

Out of the way



Miss Drag steps out

Joy Melville

"Make way for a virgin," says a deep male voice, at the entrance to the ladies' cloak-room. In comes a gorilla in drag: black shoulder straps, quivering with the strain of supporting a 46 inch bust, peep from under a short, pink, frilly dress: a black mat of hair tangles prettily with waterfall diamante earrings.

Behind him walks a silver Christmas tree, with spangled tights, silver breastplate and matching codpiece. "Don't trip, darling," comes a chorus of male voices, as the tree's tinselled two foot high headdress lurches sideways. As the tree checks its make-up in the mirror, it is joined, appropriately enough at a drag ball, by the fairy queen, who does a dainty pirouette, gossamer white wings affixed to arms.

There is a sudden kerfuffle. The winner of last year's Miss Drag International—here at Porchester Hall, London, this Saturday night to crown the 1982 winner—floats in, all feminine in a black billowing dress, which is torn. On the way here, it seems, Miss Drag stopped for a drink in a pub and was ogled by a male drinker. Annoyed, his wife complained, and Miss Drag socked her one. It led to a fight. "Are you really a fella?" asks a motherly-looking man, in a neat ruffled blouse and patterned skirt. Miss Drag, in reply, flings up his dress and unzips his flies: "Cock a doodle do."

Not to be outdone, the motherly-looking man draws me into a corner and shows me his lacy panties and cut-away stockings. "They're advertised in *Exchange & Mart*, if you know where to look. I've been out shopping in this outfit all today. I always do at weekends."

In the adjoining panelled room, under the chandeliers, the tables and dance floor were packed with couples outrageously bejewelled, be-sequinned and be-feathered. A red-coated trooper from the Lord Mayor's Show seems to have wandered in, along with Henry VIII in brocade doublet and hose, and a clutch of bridesmaids in curiously old-fashioned dresses of pink and turquoise tulle—a sight marred only by their six o'clock shadows and occasional moustache. "Mind the frock, dear, it's not C&A's," says a watching blonde, crossly, hurriedly removing his train from under the feet of Mae West, in purple feathers. "Oh, these TVs get on my nerves."

The speaker is a drag artist, it turns out—a profession that dissociates itself from

the TVs, the transvestites. The TVs need to wear drag and look upon drag balls as a chance to dress as a woman in public. Drag artists use women's clothes for their stage act, rather than put them on for pleasure.

Tommy Osborne, tonight's compere, and a well-known professional drag artist himself, says a lot of the artists meet up at the drag balls and have a few drinks "and screech at the transvestite men, who are hilarious. I remember last time, this farmer arrives in velvet cord trousers and leathers and two boxes of apples on his shoulder.

"They all just pull their wigs on, bang, and they've got these great muscular arms. At least with us, we know enough to hide our faults; but they just let it all hang out, varicose veins and god knows what."

about 20 or 30 of these shows going on every night: they've been reported as sleazy, but they're not; just a crowd of girls out enjoying themselves. We have male strippers, but they're not in among the girls every two minutes like people think they are."

The women at the hen parties look upon drag artists as surrogate women, who voice their submerged feelings. "We talk about the things that women are always moaning about," Tommy Osborne says, "like, 'He came home late last night and we had a fight and the dinner went up the wall,' and we put in a few swear words and they can give vent to their feelings. I say 'Isn't it lovely that you're all here tonight and you've left those miserable bastards at home?' and they all go 'Y-e-e-e-s-s.'



He smoothed his flowing white, pink sashed dress, as he spoke. "I call this undraggy drag," he says. "You try to create a different image at the balls, go in your Sunday best. But of course for work it wouldn't be profitable, every time you wanted something new, to fly out and have it made. We've all learnt how to bead a dress up and set our own wigs."

Drag acts seem to be very popular in pubs. Was his work usually there? "Drag artists have been the in thing since Shakespeare's day, dear. We're the second oldest profession. But I mainly do the hen parties, the girls' nights, which are very fashionable at the moment, you know. This week I've been to Luton, Maidenhead and Sunbury, up and down the motorways. There are

Pictures by Chris Steele-Perkins at the contest for Miss Drag International last weekend. In the centre of the judges (right, top) Cynthia Payne, the Streatham madam

"With a stag party, of course, you can be more feminine in your approach. You can swish around a bit more and make eyes at the fellows, which of course you don't do with the girls. I mean, I wink at the girls and stick my tongue out, but with the boys you can be a bit of a tease."

The drag artists have to be careful not to compete with a female audience. "If you look glamorous and take yourself seriously, they can hate you for that. They do like you to act like a man underneath it all. Yet if you are not up to scratch one night in the way you are looking, they say, 'Bloody



cheek, the state of him, there's a ladder in his tights, who does he think he is, coming to perform in front of us like that?'

'I have a couple of very slinky dresses in sequins, and they come and talk to you in the bar and say, 'Oh I love you in that,' or 'I wish we could make up like you.' And I say, 'Well, it all comes out of a pot, dear, and it wasn't made for us, it was made for you. We just nicked it.'

'Of course, it's different in France. When I worked there, you had to be really feminine; you had to try to fool. Over here, the women won't stand for that. I think it's something to do with our humour.'

He resents the fact that, given drag's established place in British humour, male comics are forever knocking drag artists. 'Yet you put on the television,' he says, 'and there they are themselves, always throwing a frock on. The Crazy Gang used to do loads of drag sketches; and look at Tommy Trinder, Stanley Baxter and the two Ronnies. But they think we do it to offend.'

'A lot of the big comics who play pantomime dame say, 'Oh, it's dreadful, these female impersonators playing dames. Dames should have red noses and funny skirts.' That may have been fine years ago, when grandmothers looked like that, with aprons on and boots. But you don't see women looking like that nowadays. Your grandmother is more likely to look like Marlene Dietrich or Diana Dors and the children don't understand or relate to the Old Mother Rileys, the earphone wigs and the striped stockings. They've got Space Invaders.'

A figure in a green wig and pink ruff tramped past, legs hairy enough to make even Old Mother Riley look sexy. Cleopatra undulated by. The contestants were gathering. 'Still taking the hormones, I see dear,' caroled a passing spangled bluebird. And as the band broke into, 'Bless your beautiful hide,' the contest began.

Tommy Osborne compered it like a fast-moving Miss World: 'And here is Voluptuous Veronica . . . Miss Virgin . . . Miss Just for the Hell of It . . . Miss Gypsy Rose Lee . . . Mahogany . . . Miss Dunlop . . . Miss Incognito.' Miss Incognito, in an unrelieved black dress, thick black spotted veil and Victorian black boots, decided she'd had enough exposure, and sat down.

After a flurry of activity, up and down the cat walk, the judges finally chose, as Miss Drag International 1982, the most spectacular costume of the night—the bride. It was not just that the dress easily outdid Princess Di's, it was the matching follower that must have clinched it. Dressed in a white G-string and white gauze loincloth, with a matching neck ribbon that tied him to the bride, he handled the yards of tulle with elan. And the bride, kissing him in delight at the news of the win, obviously liked bridesmaids with moustaches.

High heels tapped their way to the cloakroom. Dresses were hastily stuffed into suitcases: their erstwhile wearers, now in two-piece suits, went respectably home on public transport. In their pockets was a poster headed 'Up Your Tutu,' giving the date of the next drag ball.