

# COCKETTES CREATIVE CONFLICTS

*John Rothermel & Friend*



photo: Clay Geerdes

by Clay Geerdes

That there are people tripping around the Bay Area these days who have to ask who The Cockettes were testifies to the migratory nature of the times. As one who photographed the midnight shows at the Palace Theatre in North Beach for a couple of years, I would be the first to say that any collective definition of the enormous number of people involved in that scene is impossible. It is as logical to ask what a Cockette was as who, perhaps more so, because the end product of those hours of make-up and rehearsal was usually something beyond sex role, a work of art with a human core.

I was not there at the beginning, not in the Place the night Hibiscus and a few friends danced on stage and improvised the first Cockette show, and what I know of those initial shows came to me from interviews with many different people. Film-maker Steven Arnold, who created LUMINOUS PROCURESS, initiated a series of nostalgic movie screenings at the Place called the Nocturnal Dream Shows.

The night people came to these films in huge crowds, and one night Hibiscus and a few of his friends arrived with large bunches of red roses. All were in costumes. There were colorful, interesting people so Arnold let them in free. Hibiscus made a grand entrance down the aisle and created his own show in the audience.

Out of that scene came the Cockettes, who first went onstage one evening at the invitation of Arnold. He suggested they dance and do their thing. The music was that of the Rolling Stones, not the nostalgic thirties and forties sound that typified those Cockettes who remained performing after Hibiscus left to form the Angels of Light. There are conflicting stories about just what night this occurred, but it was either on Halloween or New Year's Eve of 1969.

The early shows were improvisational theatre, a mockery of established Broadway and Hollywood theatre—along with an extended parody of institutionalized entertainment. Hibiscus enjoyed mocking television talk-shows, and doing anything that popped into his head while he was in the footlights. It was his desire to do free shows and to keep them in an improvisational stage that caused a shift in the group about mid-1970.

Hibiscus had named the group after The Rockettes, but many believed that the name derived from the penchant of many of the drag queens for performing in costumes which left their genitalia exposed. The early shows were very orgiastic, and it was only after Hibiscus left that they began to become more slick, moving toward drag versions of Broadway musicals.

This was the schism. Hibiscus and his friends maintained the attitude prevalent during the acid days of Haight-Ashbury that people should have everything free and money should never be a factor. He wanted to do free shows in the parks and to give away food at the performances; he also wanted to do shows oriented toward children. When Sebastian took over management of the remaining Cockettes who wanted to do more complex musicals, the emphasis moved away from free theatre to a more traditional box office orientation.

The form taken by most of the Cockette shows was that of the

revue or variety show. There was a script, but it was more of an outline than a finished manuscript, and it served as a framework for series of acts of numbers in which each of the Cockettes did his/her specialty. The shows varied. PEARLS OVER SHANGHAI was a staple, and it was performed more often than any other show. TINSEL TARTS IN A HOT COMA was known as the "Depression" show. Earlier shows were HOLLYWOOD BABYLON and HELL'S ANGELS.

All of the Cockette revues featured song and dance routines, a lot of outrageously colorful scenery and costumes, and a bare minimum of spoken lines. In the troupe were gay people and some of those people were drag queens who got off on their transvestism, others were costume freaks who transcended sex roles entirely, young men like Hibiscus and Wally who were human iconography; still others were not gay at all, just lovers of freaky theatre. There were women in the Cockettes -- Dusty Dawn, Marquel, Fayette, Sweet Pam, Liz, and there was a child, Ocean.

Whatever happened to the Cockettes became a part of their shows and the houses they lived in looked a lot like their dressing rooms at the Palace, incredible museums of artifacts from the past. They recycled what they found in the second hand stores and built their most elaborate costumes from Halloween and Christmas materials bought in the basement sales held by dime-stores and department stores along Market Street. Drag queens like John Rothermel wore the forties gowns and dresses, once worn by women his mother's age; indeed, most of the queens had what they called a "street drag" for public wear.

Wally, whose headdresses were often two feet high, once told me his street drags were so hot that he couldn't even get into local San Francisco gay bars. Wally and Hibiscus used to compete in the early shows, each trying to outdo the other via headdress and costume.

In the long run, the public will probably remember the Cockettes as freaky drag queens, because the queens put on the most visible and outrageous show, but those who were involved with the scene will think of it as a time of personal freedom and good feelings. The Palace in those days was a place where you could drop your sexual and social roles when you walked into the lobby, and just trip on all of the images moving around you.

The Cockettes may still be seen in several films: LUMINOUS PROCURESS by Steven Arnold; TRICIA'S WEDDING; ELEVATOR GIRLS IN BONDAGE by Michael Kalman; THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WORLD AS SEEN FROM A SEXUAL POSITION by Arthur Meyer; ALABAMA'S GHOST by Fred Hobbs; and in a recent documentary by Gregory Pickup. Photographs of them appeared in a number of books including my own COCKETTE PAPER DOLL BOOK.

Most of The Cockettes are still in theatre. John Rothermel has a thirties night club act. Martin Worman works with the Gallery Theatre Club. Goldie Glitters recently starred in a version of "Cinderella" at the Palace. Dusty Dawn has formed her own Fantasy Theatre in Cotati, California. Wally has been working with Dr. John, the Night Tripper.

"Is there anymore glitter?"