

Hangin' with a queen

BY SARAH LEWINE

MARILYN HUMPHRIES

Spend some time with drag sensation Vaunessa Vale, and you end up with a new understanding of gender — and glamour

V aunessa Vale pulls up in front of my building in a spent blue Plymouth, the muffler hacking away. "I bet you don't recognize me," he says as I settle, somewhat disconcerted, into the passenger seat. The last and only time I'd seen Vaunessa, he was a she, leaving Jacque's, Boston's legendary gender-bender club, in a beaded cocktail dress, sheer stockings, and velvet pumps, wisps of a blond wig framing her Maybelline face. Now, out of drag, she is a he whose natural resemblance to Pee-wee Herman is offset by two-inch-long fingernails, a blue sweat suit, and white leather high tops. He puts the jalopy in first gear and we head toward Brookline for his 11 a.m. voice lesson with local cabaret singer and pianist John O'Neil.

"Hi, it's me, Vaughn," he says into the squawk box, explaining that a few still call him by his original name.

Up in O'Neil's apartment, as the two of them gossip about a mutual friend in the hospital having her toe removed, I count 54 hats hanging on the peach-colored walls.

The lesson finally begins with jaw massaging and affected yawning, and ends with Vaunessa standing at the piano, singing "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

"I see myself as a torch singer in fabulous gowns, sprawled over the piano," he tells O'Neil, who likes the idea of a future cabaret act featuring Vaunessa's showgirl flair. Joining forces with 36-year-old Vaunessa, hailed in the gender-bender community as one of Boston's top female impersonators, will be a showbiz coup. But it's Vaunessa's class-act reputation off-stage — no drugs, lots of smarts, a friend to many — that earns her the status of perhaps the most estimable queen in town.

A field of poppies

Back in the Plymouth, and still unsure what to make of each other, we drive to Vaunessa's co-op on Lawrence Street (once known as Vaseline Alley) in the more upscale part of the South End. Vaunessa is delighted to find the latest Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue in the mailbox.

We climb the three flights of stairs to his top-floor, one-bedroom apartment, which Vaunessa calls his "penthouse," and I get the grand tour: a functional bedroom; a living room with two long plush couches, and walls painted pale pink; a small dressing room with hundreds of ball gowns and dresses, all in sizes 8 to 10, hanging on store racks, two dozen wigs, and a vanity table fit for, well, a queen.

While he's on the phone with one of his "girlfriends" — another drag queen — oohing and aahing about a new pair of tan fishnet stockings Vaunessa bought for \$13, I keep busy looking at a wall covered with photographs. I'm not

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too surprised that one of them is of Vaunessa dressed up as Pee-wee Herman. Turns out that before earning a living in drag, he worked for 11 years as a clothing-store manager, and moonlighted as a Pee-wee impersonator. His act took him around the country and he ended up on both *People Are Talking* and *Good Day*. The rest of the photos feature Vaunessa performing leading theatrical roles at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania.

Over a three-hour cup of coffee at his kitchen table, Vaunessa explains his transition from a heterosexual male to a gay man to a drag queen whose gender is defined as neither male nor female, but "just me." Having lived the life of a heterosexual, suppressing his attraction toward men until the age of 30, Vaunessa says of his sexual awakening, "It was like Dorothy waking up in that field of poppies in the Emerald City." But just as his relationships with women left him physically and emotionally unsatisfied, so too, he soon learned, did his relationships with gay men. Dressing in drag proved to be the one fulfilling alternative.

"I started dressing in drag purely for the theatrical aspect," he says, "and the more I got dressed for shows or a girls' night out, so to speak, the more the gender thing started coming up. I wasn't aware that there was a sexual lifestyle associated with dressing in drag; and at first I thought it was very freaky that a man would be interested in a guy dressed up as a woman."

That "freaky" feeling dissipated when Vaunessa met a more seasoned group of drag queens who showed him the ropes. "They told me, 'You haven't lived until you've experienced the type of guys that come after drag queens.' They acknowledged and okayed the whole lifestyle."

