

BY TIMMIE THORNTON

*I'll be down to get you in a taxi, honey.
Better be ready 'bout half past eight.
Oh honey, don't be late.
I want to be there when the band starts playing.
The Darktown Strutter's Ball*

But eight-thirty came and went, and I wasn't ready. I decided to change my lashes, and despite several lacquerings of hair spray, the nape of my new wig just wouldn't stay where I wanted it. I managed to fuss and primp until ten-thirty, then threw on my genuine rabbit-trimmed coat, and dashed out the door, forgetting to put on my earrings. As I flounced through the lobby, Mrs. D', my elderly neighbor, gave me a smile and an OK sign. She was under the impression that I was just camping it up for a holiday party, but I was deadly serious.

The streets were glistening, and it was breath-smoking cold as I got into a cab and started on my way to the Variety Social Club's Fifth Annual Pre-Thanksgiving Costume and Masquerade Ball. This is one of two yearly events presented by Frankie Quinn, veteran female impersonator, and Saul Segal, long-time drag show MC and publisher of *Femme Mimics* magazine. When I purchased my ticket at Segal's small apartment in midtown Manhattan, he spoke expansively of the Hotel Diplomat's ballroom appointments, the many minor celebrities who have attended the ball, and the specialness of the occasion in general. I mentioned that I was thinking of freelancing an article on the ball for *GAY*, and Segal started.

"GAY? Is that one of these smutty things? We don't want to be connected with..."

"It's a very high-class publication," I interrupted. "Dick Leitsch, President of the Mattachine, is one of the columnists."

"Oh, I know Dick! Of course, the Mattachine... they don't go for drag."
"Yes, I know."

As I started to go, ducking my head to avoid a pair of army underwear, Segal urged me to "... be sure to say hello to me. People look different in drag." Then I was back in the November in New York sloop in Times Square. Times Square is not nice. A hustler tried to solicit my patronage there once; I replied that my mother told me not to speak to strangers.

Walking back to the subway, I contemplated the social stratification and power structure of the gay world. At the top is the Mattachine, which represents most of the money and education, and doesn't "go for drag." Somewhere closely aligned is *GAY*, which serves as a forum for the bigot Stefen Verk, who disapproves of "any form of self-degradation, such as transvestism." Just below the epicenter of the pyramid comes the poor swish, the butt of innumerable jokes by gay and straight alike. A homosexual spokesman can always garner some "cheap applause" by making fun of faggots, as Dick Leitsch recently did on the Cavett show. At the very bottom dance the mad, intoxicated denizens of the Darktown Strutter's Ball.

Holly Woodlawn has been much on my mind lately; I've been saving all the newspaper articles about her. She's "three-dimensional," "human," a

uniquely talented actress. Here, certainly, is a drag who has transcended her niggerdom. Or has she? Holly on "female impersonation:" "Well... maybe some nights I *didn't* look so pretty, but I still managed to turn a few heads. And I made people laugh." Keep 'em laughing, Holly.

My cab pulled up in front of the hotel, and I noticed a large gathering of Spanish youths outside. "Oh boy," I thought, "here it comes," and prepared myself to be verbally spat on. But they were just opening car doors for tips. You might think me paranoid, but I had just been assaulted three days before by five Spanish delinquents who didn't like my looks.

I checked my coat, and took the elevator up to the Grand Ballroom. Opulence! Magnificence! A huge pleasure dome, balconied and balustraded, surmounted by an ornamented ceiling three stories above. (I was dwarfed. I was exposed. I was scared.) Tables crowded both sides of the room, with a space extending out from the stage and runway for dancing. And among the tables moved the queens. Queens floating in

extravagant gowns in pastel shades, bouncing in maribou-trimmed mini-dresses, glittering as Las Vegas showgirls, sultry a la Hell's Angels. I felt a bit declassé in my simple reptile-print tunic and pants outfit; I needed a drink.

I got one, and then saw my friend, Tami. She was already half in the bag, having a great time handing out her electrologist's business card to any queens with a trace of shadow, and haughtily refusing the advances of "agents."

The agents, or drag chasers, were here too. In just a few moments I was approached by one. He was thirty-ish, pale, and slightly balding.

"By your looks, I'd say you're an artist," he guessed.

"I'm a writer. Do you come to these things often?"

"Twice a year. I try to find somebody I like, but I usually don't. I don't like the way these queens paint themselves up... You look natural."

"Thank you."

"Do you like wearing drag?"

"That's why I'm here."

"You'd be surprised. I was just talking

to a queen that said she hates it. Do you wear it at home?"

