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NEW YORK

UNION SQUARE

Venus Boyz 06/07/2002 @ 10:00PM Sold Out**DRAG FOCUS****Also included:****Venus Boyz**

Gabriel Baur
(Switzerland, 35 mm,
90 min., NYC
Premiere)



The New Festival is proud to present the US Premiere of this eagerly anticipated new documentary focusing on drag kings, female

masculinity, and gender performance in New York City and London, featuring a star-studded cast of local celebrities including Dréd Gerestant, Storme Webber, Diane Torr, and Mo Fischer, among others. Director Gabriel Bauer follows a wide range of subjects, finding out about their personalities, the male characters they've created, and their perceptions of gender and performance. Why do these women perform as men? How does it feel taking on a male persona? Bauer also expands the scope of the documentary by talking to FTMs like Hans Scheirl and Svar Simpson, and intersexed persons like Del LaGrace Volcano, and explores their transformations through male hormones. You won't want to miss Venus Boyz.

With special appearance and Q&A with local kings, including Dréd Gerestant, Storme Webber, and Diane Torr.

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Venus Boyz

Sunday August 11 / 9:30 pm / Pacific Cinematheque

Venus Boyz explores the performance of masculinity in NYC's vibrant Drag King scene. Interviews with lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered drag kings are interspersed with fabulously witty and thought-provoking performances, which explore and parody male sexuality and power.

Interviewees include drag king pioneer Diane Torr, Germany's Bridge Markland, Storme Webber and Dred Gerestant, a rising Haitian-American king whose acts cover race, gender and sexual identity stereotypes. The distinctions between drag and reality begins to blur as the film looks at a group of London-based individuals who are experimenting with testosterone-induced body modification. Here, Del LaGrace Volcano and friends seek new identities beyond the limits of man or woman, opting for terms such as intergendered and cyborg. *Venus Boyz* is an intimate look at individuals with the courage to create identities unconstrained by conventional labels.

In **Kings**, meet Montreal's Mambo Drag Kings, a dapper group of lip-synching lesbians who play with socially constructed notions of masculinity and celebrate the erotic power of playing it "butch".

— Gwen Haworth

Kings

Colleen Ayoup / Canada / 2001 / video / 22 mins

Venus Boyz

Gabriel Baur / Switzerland-USA / 2001 / 35mm / 104 mins

Content

The journey begins in New York. It was here, in the legendary Club Casanova, that the Young Wild Ones began writing Drag King history under the Master of Ceremonies Mo B. Dick. We meet the Haitian-American Mildred, who works in an office during the day and in the evening, as the sexy Dréd, mesmerizes her fans with her songs. Here, too, we encounter the most famous Drag King of Germany, Bridge Markland, who is constantly on the lookout for provocation and anything extreme and who ponders about her bi-sexual identity. And we come across the traces of Drag King pioneer Diane Torr, who lives with her 16 year old daughter in New York. Long before it became trendy, she was one of the initiators of the King movement and has been giving performances and workshops for over two decades. We accompany Torr, transformed into one of her masculine alter egos and, through her, discover the secrets of masculine body and power strategy.

Del LaGrace Volcano, who lives in London, has personally experienced how limited social acceptance is for "MenWomen". Up until a few years ago, his name was still Della Grace, and with him we enter into the world of bodily transformation. He belongs to a group of transgendered men in London who are experimenting with testosterone, who also sometimes describe themselves as Cyborgs. They speak openly and directly about their experiences and yearnings. In London we examine the question, with Del's assistance, of what it means to be a *new man*. Del's path is an unusual one. He tries to lead a life between man and woman, which means he is constantly compelled to create new terms and new life situations. Hans, his friend, has chosen to continue his life for the time being as a man. He found it too complicated to live somewhere between man and woman. Our encounter with the new men in London forces us to confront the basic understanding of what is man and what is woman and how confusing this can be.

The film takes place within the framework of a Drag King night in a New Yorker Club ("Slipper Room"), where Kings, Queens and the entire *Kingdom* come together, dreaming of a time in which repressive sexual norms disappear.

«Je suis l'autre» ("I am the other"). Gérard de Nerval

INTERVIEW WITH GABRIEL BAUR

(full version on www.venusboyz.net)

Gabriel Baur, what inspired you to make a film about Drag Kings?

