

Dundee Drag Goes Digital

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Abstract

During a period of lockdown in the UK in 2021 I conducted Ethnographic Encounters project on the culture within the Dundee Drag community. Over the course of the virtual interviews I conducted with four members of the community I began to get to grips with the unique nature of Drag in Dundee. This community has undergone a series of transformations as a result of the hit BBC reality show 'RuPaul's Drag Race UK' as well as the sudden shift from weekly physical performances to a solely inhabiting a digital space in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This project considers how a performance-based culture may exist in a digital capacity.

The small run-down club was filled with a hub of chatter as groups of friends gathered at circular tables with their drinks, eagerly waiting for the drag show *Bingo Wigs* to begin. The atmosphere was instantly welcoming, even for me as a first-time attendee of a drag show. The night's performers, two queens – one from Dundee and one from Glasgow – circulated the tables that situated groups of friends, greeting them as they handed out bingo cards. My friend Max¹ and his boyfriend, who is himself a queen but was attending the night as an audience member, are both core members of the Dundee Drag Scene and had invited me along. This was the first time the *Bingo Wigs* show had left its usual Dundee-base to perform in Falkirk, yet it still attracted its loyal regulars who are as much a part of the show as the performers.

1. 1 It should be noted that all names have been changed for anonymity.

Along with many others, I first discovered drag through the popular reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It was through this televised competition that I formed my first impression of what drag is, its culture and the skill of its competitive contestants. It was not until three years after my initial break into the binge-watching quality of the show that I first saw drag live at *Bingo Wigs*. The *Bingo Wigs* show – a play on the term Bingo wings meaning the fatty upper arms (of a woman) – centres around a game of bingo, embedded with a flurry of more scandalous innuendos and bounded together by a series of live drag performances. The title's playfulness showcases humour as an integral part of the drag performance, and ties to what Keith McNeal (1999:347) describes as a 'cathartic' critique on gender, as a derogatory term is transformed into light-hearted fun. The show has an in-house resident who is then accompanied by co-hosts and up-and-coming performers which allows for the integration of local and non-local queens, as well as being open to new members of the community. This has been the only live performance I have seen thus far due to the Covid-19 pandemic; my impression of Dundee's Drag Scene has been fleshed out through watching online performances, interviews with community members and through watching *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* season two.

Primarily, I interviewed four interlocutors: a cis-gendered man who regularly participates in the scene (Max), a cis-man drag queen (Strawberry Blonde), a cis-woman drag queen (Ginger Nut) and a transgender man who performs as a drag

king (River). These informative interviews took place over Zoom and were further fleshed out through online resources as recommended by my interlocutors such as their personal drag accounts on *Instagram* and performances they had posted on *YouTube*. In exploring the nature of the Dundee Drag scene, I have found points of reflection and interest in relation to wider anthropological theory such as the digital, gender studies and anthropology of the future. This will further exemplify the social structure of this idiosyncratic sub-culture inhabiting Dundee, with its unique inclusivity, hopes for the future post-*RPDR UK* and how it grapples with its newfound inhabitation of digital space.

The Structure and Status of Drag in Dundee

The Dundee Drag Scene established itself roughly six years ago and has grown quickly ever since. It is diverse in its nature and does not restrict its performers to the traditional drag queen role, as shown and expressed through the diversity of my interlocutors. Drag scenes particularly emerge in cities as they are home to an amalgamation of people from different backgrounds allowing for considerable nightlife and niche communities to emerge. Metropolitan cities, like that of Dundee, in their variegated and substantial size, allow for a range of inhabitants, and as a result, 'differentiation and specialization occurs' (Ulf Hannerz 1980:68). The structure of the drag community – made up of drag performers and regular attendees – appear to mimic the structure of the city they inhabit. Due to the small nature of Dundee, and its limited number of venues,

the church that hosts the weekly *Bingo Wigs* show serves to centralise and unify the tight-knit community.

Dundee and its drag community possess much character yet are often overshadowed by the Edinburgh and Glasgow scenes, which are more renowned and tourist-driven. Moreover, the drag scene in Scotland itself is less well-known in comparison to its English counterparts, and as a result there is a lack of funding. As Lawrence Chaney, the first Scottish contestant on *RPDR* jokes in season two episode one, he is a well-established member of the Scottish drag scene, however, Scotland is often overlooked in this regard, and so he is probably unknown to the other British contestants (Images 1 & 2). This is likely in part due to the population difference between the two countries, with England being significantly larger. Strawberry Blonde speculates that a common payment for a drag show in Dundee is £20 as opposed to the roughly £200 payment for the English equivalent. This means that the queens who do drag as their occupation require immense talent and drive due to the lack of financial rewards. The rest of the funding is supplemented by tips from the audience. Lack of funding, from lack of visibility, potentially acts as another reason why Scottish drag is less well-known, forming a vicious cycle. As Max raised during our *Zoom* call, "Drag is about a 'wow' factor, [performers] constantly have to mix it up". The craft requires an investment of time and money in order to access the attire, wigs, and props that they need to continuously evolve as a performer. This suggests that the general lack of financial resources for

drag performers in Dundee inhibits their progress to achieve comparative noteability.

