FEATURE

How 'RuPaul's Drag Race' reshaped drag culture

Pictures & Annotations, courtesy of Karla Jetty. We watched Barack Obama's inauguration with Michelle sharing ears in her iPhone ...

the years go by considering it started on YouTube as a YouTube competition and then went from YouTube to Amazon Prime and then from Amazon Prime, it's now on Netflix." Violencia said about "Dragula": "It's just gotten more popular even over the last three seasons."

In Boston, the lack of representation of drag queens of color and of drag kings is evident. As Violencia explained, while there are drag king shows, the kings aren't allowed to host.

"The clubs should be held accountable. If they say they're going to be an all-inclusive space they need to really practice what they preach and really be an all-inclusive space for the whole community, not just the ones that they think are the people that they want in their business," Violencia said. "There's an entire community of queer people that feel completely under represented in some of these Boston nightclubs and it's becoming extremely apparent — especially throughout this whole pandemic and from people talking on the Internet about all the stuff that's going on in these clubs or that had been going on."

While the Boston scene lacks representation, she argues that "Dragula" has been a platform for intersectionality. Violencia had auditioned for season nine and season 10 of "RPDR." But when season 11 auditions rolled around, she had already decided to go after "Dragula."

"I saw that they were opening their casting to all forms of gender identity and I thought that was amazing," Violencia said. "I was like I really should be part of this. I've always felt that I was an alternative drag queen and that my drag would be better suited on a show such as 'Dragula' more so than 'Drag Race.' There were so many different identities on this past season of 'Dragula' but a drag king won."

The winner was drag king Landon Cider, highlighting the show's inclusivity. "RuPaul's Drag Race" is mainly open to gay men in female impersonation or to pre-transitional transgender queens only.

"The community and the times have changed since then and more people should be represented on that show than are represented," Violencia said. "There's an entire community of people that are drags artists that aren't allowed on the show because they're trans or because they're a drag king or because they don't identify as a cis man."

Violencia will be featured in a documentary that discusses the challenges local queens face as "RuPaul's Drag Race" soars in popularity and continues to impact drag culture. She met documentarian and filmmaker Stephanie Stender years ago at an event in Boston.

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Stender considers herself an ally to the community, positioning her perspectives through the lens of a storyteller who set out to highlight the challenges queens face in the era of "RPDR."

"It's kind of an old-school feminism thought where some people think it's bad that a female is going to see a drag show because I'm promoting the stereotyping of women, which I never thought that," Stender said. "I think it's giving the middle finger to the patriarchy and showing the gender stereotypes."

Stender got the idea to do a "short" on drag upon attending drag shows while in college at Hollins University in Virginia. As she moved to Boston for film school, so did the documentary. She started her storytelling focused on the Boston drag scene, while filming for the doc started in 2013.

Initially, she wanted to highlight how drag could also be a feminist statement in how it tackles gender. Then she spoke to more queens. "Drag Race" premiered in 2009, but she mentions you could already see how "RPDR" was shifting drag a few years after the show's premiere in 2013. The evolution of drag also changed the focus of the doc to how mainstream drag was challenging local drag.

You heard it before. The show was turning local queens into celebrities, and that would impact local queens who weren't in these shows. "They wanted to save their money for 'RuPaul's Drag Race' queens to come in," Stender said.

"It left the queens who were the [local] stars with less booking fees even though drag was becoming more popular. It's the opposite of what you think would happen," Stender said.

Stender hopes that her documentary — "All Stars: The Changing Face of Drag" — will come out in 2021. "There is definitely a mindset with some local queens that if you're not on 'RuPaul's Drag Race,' you don't have a career," Stender said.

Of course, queens on the show still have to work for it, she continued, especially if you're not one of the top contestants. You have about a year to capitalize off of your season and time on the show. Vanessa Vanjie Mateo was eliminated first off of season 10 in 2018, but with her catchphrase "Miss Vanjie" becoming an Internet meme and her subsequent "RPDR" appearances, she has become one of the most the popular queens to ever appear on the show. Stender calls it the "RPDR" seal of approval.

"When you're a local queen and you see that your club is being taken over for big events like that and you're not in the spotlight for any of those events, I can see where that idea comes from — that the only way to make it is to be on 'RuPaul's Drag Race.'"

Some local queens would be uplifted when "RPDR" stars would visit — like with West in Columbus or VinChelle in Philly or New York City, but not all queens had this experience. "All Stars: The Changing Face of Drag" documents testimonies from a variety of Boston queens — including Violencia — as well as "Drag Race" alum like season six finalist Adore Delano and season four winner Sharon Needles.

With a new "RPDR" spinoff, "RuPaul's Drag Race: Vegas Revue," the franchise isn't slowing down anytime. When the show premiered in 2009, Lady Gaga's breakout success was mentioned. She was earning her first no. 1 hits on the Billboard Hot 100 with "Just Dance" and "Poker Face" that year. In 2017, Mother Monster was now considered one of the greatest pop icons in music and she was the guest judge on season nine's premiere — revealing the show's trajectory into mainstream popular culture.

As the popularity of "RPDR" continues to soar, a couple of things are apparent from all of these drag queens. "RPDR" elevates a drag queen's career to the mainstream entertainment industry, turning them from local celebrities into pop cultural superstars who are globally recognized. We're talking clout in music, movies and TV. While "RPDR" serves as a mega platform for drag queens to take their careers to new heights, the show by no means fixes the many issues drag queens face as part of the larger LGBTIA+ umbrella. There's work that needs to be done.

"People need to educate themselves to learn more and to take a step back before they comment or say stuff," VinChelle said about the challenges drag queens and LGBTIQIA+ communities are facing in 2020. "I think more education all around. Black folks need to educate themselves. White folks really need to educate themselves. All colors need to educate themselves. I think that'll help the community become better. Until then we're going to have a lot of people who do what they want, say what they want, but I'm hoping that there is a change that comes from this."

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