G.B.: Don't we all dream of slipping into the skin of the opposite sex? Of experiencing so-called "maleness" as a woman? In 1996 I heard about women who appear on stage as men and this, as I was told, with lots of black humour. The very next morning, when I woke up, I booked a ticket to New York... Ever since I was very young I was fascinated by the question: What if everyone wore green glasses and no one even noticed it? The question of social norms and transcending them, the question of identity and gender have always formed a central aspect of my film work. I have been fascinated by the question of how society defines such terms as "masculine / feminine", e.g., what it associates with "the woman" as opposed to "the man" and I used this theme in earlier projects and films – DIE BETTKÖNIGIN, LULUTOPIA or CADA DIA HISTORIA. VENUS BOYZ was a logical continuation.



How did you research for the film?

G.B.: I began my research in New York and it didn't take long for me to see that the Drag King shows were far more than simple entertainment. I made the acquaintance of the Drag Kings. They were women with great personality, like the Drag King pioneer Diane Torr, who examined social power structures and discussed them with much reflection in her workshops and discussions. Or Dréd Gerestant, a member of the younger generation, who is trying to live her life completely differently.

But you didn't only film in New York.

G.B.: No. In the course of my research activities, I came to London, where I met women who had just begun to take testosterone. This added a new dimension to the theme. In the moment in which the external transformations become inscribed in the bodies, the matter becomes more basic, more existential. My encounter with the new, so-called transgendered men in London deeply shook my understanding of "maleness" and "femaleness" and convinced me that I must absolutely make this film. And it should be a feature film.

Why a feature film?

G.B.: I felt that the film should be long enough to adequately deal with this very complex subject. The journey from the familiar – from Bridge, the performance artist – to the unfamiliar – to Del, who takes testosterone – is very important, and this journey requires an epic form of narration. Not only that. VENUS BOYZ touches a topic that is taboo. The caution and scepticism that accompanies it must be treated with care, we need to leave it plenty of room. The journey in the film portrays, in a certain sense, my own journey. I learned a lot of new things while I was making VENUS BOYZ. I laughed a lot, I was touched, I was confused – and I wanted to share this journey of discovery with my viewers.

In VENUS BOYZ you limit yourself to the current situation and only briefly deal with the historical dimensions. Why?

G.B.: For me, it was important to concentrate on what is happening now. The current Drag King movement goes way beyond what has been known thus far. Modern Drag Kings reflect their transition from women into men also through parody. They do not simply put on men's clothing so they can appear on stage and slip into a man's role, as Marlene Dietrich did. Nor do they do it in order to make femininity more erotic. Their behaviour is often targeted at deconstructing and innovating masculinity. That evidences a certain distance and, at the same time, a new self-awareness.

Then in your eyes, the appearance of Drag Kings in these modern times reflects other social phenomena that we are experiencing now?

G.B.: Very much so. The possibility for women in western cultures to break out of traditional roles was never as great as it is today. The relationship between the sexes is on the way to very basic change. We are experiencing a paradigm change. One of the main reasons for this is that reproduction is no longer a fundamental aspect of the sexuality that binds man and woman. This creates new space, allows a completely new evaluation of the roles of men and women and the various forms of sexuality. Another release mechanism can be found in the new economic possibilities that women have today and in their self-understanding in view of feminism...

In VENUS BOYZ, the protagonists' distinct self-confidence and strong reflectiveness comes across very strongly.

G.B.: The fact that Drag Kings, especially the pioneers, appear to be such reflective characters is certainly relevant, on the one hand, to the fact that they are – or were – women. In our society, women are generally forced to think about their behaviour and their appearance. On the other hand, when they play masculine roles, they are called into question by society. In order to conquer new space they must have an awareness of what they are doing. For Del and the London group, this problematic takes on another aspect. They are perceived as men.

You mentioned before that you met several Drag Kings in New York. Wasn't it rather difficult to get into this scene – which must be somewhat small and exclusive?

G.B.: Not really. But it would be an exaggeration to say that I was welcomed with open arms. There were certain reservations when it came to strangers who were interested in making a film about them. The New Yorker scene is, however, quite large and thus quite open. Because I had lived in New York for several years previously, I felt at home there and I had friends who were able to introduce me into that scene. What is important is the long time we spent in realizing the project. If I had shot the film in 1996, when I began my research, the intimacy and confidence that characterizes VENUS BOYZ would not have been present in the film. Our long cooperation gave the participants the assurance that I was not presenting them as some kind of shimmering exotic birds – as they were accustomed to in talk shows, but rather that I was seeking serious clarification. This was more important for the protagonists in London than it was for those in New York. The London scene is more critical – and has been much more strongly attacked. Del, for example, who was still Della when I met him, was very wary in the beginning. He wanted to know exactly what I had done in New York. It was only once he had seen the film material I had made in New York that he agreed to work with me. He was favourably impressed with the fact that I had framed the images in a special way, that I had sought a certain beauty. He finds that his world is often portrayed as ugly and distorted – and that bothers him.

