

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



**IN DEFENCE OF DRAG**

Vanity von Glow

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## IN DEFENCE OF DRAG

A drag queen is an arch-other: a creature of the marginal spaces, occupant of the hazy blur between black and white. A colossus in stilettos, the drag queen straddles gender, self-expression, identity, performance, façade, authenticity, artistry and satire.

Young people today, obsessed with shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*,<sup>i</sup> fixate on the self-created aspects of drag - the sense of aggrandisement from curating a projected, invincible self. It is no wonder a generation who grew up tweaking and tailoring Instagram posts for maximum engagement find the constructed elements of drag the most endearing. Their personalities are presented as 'content', their popularity with their peers - once amorphous and unspecific - has become codified with likes and follows.

For me, the true sorcery of drag is the magical way a drag queen can get away with murder on stage. This has something to do with how they look and how they feel - but far more to do with who they are and what they say.

Just as a well-sung note resonates with sonic and emotive beauty, to me it is self-evident that glitter,

sequins and artfully drawn makeup are beautiful. I make this pronouncement with an acknowledgement that not every singer's voice is to every listener's liking. Certainly, recent cultural tensions have reminded us that drag is not everyone's cup of tea<sup>ii</sup> and, for some contrarian artists, this might be part of the punk appeal of the form itself.<sup>iii</sup>

*From their marginal viewpoint, jesters and drag queens see the trivial nature of many social hang-ups and taboos.*

But while some drag artists consider their work to be political,<sup>iv</sup> I consider it to be more profound than that. Great performances resonate on a deeper level, beneath the political or activist planes. They speak to shared human emotions. Insofar as they capture the imaginations of fellow humans, good drag shows are, to me, worthwhile. Whether connecting with audiences of thousands at festivals and Pride celebrations, or simply an indifferent barman and two washed up Soho luses in a dingy basement bar, it is possible to create genuine magic if the chemistry between audience and performer are just right.

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## Drag through the ages

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It is oft repeated that the term ‘drag’ is of Shakespearean origins. In bygone days, when women were forbidden from taking to the stage, the letters D-R-A-G are said to have been used as an acronym of ‘dressed as a girl’, written in the notations of manuscripts to emphasise which actors would be playing male or female characters.<sup>v</sup> Others suggest that petticoats worn by nineteenth-century drag artists dragged along the floor, and so performers were donning their ‘drags’ when readying for a show.

Whatever the origins, it seems likely that the term sprung out of theatre. This makes perfect sense, for though drag cabaret and vaudeville may be the bottom rung of the showbusiness ladder, the home of drag is deeply theatrical.

Shakespeare certainly did give us liminal personas like the jester Feste in *Twelfth Night* - a creature within the court, but who operates external to its hierarchy. Feste and characters like him are special in their ability to make fun of the King. Somewhat exempt from the pecking order of dukes and duchesses, jesters observed group dynamics from a vantage point that afforded them a clearer view of humanity. They are jokers in the pack, exceptions to the rule. They see

through convention and customs, often dismissing hierarchy and rules. From an outsider's perspective, they can mock the court, revealing and revelling in rarely expressed truths. From their marginal viewpoint, jesters and drag queens see the trivial nature of many social hang-ups and taboos. It should come as no surprise that post-Victorian Britain, famously uptight about sex, had a tradition of bawdy drag performances in almost every area of entertainment, from theatre to music hall to working-men's clubs - for repressions demand expression.

*A drag queen isn't a man 'pretending' to be a woman - not exactly.*

All cultures need valves to let off steam and to laugh at themselves. Be it conscripts 'dragging up' to amuse one another - fooling around in the army messes of the Second World War<sup>vi</sup> - or Danny La Rue's extravagantly staged professional drag revues in the 1960s, men in wigs and frocks have long been a staple of the British entertainment landscape. This tradition continued through the late Lily Savage's primetime TV slots in the 1990s up to the present day, with one of BBC's most popular properties, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its assorted spinoffs.



But what is a drag queen? It's important to clarify that a drag queen isn't a man 'pretending' to be a woman - not exactly. Danny La Rue enchanted audiences with his 'birds' (the female characters he played in his skits), always cheekily reminding the crowd that these personas were a mirage. At the end of his show, La Rue would take to the stage in a top hat and tails to show the audience the man behind the makeup. The great American drag artist Charles Pierce used the same device, transforming from Bette Davis to Mae West to Joan Crawford in every show, ending the performance on stage as himself. Drag audiences are in on the joke. Drag is not a deceit, but a conceit.