Roles within the Dundee Drag Community

Uniquely, at the *Bingo Wigs* shows there lacks a distinct divide between the roles of audience member and performer that is expected in the entertainment industry. There is no barrier between onstage and off, as performers and audience alike permeate each other's designated space. I witnessed this when attending my first show as, upon winning the round

of *Bingo*, Max, an audience member, was invited to the stage to collect his winnings and to perform if he wished to do so. The inclusivity and stress placed on the importance of the audience themselves create an all-embracing safe space. The interlocutors described the community as "a big bubble" meaning there would be no motivation to create a hierarchy of 'us' and 'them', and as a result the social roles are relaxed and fluid.

The low set stage and absence of a backstage setting itself in the club did not enable

the performers to establish a hierarchy over the audience members if they had wished to do so. There was no backstage, and so there was no illusionary entrance and exit off the stage. Further to this, the performers regularly walked into the sea of circular tables to mingle with audience members, making sure they were having a good time and taking pictures. It is a regular occurrence for audience members to attend *Bingo Wigs* dressed in drag, further blurring the role of performer and audience member. Richard Schechner (1988:265) proposes that performance and the mundane are separate events; that there is a distinct separation between onstage and off-stage. As a result of this strict categorisation, it does not allow room for the in-between, as demonstrated here, where the role of performer and audience member is blurred. Further to this, when considering Judith Butler's (1990) belief that gender is always a performance; the performance of gender does not fit into either the significant performance or the mundane. Drag resists the construction of gender as a binary and through observing its performance in Dundee, so too do the social roles of performer and audience resist binary categorisation. Drag is viewed as a more prominent or extravagant form of gender expression with its on stage platform and glamorous queens and kings, and so the everyday performance of gender that adheres to the traditional binary ideology is overlooked in its 'masculine' and 'feminine' forms. Butler (1990:175) poignantly states, '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*', parodying of a gender, whether that be as a king or



(Images 1 & 2) Lawrence Chaney on BBC Three's 'RuPaul's Drag Race UK', Episode 1, Season 2 (BBC 2021)

Image 1 Text: 'and I'm Scottish drag royalty'

Image 2 Text: 'Which basically means that no one in England knows who I am.'

a queen, infers that there is an original performance to be mimicked. The Dundee Drag Scene resists typical social constructs and refuses to be pigeon-holed, instead, *Bingo Wigs* creatively and inclusively entertains its audience.

Dundee Drag and the Digital

The Dundee Drag Scene existence in an online sphere has been emphasised by the recent Covid-19 pandemic which has caused in-person performances to be impossible and so the physical community has been transformed into a temporarily digital one. The digital as the only outlet for drag during the pandemic has caused an undeniable realisation of the role of the audience. Both Strawberry Blonde and River discussed the importance of atmosphere: cheering, singing-along, audience participation, all things inhibited in the digital without a live audience. River particularly points to the fact that the atmosphere of the show impacts how he chooses to perform as a king. For example, he describes the *Bingo Wigs* shows as playful, fun, and welcoming, whereas the Edinburgh show *Glamoor* he regularly attends is edgy, artistic and burlesque-inspired. For both shows his performance alters slightly to adhere to expectations from the audience and fit in with the atmosphere of the night. In this sense the audience gives them inspiration and within the realm of the digital this factor is removed. Further to this, when observing the performances online there is a distinct barrier between performer and audience member as the dynamic is translated as content creator and viewer. This suggests

the online sphere – when sustained as the online means of performance – may impede some of the characteristics that makes the Dundee Drag community so distinct.

Social media has served to evolve the scene as an outlet of advertisement and as a platform to introduce new performers. For my interlocutor Ginger Nut, who began performing drag in 2019, the digital was her gateway into the scene. After watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* she decided to find the queens on social media, and from there was suggested local Scottish queens whom she reached out to through Instagram's direct messaging. Instagram appears to be the main platform for the queens and kings in Dundee suggesting that the visual is a main component of their drag due to Instagram being constructed around sharing pictures and videos. As River raised, "it is a good place to start building a portfolio", as its new feature IGTV allows for videos of performances to be attached to their profile. The platform can exercise the duality of drag being both artistic expression and to creating a brand for one's act. For example, Strawberry Blonde states that "make-up is a branding choice" as her upwards pointing pixie-like eyebrows are a conscious decision to set herself apart, a marketable identifier.