Men with a penchant for drag queens are typically rugged blue-collar workers who lead otherwise heterosexual lives. "Most of these men are not closeted homosexuals," says Vaunessa, "which is what a lot of people think. Just as there are men attracted to men and men attracted to women, there is a whole legitimate population of men who are attracted to drag queens. And they're bisexual — even if they try hard to keep their straight image."

As if out of a script, the phone rings; the caller says he's in town for the day, and asks if he could come over for the afternoon. Vaunessa can't quite place him until he says, "You told me that I look just like the kind of guy you'd be attracted to, because I look like an electrician who might come to your home to do repairs." Vaunessa offers him a flirtatious laugh, and tells him he's busy (not to mention he's not in drag), but perhaps another time.

"It's a tremendous turn-on for me. The mere idea that I'm able to snag or end up with a 6-foot-plus, 200-pound-plus, macho straight guy is very exciting, because that really shouldn't happen. Gay society says I should take off my drag and meet gay boys."

As a child growing up in the Pocono Mountains, straight society said he should play Little League and do what all little boys do. "But all I wanted to do," says Vaunessa, "was twirl a baton and make cookies with my mother." And put on his Aunt Adelaide's size-five green pumps and his mother's fuchsia satin bathrobe.

When Vaunessa sat his parents down six years ago to tell them of his lifestyle change, they responded that as long as he was happy, they were, too. "They have an amazing capacity," he says, "to accept things in my life that I'm sure they would find unacceptable in the lives of others."

Vaunessa lets out a long day's-end yawn. Drag life dictates that he get his beauty rest before the show tonight at Jacque's. I leave him to sleep and tell him I'll catch up with him later.

Making up is hard to do

When I return to his "penthouse" at 8:30, Vaunessa is showered, shaved, and wrapped in a red cotton robe. He sits down at his vanity table, cluttered with make-up, jewelry, and 11 drag-pageant trophies — including Miss Massachusetts USA, Miss Tri-State, and Miss New England.

He pops a '70s disco tape into the cassette player and the transformation begins.

"It's all right to use globs of make-up, as long as it blends," he says as he starts meticulously applying setting powder, foundation, burgundy and orange rouge, black eyeliner, fake lashes, mascara, false eyebrows, rust and brown eye shadow, terra-cotta lip liner, Heather Mist Pink lipstick, neutral lip gloss. Vaunessa reaches for a tissue. "Everybody knows you've got to blot your lipstick."

A beauty mark on the left cheek and a full hour later, the glamour-girl face is contoured and complete.

Now it's time to attend to the body.

Vaunessa is blessed with shapely legs and slender arms, but says, "I use every secret in the book to achieve that full, feminine figure." Two girdles (made out of control-top panty hose), a little foam rubber here and there, and a padded and stuffed bra are the only secrets he'll reveal. He won't tell me why there's not a trace of hair to be seen on his body, but assures me he doesn't take hormones, as many a queen does. Body waxing? Electrolysis? He won't say. As compensation, he divulges a drag-queen favorite, the tracheal shave: a surgical reduction of the Adam's apple.

Time is running short, even with all the clocks in the apartment set 15 minutes fast. He slips on a pair of sheer brown hose, a short, tight, black sequined dress with spaghetti straps, and a pair of pumps.

"Is this dress too tight? Do I look fat?"

I assure him he's got the body of a Las Vegas showgirl. He puts on a long and curly strawberry-blond wig, gives it a heavy dose of hair spray, and pulls two chunky faux-diamond rings and a pair of teardrop earrings out of the jewelry mound.

"I will never truly know what a woman feels like," he says, "but when I'm all dolled up, I feel like what I think a woman would feel like."

His low-pitched voice is the only trace left of his masculinity, and I have unwittingly suspended my disbelief. The person standing before me is no longer a he, but a she.