This conceit is best expressed by UK drag artist Myra Dubois, a character creation of Gareth Joyner, who treats his *grande dame* persona with the consistency of a theatre actor playing a role. The Myra character evokes the small-town grandiosity of *Keeping Up Appearances*' Hyacinth Bucket, with the crux of the comedy nestled somewhere in her delusional sense of high status. Sides positively split when Myra takes to the stage, sending up herself, the audience *and* the human proclivity for self-importance in a series of fell swoops. Just as audiences knew La Rue was not a woman, audiences understand that Myra is an invention - and they are delighted to play along. She is indeed a monument to untamed narcissism, but also a hilarious exposé on the folly of ego.

I see drag as an invitation to play a game. When in drag, we see who is prepared to play along with the whimsy and the absurdity of it all. From beneath the wig, we catch glimpses of the truth about people. Who are they? And how ready are they to have a good time?

*Drag must maintain its sense of humour to really work, especially when courting controversy.*

Octogenarian actress Miriam Margolyes (not a drag queen) loves to drop expletives or outrageous remarks into conversations with interviewers - enjoying the moment where people's expectations of her as a little old lady are subverted and tension is released. In the split second in which someone goes from shock to laughter we can often see who they really are. This leaves audiences with nowhere to hide. Ironically, this guerilla comedy - a form of stress-testing which the best drag queens understand well - seems to strip pretence away.

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## Drag as a form of play

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Play is universal - what could be more freeing than playing? Drag must maintain its sense of humour to really work, especially when courting controversy. Drag queens may be playmasters, but games only work within an understood framework. The framework of drag posits identity as being fundamentally frivolous - this is why the self-serious don't get it.

This was the late Barry Humphries' great gift as Dame Edna. He knew that not all power dynamics were obvious, and that a cleverly administered little shock could force a person to reveal themselves. Seeing through movie stars and their status, catching a glimpse of who they really were and what permission they would give themselves to connect, was part of what made Dame Edna such a hilarious talk-show host and guest. In decades-spanning TV appearances, Edna would mock the greatest stars of the day to their faces - including icons as varied and legendary as Cher, Robin Williams, Mel Gibson and members of the royal family.

Somewhat aside from the Myra Dubois/Dame Edna satirical model, we find a softer form of drag - the female impersonator model (or what I have dubbed

‘Disney Princess Drag’), epitomised by Aussie performer Courtney Act. With a far less threatening personality, and in which the femme-realism - looking ‘like a woman’ - is at its height, this drag is ultimately benevolent; cheeky but not wildly provocative. I have often referred to an equally harmless archetype - ‘Holly Willoughby Drag’, no better exemplified than by London’s own Kitty Scott Claus, who in both look and temperament would be quite at home on the *Loose Women* panel.

But drag doesn’t have to go the whole hog of female illusion. Boy George often refers to himself in all his androgynous glory as ‘being in drag.’ Bette Midler, a high priestess of camp who performed in gay sex-clubs in the early 1970s - and whose first Oscar-nominated movie featured scenes with drag queens - once referred to the Elvis impersonator who married her to her husband in a Las Vegas chapel as being ‘in drag’. For all intents and purposes, a man garbed fancifully enough to impersonate the King of Rock and Roll - whose peacockery was almost at Liberace levels - is basically doing the same thing as a drag queen.

One of the UK’s more interesting acts is the ‘drag prince’ Alfie Ordinary - a Brighton-based performer who, instead of channelling pop strippers or *grande dames*, styles himself after a marionette puppet with a

clearly male presentation.<sup>vii</sup> His drag projects a naïve but charming enthusiasm in which he is half-clown, half-Pinocchio. Drag is but a stone's throw from clowning - it deals in similar broad strokes and, while drag generally lacks the subtle realism of acting, it shares qualities with Kabuki, burlesque and mime.