How did you finance your film?

G.B.: Financing the film was very difficult. In Switzerland we were confronted with extreme rejection and scepticism, especially in the established commissions. Partially, this was because in 1996/97, when I began my work on VENUS BOYZ, there was not as much awareness about the subject matter as there is today. In the meantime, many books have been written about this topic and a film was made about the story of Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena (BOYS DON'T CRY) – A lot has changed in the past few years. But without active support from abroad, this film would never have been realized.

What were people so sceptical about?

G.B.: I'm convinced that there were a lot of unconscious fears involved. I have learned that this subject matter represents a great taboo for many people. Many reacted with the suggestion that I stick to what is familiar. They recommended that I film a single biography, from A to B, from woman to man. And that was exactly what I did NOT want to do with VENUS BOYZ. Others made it clear that I should in no case film Drag King performers or performances because they would be only attractive, but not profound enough. But it was exactly the attractiveness of the performances that appealed to me, because they contradict our prejudices and expectations, they challenge the associations we have about masculine women: that they are ugly, Amazon-like, have hair on their chests...

Isn't this because it arouses a lot of insecurity and fear?

G.B.: Of course – but where do these fears come from, fears that lead to the situation that little children are forced into specific roles? And what happens when the roles are not fulfilled? Let's talk about Storme Webber: Many people perceive her as a man. She, however, lives her life as a woman – and is happy about being a woman.

Which leads to the question of why society forces its members into such rigid roles?

G.B.: Let's ask the question differently: If we did not have any gender, would there still be sexual desire? Sexual desire establishes itself in the traditional understanding about the distinction between man and woman. The problems homosexuals have result from this socially constructed gender binarity. It denies them the "ability" to experience "natural" desire. Today we all know that sexual desire is possible in every direction: man-man, woman-woman, man-woman... The less sexuality has to do with reproduction, the freer it becomes and the more society changes. Instead of blood relatives, a freely-chosen "family of friends" forms. The importance of the classical family as such diminishes. The protagonists in my film live in very different "family forms". Diane Torr lives alone with her daughter, the New Men in London share a very close relationship...

VENUS BOYZ is a documentary, but contains experimental elements. What is the reason for this?

G.B.: Documentary film always involves staging. To make a documentary you construct your portrayal of reality. In VENUS BOYZ the moment of staging is strengthened. The Performances, that is, the interpretations of the protagonists on the stage, are interwoven with their conscious as well as their unconscious performances in every day life. Their permanent staging of themselves helps us perceive that there are only very gradual differences between gender performances in every day life and those on stage. These performances (diese Inszenierung) concern all of us. The dichotomy of the sexes is so obvious to us that we seldom think twice about it. We grow into these roles and unconsciously "perform" our gender every day. In its form, VENUS BOYZ attempts to be consistent with this constant staging of gender. I filmed the whole time with two cameras: the main camera was accompanied by a small camera which filmed the same scene from a different perspective. We also experimented with film speed and lighting. By doing so I wanted to achieve a release from "reality", I wanted an undefined visual zone. Both levels were mixed as we edited the film. For me, the blue images represent a third level. They indicate short moments extracted from a world of dreams, of imagination. They achieve a certain distance and refer to the act of constructing film reality. Film is, after all, "reality in drag".

Do you have the feeling that VENUS BOYZ will have some kind of cultural and/or socio-political effect?

G.B.: VENUS BOYZ is a film about Drag Kings and transgendered personalities, but above all, it is a film about people who take risks and refuse to succumb to their problems. Instead, they become creative, seek a new identity beyond the field of tension between man and woman. That affects all of us and, along these lines, I hope that my film will open doors and provide a glance into a world that was thus far relatively unknown. My wish would be that it makes a small contribution towards more tolerance in our encounter with other human beings. I would be happy if those who see the film begin to perceive ideals of beauty in a new way, and think more consciously about where the freedom of individuals begins and where it ends...