Drag performers can carefully construct their onstage persona and brand through self-managing a public social media platform. Social media here has a very professional purpose as a mode for advertising and networking, thus the construction of one's drag persona online is important. This is a new phenomenon in

which ‘users actively participate in forms of impression management that were once the preserve of celebrities, politicians and others in the public eye.’ (Deborah Chambers 2013:62-63). Further to this celebrity-like status, the performers often keep their personal account separate from their drag account. The divorce of the two personas means that their professional and private lives can be kept separate, however, primarily it allows for the drag account to be clear and concise in its self-promotion. This separation of the two selves is explored by Scott Ross (2019), in which he suggests separate public and private Instagram accounts are to cater to two different sets of social constraints and norms without obstructing likes, follows and comments. The professional side is adhering to the norms and taboos of drag, and through creating a separate personal account, non-drag related posting will not impede the popularity of the drag persona. The difficulties in translating the key dynamic between performer and audience in the online space suggests a that the current online-only drag scene is not sustainable despite it’s usefulness as a tool for building one’s brand and following.

RuPaul’s Drag Race UK and the Future of Scottish Drag

RuPaul’s Drag Race franchise broke into mainstream media with its US season that had both national and international success. This has resulted in more awareness and respect from those not previously aware of drag. For an etic admirer of the community like myself, the reality show granted access to the behind-the-scenes process of drag: the performance preparation, make-

up, and often the creation of an outfit. As argued by Brennan and Gudelunas (2017:2) ‘RPDR has served to propel drag culture from the obscurity of the gay bar/club scene to the mainstream of reality television.’ An example of its benefits to the drag community was raised by Ginger Nut; the show answers questions for newcomers without having to approach a member of the scene themselves. This is especially useful for some of the invasive or uncomfortable questions, such as the notorious ‘tucked’ question. At the very least it provides the show’s audience a starting point from which they can research drag performing or even find the digital side themselves. Thus, *RPDR* destigmatises the scene as it introduces drag into mainstream media. The presentation of the artistic process behind drag, as opposed to live performances where only the end product results in a new level of understanding and respect from the audience. Strawberry Blonde raised that the show, “brings drag into the house”: it is brought to its audience instead of its audience proactively searching for the scene in person, permeating the threshold of the home. *Drag Race* gives a platform to the world of drag and the LGBTQI+ community that has otherwise been marginalised. However, it possesses a somewhat restrictive quality in that it is a competition for drag queens only. Without my attendance at *Bingo Wigs* and being friends with members of the scene, I would not be aware of drag kings and cisgender woman drag queens.

In the most recent series of *RuPaul’s Drag Race UK* which began airing in January 2021 – spoiler alert – two of the four

finalists were Scottish queens, with one being from the Dundee Scene herself, and the winner being from the Glasgow Scene. This is the first of any Drag Race show with Scottish contestants, meaning that the winner being Scottish caused quite the cultural wave for the interlocutors. The lack of Scottish representation in the franchise appears to be a contributing factor to the disparity in funding as the first season of *RPDR UK* particularly transformed the English Drag Scene in 2019, multiplying its audience. Now, there is expected to be a distinct growth in the Scottish Drag Scene as it can now assert its status with the Scottish finalists being two new household names. This has resulted in a common feeling of hope expressed by all four interlocutors for the future of the scene; particularly the hope of more funding as there is a new audience that may wish to see the venues in which Ellie Diamond and Lawrence Chaney performed. Many of my friends outside of the drag community have started watching *RPDR UK* this year to cheer on the Scottish contestants and now wish to see live performances. The success of this UK spin-off of the Drag Race franchise – in its ability to showcase more culture-specific drag in its humour, slang, cultural references etc – has meant other national versions popping up such as *Drag Race Holland* and *RuPaul's Drag Race Down-Under*. The united feeling of hope maintains the strong bond between the members of the Dundee drag community acting as a light at the end of the tunnel that is the Covid-19 pandemic. As argued by Bryant and Knight (2019:134), hope is 'a form of futural momentum, a way of pressing into the future that attempts to pull certain potentialities into actuality.'

This focus of the potential success of the future coincides with the natural future-orientated community who consistently pursue creative endeavours in the hope to evolve. The future, therefore, is a constant of the present in the community. However, there is also a sense of urgency to materialise these hopes within this limited attention as Max, Strawberry Blonde and Forrest all expressed concern that the hype from the most recent season of *RPDR UK* will die down before nightlife can return to its physical performances post-pandemic (Bryant and Knight 2019:157).

Conclusion

Through the course of this study of the nature of the Dundee Drag Scene I have observed the ways in which the character of this community within Scottish drag has been impacted by the city it inhabits, the progressively popular *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise and the translation of drag into an online sphere. *Bingo Wigs* crafts itself to primarily function as a social space highlighted in its interactive premise – a game of bingo –, the importance of audience members in creating an atmosphere as well as the non-hierarchal relationship between performers and attendees. Its inclusivity, as shown through the diverse roles of my interlocutors and sustained regular occurrence, creates a safe, stable space for the audience to have fun, socialise and potentially win a game of bingo. The drag scene in Dundee is suspected to be up-in-coming in the wake of *RPDR UK's* second season, uniting community members in a time-space of hope. If the expected influx of new audience members come to fruition, it will

likely impact the structure and roles within the community. However, the fluid and inclusive nature of the Dundee Drag Scene will likely welcome the change and take it in their stride.

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