*The man in drag exempts himself from usual hierarchies.*

For me, the greatest drag queen of our time is David Hoyle.<sup>viii</sup> An avant-garde cabaret artiste whose work straddles comedy, music, painting, surrealism and striptease, the drag of Hoyle is not built on perfectible ideals around makeup and image. Indeed, he usually takes to the stage with a purposely chaotic visage - makeup smeared roughly around his eyes like a psychedelic Liza Minnelli. Hoyle, who began his career in the 1990s as The Divine David, possesses a mystical, other-worldly persona. With deliciously sharp and cutting social commentary, his is a wit which crackles with an electricity only a few of the greatest comedians possess. There is the sense that this unusual man, and his unusual perspective, are coming from a plane elsewhere. This shaman-like, somewhat neurodivergent drag creates new links between the mundane, the particular and the

transcendent. In a world of dull social conformism, Hoyle's drag is radical.

Friends of mine, Tayce and Lady Lloyd, present as supermodel drag queens, both having worked on runways for the biggest fashion houses in the world. In every gay bar in the country, you will find a glut of Pussycat Doll/Britney/Xtina knockoffs - popstar drag, which can sometimes raise eyebrows as female impersonators look to recreate the racy aesthetics of pop's most scantily clad songstresses. Some drag delves even further into makeup illusion, using cinematic special-effects makeup to present as animals, fantasy creatures or the undead - US queens the Boulet Brothers' show is dedicated to just that. Drag can be all kinds of things - the long British pantomime dame tradition is a subset of drag. Indeed, the British drag queen archetype - the end of the pier comedian in a wig - takes obvious inspiration from British panto.

*You can put a man in drag, but that doesn't necessarily make him a queen.*

And so be it as panto dame, gender clown, warrior princess or glamazon fashionista - the man in drag exempts himself from usual hierarchies. Some consider a man dressing as a woman to be degrading.

But, as pop icon Madonna put it, that could be 'because you think being a girl is degrading'.<sup>ix</sup> I have never considered my on-stage persona as Vanity von Glow to be either a diminishment of who I am, or a denigration of womanhood. In fact, I feel the trappings of drag - with hair to the high heavens and a stagey and dramatic attire - reach for representations of the divine in the same way great opera stars at the height of their powers transcended the ordinary to become 'La Diva'. My drag on stage borrows as much from the bombast of male rockstars like Freddie Mercury, Steven Tyler and Meat Loaf as it does from Maria Callas, Shirley Bassey and Celine Dion. Only the campy and excessive medium of glam rock marries together gender-bending and bravado to the same level as drag.

Mick Jagger, who appears to have spent as much of the 1970s in a dress as any drag queen - once said: 'I thought it was sophisticated to be camp and effeminate... It was very English; guys dressing up in drag is nothing particularly new.'<sup>x</sup> He is right - many a straight man in the UK has donned some form of drag for a student-union, Halloween or fancy-dress party.

But while the forays of frat boys and rockstars into *Rocky Horror* getup is not wholly unwelcome (let the lads have their fun), it is important to remember that

you can put a man in drag, but that doesn't necessarily make him a queen. For a drag queen, like a great comedian, must be an oddball at heart. It isn't essential that they be gay, or 'queer' - Barry Humphries, the greatest to ever don a frock, was a jester of the tallest order *and* a heterosexual middle-class man. Those who do drag best exploit their otherness for maximum effect. For some, putting on the mask of drag is an act of liberation - a permission granted to behave outrageously. For others, getting into drag is an *un-masking* - an expression which confirms who they really are. With unusual faces they can make external their sense of being internally different.

Of course, we all wear masks. Any professional person is aware of the different hats they wear at work, versus their life at home or with friends. A business suit is itself a form of uniform - a mask that clarifies to its wearer and others what behaviours to expect from them. A dramatic performer is someone who makes a study of the masks we all wear. Each of us has this instinct, but sometimes it lies dormant and requires a liberated soul to exercise the muscle properly. The ability to see your own characteristics in another, and vice versa, is the birthplace of empathy. It's why I resist the popular idea that actors should not play certain parts. How could a drag queen support the



ridiculous idea that someone's identity has to be authentic in order to play the role well? Artists are dreamers who envisage different ways of being - they are the ones who first venture away from the campfire. Until Picasso came along, nobody saw the world in a Cubist way. Drag *artists* similarly attempt to paint the world with their impressions in the dimly lit cabaret stages of major cities. For all its trial and error (anyone who has been to a midweek Vauxhall drag show will have seen plenty of error) drag artists are reaching for new ways to see and relate to one another. It is a noble endeavour, even when executed clumsily. Some of us feel exhilarated by departures from norms, others feel anxious. These are both normal aspects of human nature. Elon Musk wants to take us to Mars. Artists have been taking us to the stars for thousands of years.