Show biz

Before heading to Jacque's, in Bay Village, we swing down to Mass Ave to pick up Lokia Mondale, a voluptuous 28-year-old drag queen with honey-colored skin who's been living as a woman 24 hours a day for the last 13 years. She hops into the car. "Hi, Sugar. It's a good thing you're late. Gave me time to finish my apricot-and-apple facial peel."

Before performing full-time as a female impersonator, Lokia worked for two years in a home for children with cerebral palsy, and one year in the accounting office at Beth Israel Hospital. "The kids' home was the best job I had. Long as I did my job, that's all I was judged on." But at Beth Israel, she went to great pains to protect her feminine identity, including storing sanitary napkins in her desk drawer, in case anyone thought to look.

"You have to find a place where society will let you fit in, and that's not easy," says Lokia, who now spends her days following *The Young and the Restless* and *One Life to Live*.

At Jacque's, it's the slew of drag queens, cross-dressers, and transsexuals who set the norms, if there are any. I follow Vaunessa and Lokia past the pool table, the dimly lit L-shaped bar and stage area, and into the 9-by-3-foot dressing room, where Norrel, an attractively corpulent queen, is polishing rhinestone earrings with a shoe mitt swiped from a hotel room.

Vaunessa shifts into her show-director mode, arranging the line-up with the "girls" and coordinating the music with Joe Pro, the DJ. I take a seat at the bar and order a soda from a post-op transsexual. The club is mostly empty, save for a few cross-dressers hunched over the other end of the bar, a dozen men you'd otherwise find at a truck stop, and a few gay couples seated at tables in front of the stage.

At 10:30, the DJ silences his Melissa Etheridge track and a spotlight beams down on the stage. The first riff of a Barry White tune opens the show, and Lokia appears from behind the black curtains in a tight red satin dress, seductively moving her hips and lip-synching, "Can't Get Enough of Your Love, Baby."

She can dance, she can synch, but there aren't enough hands in the club to generate much applause.

Norrel is next to slide on stage, and receives a ripple of laughs for her performance of "Big Long Sliding Thing," before returning to the dressing room.

After a short pause, two large white feathers peek out from the curtain, followed by Vaunessa in a sparkling white gown flowing down to her ankles. As she glides gracefully across the stage twirling her feathers, it's clear she has choreographed every move she makes to her k.d. lang number. She glances my way and lip-synchs, "I can't explain why I became Miss Chatelaine."

She's got the small audience mesmerized, including Matt, the busboy who taps me on the shoulder and says, "Vaunessa's so great. She's like the Ziggy Stardust of the '90s."

But with the oddly low turnout tonight, Vaunessa's stardom will go unnoticed. The show draws to an end at midnight. "Without an audience," quips Norrel, "you feel like a man in a dress running around flapping his lips to somebody else's voice."

Out in front of Jacque's, two men, one in a suit and one in a sweatshirt and jeans, follow Vaunessa and Lokia to the car.

"Want to go out? Want to get a drink?" they ask.

Neither of them does, and we all go home to our separate lives.

