

Drag queens take pride in their art, culture

Clockwise from top left, Monica West, Victoria DeVille, and Kamaree Williams. (Photos by Mike Madison)



by Marla Khan Schwartz

With COVID-19 impacting the way businesses operate and putting in-person Pride celebrations on hold this year, drag queens who appear at LUSH are anxious to get back to doing what they love most: performing shows, and again gracing the stage at the popular Northeast venue in their immaculate gowns and makeup.

Many drag queens make a life out of this performance art, and LUSH, 990 Central Ave. NE, a bar and entertainment venue meant to provide a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ community and others, provides them with the ability to have a full-time job doing what they love most – singing the songs they love to an audience who appreciates their art.

Although the wait for LUSH to re-open has been difficult, some of the performers have spent a lifetime filled with struggle, motivated by significant mentors, and more opportunity due to changes in societal and political views, eventually leading to more work in a profession that was once unaccepted.

“In Omaha, I used to hide going to the gay club because people would throw bottles or garbage at you,” said Monica West, who has performed as a drag queen for 34 years. “In Omaha, the bar was not even marked with a sign so you didn’t even know it was the bar unless you had been there before. If you were in drag, and you walked in while people saw you, people would yell ‘fag.’ When I came to Minneapolis, it was a much larger city. Here, when you go to your taxi or your car, and you have your face [makeup] on – people will look and wave.”

Victoria DeVille, whose drag career spans 18 years, uses mostly live performance singing, comedy, and hosts burlesque shows. DeVille appreciates the opportunity to work in an environment that allows her to bring her artistic fervor to the listening audience.

“It is so exhilarating and humbling all at the same time,” said DeVille. “It is a dream to have a job like this, and have it support you. It is almost indescribable as an artist, because so many of us struggled for so long and that is the common experience in artists – the struggle to find financial stability while still being able to do what you

want to do with something you are passionate about.”

For Kamaree Williams, rising to LUSH stardom entailed a different path. Williams, who considers herself a black, transgender, LGBTQIA+ woman, began her career after finding a mentor who helped her gain the skills she needed to start her career in drag.

“What was really helpful for me was to find a person of color or entertainer who you can connect with and emulate,” said Williams. “For me that was Tommie Ross. The first time I met her, she took my breath away. I knew at that moment that this is what I wanted to do and I wanted to be like her. I wanted to hold myself to that caliber and standard, and make sure that I mean business when I am out here. You need to figure out how this works for you, but also stay true to yourself and succeed amongst people who already have an advantage over you.”

A Saturday or Sunday drag show at LUSH is preceded by a brunch. Once patrons receive their food and drink, the lights dim, and the glitz and glam begins. The queens wait backstage with anticipation and excitement, as they’ve often sewed their own unique outfits for the themed brunch, hand-picked the songs performed, spent hours putting on the makeup that transforms them, and choreographed all movements during their stage time. Transitioning into their performance characters takes time and exacting makeup techniques.

Said West, “I befriended a drag queen [in Omaha]. I asked them to teach me the ways of performance and how to get into shows. They painted my face a couple times and then said, ‘You’re on your own.’ I did it [makeup] and for the first three years of my career, they called me Jo-Jo the dog-face girl because I was really bad. I took a little time off, learned makeup and costume, came back and started winning Nebraska titles.”

Participating in pageants all over the country, West, Williams, and DeVille all have multiple local, state and even national titles, as well as a major stake in the drag and burlesque worlds. All agree that the future of drag can continue to grow, become more inclusive and encompass diverse people who can learn from them.



“I see drag continuing to bring queer and straight communities together,” DeVille says. “There is negative press from time to time, but in the world we live in, that is kind of the case for anyone who is different. I am not going to let that affect me in any way. For the future of drag, we are going to continue to see more and more challenges of gender norms and gender binary, which I am thrilled about. This new group of entertainers are really bent on saying something with their drag and that is very exciting.”

“I see the industry for people of color really blowing up and not just for people of color, but for everyone,” Williams said. “It is becoming very mainstream. It’s something that is happening and it’s a wave that needs to be rode. A lot of people in this world need to be educated. I think it will be even better once there is more representation from the trans community, not just from trans women but also from trans men. I hope the [drag industry] will evolve even larger than what it is.”

The LGBTQIA+ commu-

nity has faced inequality and social justice discrimination over many decades and the struggle is all too familiar to them. The Stonewall uprising in 1969 led to the modern gay liberation movement, and is considered an essential steppingstone for gaining equal rights. These drag queens continue to pave the way for future generations of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Although LUSH has no plans to re-open right now due to the COVID-19 health restrictions, co-owner James Nelson asks, for Pride month, that LUSH fans and family focus on paying tribute to their black, people of color, trans and queer family, activate to end police brutality against people of color, and support the uprising that can lead to justice and revolution. Their call to the community stems from the death of George Floyd, and supporting others who fight for systemic change and justice.

You can find information about LUSH, the shows, and information about when they will re-open at lushmpls.com.