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## **Leaving politics at the stage door**

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For all the intellectual groping of this *Letter On Liberty*, and of the vast drudgery of queer theory scribbled on the subject, drag is first and foremost about fun. It's part of why so much drag is, in qualitative terms, crap. Drag isn't about excellence, it's about having a good time. That's not to say there aren't great artists within the field - many whom I've mentioned here - but

sometimes the best nights are when ‘the pig in a wig at the end of the pier’ has the whole room bellowing along to ‘Simply the Best’. While drag can provide us with much to think about, it is inadvisable to *overthink* it.

In an increasingly censorious world, it takes some courage to play. Online mobs demand fealty to the cause of the moment, and drag queens have become, paradoxically, flagbearers for various political aesthetics. Questions about where and when drag should appear - particularly in relation to the now infamous ‘Drag Queen Story Hour’ - have in some cases morphed into a crusade against drag itself. A true drag queen acknowledges this puritan dislike of mirth and laughter for what it is - moral pomposity, of which many artists are just as guilty as their fangirl internet scolds.

A drag queen can have sympathy with such political concerns, but fearless artists do not capitulate. Drag has become a strangely therapeutic field, in which queens are encouraged to become guardian angels and moral gatekeepers of the LGBT+ community. But artists should not exist as mere vectors of whatever the prevailing moral fashion is at a given time. I have little interest in such pious wranglings - despite being a frequent advocate for free speech. Pushing against censorious atmospheres in our culture - from both left

and right - I have faced down ‘cancel culture’ mobs on the one hand,<sup>xi</sup> and sat across from opponents denigrating drag as the domain of ‘degenerates’, ‘groomers’ and ‘paedophiles’ on the other.<sup>xii</sup> Performers should be allowed to *not* be moral exemplars. Creativity should be unconstrained by frameworks established by those with no vocation for entertainment whatsoever. If she has no backbone to take a stand against this sort of thing, then what use is a drag queen anyway? It is a privilege to become fearless. Accepting people may hate you for being a sissy, or a faggot, or in ‘womanface’, but persisting with your art is psychic liberation indeed.

*A drag queen is not simply performing to feel free; they are performing to make us free.*

In a recent article celebrating the life of the inimitable Humphries, the comedian Simon Evans, referencing the views of dissident feminist Camille Paglia (another of my heroes) makes the point that the quest of the non-conforming should be to illuminate their experience as other with ‘your brush, your lyre, your pen’. That the grasp for recognition from clerics of the state leaves society’s creatives ‘quivering not with ecstasy but with indignation’.<sup>xiii</sup>

Drag at its best doesn't seek the accolades of broad public acceptance. These things, and the associated lucrative benefits, are nice to have, but to quote Madonna again: 'Poor is the man whose pleasure relies on the permission of another.'

I think sometimes of Lily Savage who came directly from and through the gay pubs and working-men's clubs of the 1970s and 1980s. Lily's hard-as-nails persona was fearless, and to those who crossed her, fear-inspiring. Quite right. While bedroom queens and teenage fans of *Drag Race* take inspiration in the freedom to be themselves - and why shouldn't they - a drag queen is not simply performing to feel free; they are performing to *make us free*. To call drag political ignores its almost spiritual aspect. As an orchestral symphony vibrates with the energy of life, and an epic rock concert imbues the audience with a renewed vitality, so too can drag - in its own little way - stun and amaze, titillate and inspire.

People come away from great performances of all shapes feeling more confident, with a greater capacity for life and for love. Showing people that supposed identities, social structures, norms, attire and hierarchies can be shuffled around, drag queens put people in touch with braver, more creative versions of themselves. There will always be those who don't understand, who mock and denigrate. True liberation

is accepting that not everything is for everyone. That's the beauty of freedom, darling. And as Bette Midler once said: 'Fuck them if they can't take a joke!'

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