Powder and glass

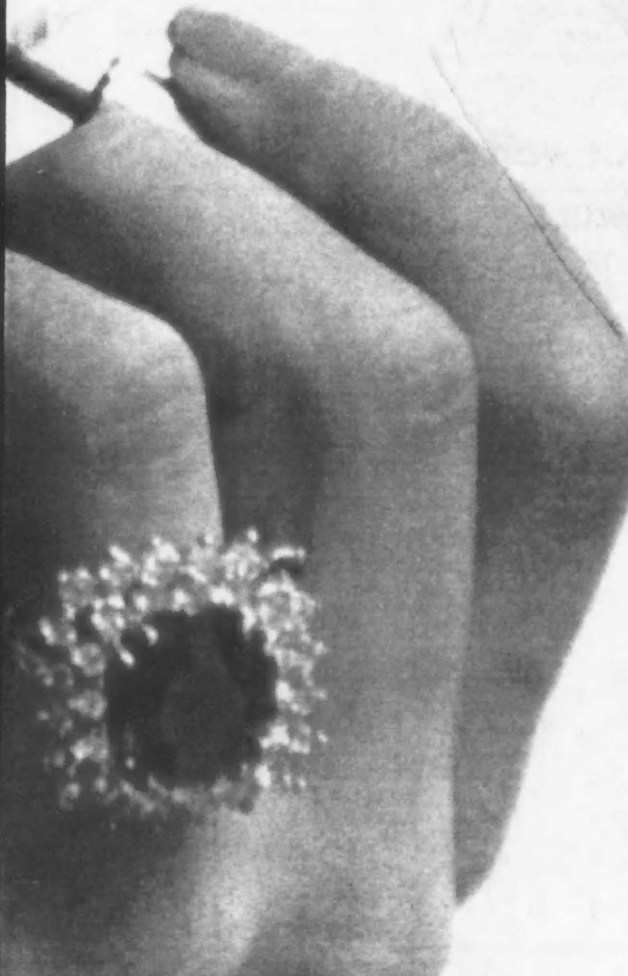
The following night I help Vaunessa load the Plymouth with boxes of wigs and garment bags full of gowns, high heels, and boas. She swings her hips into the driver's seat and we head north on route 93 to Stoneham for the "Les Follies" dinner 'n' drag show at the Montvale Plaza.

In the marble-mirrored ballroom, 175 straight suburbanites eat cake and wait for the show. I opt to join the five half-naked primping queens in the dressing room.

Old-timer and drag master of ceremonies Karl Houston crushes a 10th cigarette, the filter smeared with red lipstick, into an ashtray and tells me that back in the '60s, a gorgeous queen had to watch her back. "The other queens would get so jealous, they'd do things like put shards of brown glass in your face powder. When you went to brush it on, your whole face would start bleeding." Until the late '80s, fist fights over a dress, a man, or even a song were considered routine in Boston. In today's more subdued atmosphere, a queen will lend a girl her earrings, but not her best pair.

I return to the ballroom just as the chandeliers are dimmed. A spotlight zeroes in on the silver-tinted stage and the audience is quickly reeled in by the "showgirls." After Cher takes away the heartache, Vaunessa tap-dances her way on stage as Anne Miller in black leather hot pants and a cropped black leather vest. The crowd is abuzz with applause and smiles — all except the men in the 25-to-40 age range sitting next to their wives. They struggle to look nonchalant, to feign yawns as they sneak glances at Vaunessa's legs and midriff. By the time a Tina Turner lookalike shimmies her wares in a tiny red dress, these

See QUEEN, page 8



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Queen

Continued from page 7

stern-faced men are looking as if they're about to be fired from their jobs.

After the show, the audience files along the queens' receiving line, showering such praise as, "Great show, girls," and, "You're all just so gorgeous."

By midnight, we're back in the Plymouth, now driving Southbound on Route 93. Vaunessa has a quick show to do with two other queens at Locke-Ober, this time for a large private party of young Brahmins with cash to burn. As we take the exit for downtown, she gets "spooked" (drag slang for checked out) by a guy in a pickup.

"Men have accepted the defeminization of women," says Vaunessa, "But they haven't forgotten, or given up on the feeling of seeing a glamorous woman. That's certainly part of my sexual appeal to these guys."

What lies at the root of her appeal is hidden under the green-sequin dress she's wearing, though. "The big exciting phenomenon is that this beautiful girl has a penis — that's the bottom line," she says.

Just as I am swept up in the illusion of Vaunessa's femininity, so, too, are the ostensibly straight men she dates. "The relationship is just like a heterosexual relationship. They treat me like a woman, call me their 'girlfriend,' and I naturally play the part."

Still, when it comes time to take off her drag — make-up, wig and all — not every man she spends the night with is willing to stick around.

"Some guys are right up front and say, 'I'm only interested in you as a woman.' But there are special men out there who are willing to look beyond the make-up. These are the guys who mean the most to me, guys who don't just know there is another side to me, but expect it and are willing to be a part of it."