This was becoming onerous, and the remainder of his remarks are not printable in a family publication. I excused myself, and, envying the couples dancing to the rock band, I positioned myself to indicate that I wished to do likewise. As the stage band came back for another set, I saw Segal, and dutifully said hello. "Yes, I remember you. You look good," he leered, and chucked me under the chin in an irritating manner. This is how distasteful people check to see if you have any beard. I had none.

I began to speak to Tami again, but someone touched me on the arm. He was my height, wore dark glasses and a sportcoat which emphasized his broad shoulders. It was a slow dance; there was at once no inhibition in our clasping. Then the band began to play some rock, and I immediately picked up the afterbeat. My partner hesitated for a moment, then joined in. My clothes swirled as I spun about like a Temptation.

As he bought us drinks, my new-found

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Timmie Thornton :
Gotham's Brightest Belle

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escort and I exchanged personal information. His name was Steve; he was from Boston; and he was in show business. Steve seated me at his table as the floor show was beginning. Frankie Quinn, as MC, opened with a song. "Frank's been doing that song for years," Steve commented. "I guess he's going to keep at it until he gets it right." (It's not necessarily insulting to call an impersonator "he." As part of their theatrics, they usually maintain a fiction of being male.)

Now Frankie was shouting, "We have in our audience tonight that world-famous impersonator, Pudgy Roberts! Come on up and take a bow, Pudgy!" (Quinn and Roberts, I'm sure, would dearly like to see each other garrotted with a "G" string, but the hostilities are put aside for the sake of the show.)

Then a red-haired impersonator did a strip reminiscent of 40's burlesque, or perhaps Rita Hayworth in *Sadie*

Thompson. The spots were on him so strongly, it was difficult to tell that the derriere was a cleverly designed contraption of flesh-colored rubber. When the bra finally came off, Steve exclaimed, "My God, it's a man!"

Steve went to get more drinks, and then his friend Kiki, a drag-show entrepreneur, stopped to say hello. "Are you going to be in the Parade?" Kiki asked me. "No, I don't think so," I replied. "They don't have a category for the Sweet and Innocent."

Leslie London did his Diana Ross impersonation. I think Leslie has consummate grace and stage presence, and I always enjoy him tremendously. Steve's favorite impersonator, Robin Rogers of the Jewel Box Revue, sang with his two voices, contralto and baritone. With his beautiful feminine register, Robin could very likely succeed as a straight night club performer. I mentioned that the impersonators, camping with the omnipresent camera, seemed to be enjoying themselves quite as much as the other queens. Steve said he didn't think that even the top performers made too much money; he knew one drag who had started her impersonation career for twenty-five dollars a week, a place to

live, and all the drinks she could hustle.

Steve went to get more drinks, and it was now time for the Parade, the exhibition of beauty and glamour which is one of the high points of the year for so many queens. First there were the professionals, then the comedy and originality categories. One by one, they flashed across the stage and down the runway. Someone was *Laugh-In's* Dirty Old Man. There was an attractive queen in a gorgeous brown satin ante-bellum costume, and—unbelievably—a mustachioed young man who was apparently representing himself to be the Tree of Forbidden Fruit, with silver branches swaying over his head, and a green serpent coiled around his arm. "It's a drag king," I observed. Steve laughed. The Tree came back to sit at the table next to us, and one of his leaves gouged me in the eye. I glared at him briefly, then turned to watch the costumes grow more and more elaborate in the main contest.

Steve recalled that he had been asked to judge the contest at a Halloween ball in Boston the previous month. He had been under the impression that these affairs are all in fun, but soon changed his mind. When the favored contestant of a

large group of Latin queens failed to win, a full-scale riot broke out. Fruit salad went flying, and Steve was hit over the head with a coquette's fan.

The tendency here seemed to be toward huge fan-shaped arrangements strapped to the backs of the bedizened queens, but there came an afro-coifed Latin in an unadorned white gown which slipped off to reveal a sequined halter—and a dancing belly. She had verve, and wasn't just a clothes rack. She was our choice, but the winner carried a fan fully twenty feet high which seemed ready to topple at any moment.

At the close of the show, Frankie Quinn announced that we were going to see a *real sex change*. I stood up to applaud this person's courage, but when she threw open her dress to reveal DD boobs, I sat down again in embarrassment.

The ball was over. Downstairs, as I waited for Steve to get my coat, I saw our candidate on her way out. I told her we thought she should have won, and asked how long it took her to make her costume. "A week," she replied.

Steve helped me on with my coat, and as we reeled down the street, he asked, "Am I holding you up, or are you holding me up?"

"A little of both, I think." ■●