to create some otherworldly creature," he says.

PRIDE Squamish

GLOWING BEHIND THE PRIDE Squamish table is Trevor Wulff, a two-spirited member of Ashcroft First Nation and co-founder of PRIDE Squamish.

"Personally, I've been coming since the inception in 2017," says Trevor. "The Drag Show has been amazing for Pride Squamish the past several years. Gerhardt [Troan] is on the board now. It's so great to be part of an amazing team."

PIQUE: *How does it feel to have students come to Quest, discover drag, and maybe discover a bit more about themselves through the process?*

"Being a farm kid from Brackendale, born-and-raised in what was once a small logging town, it's so good to see. I never thought I would see the day that we have a rainbow crosswalk. It's so good to see that the work that we do [is making] everyone feel welcome to live their authentic lives.

"We've come a long way," Wulff says of Squamish. "There's still a big path in front of us in regards to equal rights and OneLove and acceptance, but we're doing the work, and that's really important."

What do you see for the future of the Drag Show with Quest gone?

"I think they have contributed so much to our community and

to Squamish that I would back them in any way possible, for them to continue doing the amazing shows that they do.”

Why does this show matter so much to the performers and the audience?

“It matters because everyone should feel like they are welcome and that they belong, and that they can be safe to live their authentic self. In the small logger’s town in which I was born and raised, that wasn’t OK. So, it’s beautiful and amazing to see the acceptance the show brings to the community.”

What does an authentic self mean to you?

“Being able to live your true self—dress how you want, be truthful to your soul, and have the support around that, that you know you are safe and you are loved and appreciated.”

The Janitors: Johnny, Ronny, Donny & Paul

DURING BREAK, I am accosted by the janitors, a polyquad of short, lithe men wearing work clothes with massive growths of unruly black hair poking out from their pants. The janitors are first-year Quest students with amazing spunk—Becs, Laiyane, Lillian, and Mia—and their performance ups the ante on the eroticism of crossdressing cowboys, K.D Lang-style.

How did you all get into janitorial services?

“You see, we all went to janitor school together, then we went our separate ways, and we decided to reunite, come back together,” says Donny, with about three-days of painted-on stubble emphasizing the Joisey accent. Meanwhile, Paul recounts how he has been travelling California with his band, hitting loads of “waves and barrels; it was amazing, dude.”

Apparently, Donny has been happily married to a Sheila for 40 years, but “she’s not here tonight”—and not supposed to be here.

“The boys get together, they stay together,” says Johnny. Pretty soon the chops are dropped. “Ah ya baby, this is my lover,” says Donny, curling up close to Johnny.

Olivia Fuller, Oh! Shit! Punk Guitarist Extraordinaire

I PLAY IN A PUNK ROCK BAND, but I kind of hate it. I love playing punk music, it’s so much fun, but I kind of have to hide that feminine side of me,” says Olivia, a.k.a. third-year Quest

student Otis, dressed in classic black-and-red lingerie. Olivia lets me know they went colour-coded lingerie shopping as a group.

“Getting the boobs right is the hardest part,” says Olivia. “I had to colour them and contour my chest in. I was concerned they were going to look like chicken cutlets.”

Another concern is their escape; apparently they flew across the room during dress rehearsal.

“Donny likes what Donny sees,” Donny chimes in.

Popping out of character, Otis reflects on the challenges of being a third-year student, staring down a transfer to Prescott College in Arizona, which has taken on some Quest students.

“That’s kind of the only real good option,” he says. “[If I went to] Capilano University, I would be getting a BA, and I am not a BA student.”

This hammers home how I feel about Quest as a former sessional professor: there just isn’t equivalent education anywhere else in Canada. This place was damn unique.

“It’s kind of a shitty spot to be in, but we’re making the best of it,” says Otis, transforming back into Olivia. “That’s why we’re here. We’re doing anything and everything we can to end the year out strong.”

The spirit of you guys in the last year is just blowing my mind. I taught here for seven years. This is hard.

“And yet, every single Questie is putting in effort and powering through and putting on this amazing show, when it feels like it would be so easy just to let shit hit the fan and let everything fall apart,” says Olivia. “And here we are, putting on two amazing shows.”

What’s your punk rock group name?

“Oh... shit.”

It’s Oh Shit?

“Let’s stick with Oh! Shit!”

What It All Means

ONSTAGE, DURING BREAKS BETWEEN ACTS, the organizers and members of PRIDE Squamish speak with the audience about all things queer culture, pride, and of course, drag. The discussion is frank about the wider world in which drag takes place, and it provides a poignant reminder of why we are all here, and why it matters to keep creating public space for queer communities. As in the U.S., drag in Canada has likewise been attacked for its supposed immorality. The stakes of the show are made clear by organizer Cal Kinnaird, a.k.a. Blandon White.

“This is a safe space, but outside, it’s not-so safe. We’re having laws passed against us. We’re being vilified. We’re seen as threatening everyone’s children, ruining them and turning them into LGBTQ+ monsters. I don’t know how the children in the audience feel about that. It’s really, really important that we continue to make spaces like this happen, and support the organizations in our community that make it safe.”

All the energy climaxes with the closing party. As Emma Goldman once said (well, sort of): *If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution!* The final show done, the performers and audience take to the stage to shake and shimmy the night away to a few classics. I am reminded of what Emma *really* said: “I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.” That’s my kind of anarchism, and for me the participatory ethos of the dancefloor remains one of the most sublime expressions of radiant beauty. Claiming the corner with a shuffle-step, I surreptitiously snap a pic of Dee, who has burst onto the dancefloor like a burning star. Deidre Laatjes has been with Quest since the start. Anyone who has visited campus knows Dee: she was the welcoming face at reception, but so much more than that. It was rumoured that Dee knew practically everything there was to know about Quest—quite simply, if you wanted something done, you went to Dee. This past year, the students awarded her a special plaque for her many years of awesomeness. Seeing Dee drove the point home: this wasn’t just a job; this wasn’t just a school. This was something else—a special and unique convergence in this vast cosmos, whose fleeting radiance we were all blessed to be a part of.

If I can’t dance at your University, I don’t want to be a part of it.

May the spirit of Quest live on in all the souls that bare and strut their stuff.

Quest is now the stuff of legend.

A Fond Farewell

IT HAS BEEN AN HONOUR carrying on the tradition of the Quest Drag Show. *This show is very near and dear to our hearts and we are sad to see it go. Despite this being the last show, we are so very proud to have been part of something that allows folks to explore parts of themselves they never would have otherwise. We hope that we have contributed to the Squamish community in a meaningful way. With heavy hearts we say goodbye, but with high spirits we celebrate what we all have created.*

LOVE, YOUR DRAG SHOW COORDINATORS, LARK VELLA, MARLIE MASTINSEK, KEYELLE HULA, CAL KINNAIRD ■



PATIENT ZERO



KYLE WYLIE



JOHNNY, RONNY, DONNY & PAUL