But at some point, whether it be at 3 a.m., 10 a.m., or a year later, even those "special men" return to their straight lives, or to their wives. "You have to accept that you're only going to get a certain percentage of these guys," she says, "and I've decided that these men are so nice and desirable that I will accept whatever percentage of them I can have." Despite the bleak prospects for a long-term relationship with a man willing to abandon his lifestyle for hers, Vaunessa's confident nature keeps her optimistic.

"It will happen some day," she says, handing her car keys to the valet at Locke-Ober.

Pink latex dress

Vaunessa and I take a couple days' break from each other. When we meet again for an afternoon of shopping, he's wearing yellow sweat pants and a leather bomber jacket. I hop in the car, happy to see him.

Our first stop is Central Square, where he picks up a month's supply of Sensor razors at Walgreen's and a medium-brown eyebrow pencil at Venus Cosmetics. Next, it's on to the Colonial Drugstore, in Harvard Square, the only place he can find CoverMark Face Magic, a product that claims to "hide any problem, including eye circles, birthmarks, bruises, age spots, acne" — and, Vaunessa adds, "beard."

At the Garment District, we head straight for the vintage gowns, where I pick out for him a long, glitzy pink dress made out of latex, and a multi-colored pantsuit. He can't believe my taste. And neither can I, as he makes the \$8.95 purchase.

We skip Filene's, where he usually shops, and where the saleswomen call him at home to tell him about bargain prices on ball gowns. I can't imagine which changing room he uses. "The women's, of course," he says. "A lot of times the women will say, 'Is that for you? When you get it on, let me see it . . . Oh, I wish I could wear that. You have a better figure than I do.'"

On a rack at Marshalls, Vaunessa eyes a green suede mini-skirt that's all too familiar to him. He's miffed to see the zipper still broken. He bought, and returned, the damaged skirt two weeks ago.

The following Saturday night, at Jacque's, Vaunessa is wearing her new pink dress that serves as perfect garb for her famous Karen Carpenter impersonation. As she performs "Top of the World," tonight's packed house of gays, queens, and men looking for adventure can't seem to get enough. I follow protocol at Jacque's by standing up with an outstretched arm waiting for Vaunessa to take the \$1 tip from my hand. When she finally reaches me, at least 50 singles are tucked between her fingers.

A singular high

A tour of Boston's drag scene is not complete without a visit to the Playland Café, in the Combat Zone. Here I'm introduced to the darker side of life in drag. It's here that Roman Pickett, a 23-year-old pre-op transsexual who went by the name Chanelle, met his accused killer, William Palmer, on November 19. Back at Palmer's apartment, Palmer allegedly strangled Pickett when he discovered "Chanelle" was a man. "It's not the first time a drag queen was killed by a date, and it won't be the last," Vaunessa laments.

Outside Playland, three queens, hands on hips, wait on separate corners to turn a trick. For some, Vaunessa explains, it's a way to pay the rent. For others, it's money to fuel a crack habit. Whatever the reason, an estimated 50 percent of Boston drag queens continue to fall into prostitution.

Inside, Playland is a haven for crack dealers, pimps, and more prostitutes in drag. But it's also a place for a clean-living queen like Vaunessa to bring a date, meet a date, or wind down after the show. After a quick once-over of the seedy bar area downstairs, we head upstairs to the lounge, where a few strings of white Christmas lights and a wall full of framed playbills from Broadway shows are the only decor. At one end of the room, a piano player sings, "Luck Be a Lady"; at the other, a restless queen in dominatrix get-up cracks her whip on an empty bar stool. Somewhere between the two, another queen smiles tenderly at her man.

Vaunessa and I sit at the bar talking, no paper and pen between us, the piano man playing on and on. At 3 a.m., the night and my time spent with Vaunessa roll to an end. We say good-bye, and all I can think to tell her is, "Thanks." I watch her drive away in the Plymouth, her fingernails waving out the window. □

in a perfect world

by mimi coucher



M. Coucher