

To Mimi Infurst, Thanks for...Something!: A Night at Philadelphia's Drag Wars

“Come on, Auschwitz, get up here!” Mimi Infurst shouts at the shaved headed, skinny white guy to the right of the stage. She orders the blond “teacher twink” in UGG slippers, the black man who’s “doing it for Rosa Parks”, a “hairy bear”, and the “Auschwitz motherfucker” to take off their clothes. They’re vying for a chance to win free drinks for the night and Andrew Christian briefs by letting Mimi touch and inspect their junk. Mimi chooses the “teacher twink”, and when he comes back in only his slippers, glasses, and robin’s egg blue briefs, he struts down the very fitting cock-and-balls shaped runway and stage. That’s when the show really begins.

Philadelphia isn’t known for its drag scene. Drag queen Mimi Infurst said it herself in an interview with infamous 90s Club Kid James St. James. Mimi Infurst, who goes by Braden Chapman and uses masculine pronouns when out of drag, moved to Philadelphia, hoping to “recharge my creative batteries” after a decade of off-Broadway shows and a short stint on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in New York. Her time on *Drag Race* ended abruptly after she picked up fellow contestant India Ferrah during a lip sync challenge, leading to RuPaul declaring the oft-quoted line, “Drag is *not* a contact sport.”

Instead of using her *Drag Race* fame to tour gay clubs around the world like many former contestants do, Mimi created the weekly drag competition Drag Wars, which is in its fifth cycle at Voyeur, in the heart of Philadelphia's gayborhood. Described as a cross between *Drag Race*, *The Voice*, and *Project Runway*, drag queens travel from as far as New York to compete each Thursday night in the twelve-week drag competition. Drag Wars has become so popular that over sixty drag queens have competed in total and *Drag Race* alums like Phi Phi O'Hara will come in to guest judge. Offers to televise Drag Wars and to produce it in other cities often come across Mimi's desk, but she turns them down to put on the best weekly drag show she can.

The doors to Voyeur open at 10pm. Hardly anyone is around but the bouncers and the queens prepping for the show. Club remixes of Madonna's "Like a Prayer", Cher's "Believe", Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Ke\$ha play from the stacks of speakers surrounding the stage, the bass so heavy that the liquor behind the bar sloshes against the sides of the bottles. The queens, prepping for the night's competition, sip on \$3 cocktails through straws trying not to mess up their precisely applied lipstick. They lean against the bar in the back; each queen's face is fully beat (to beat is to do one's makeup) but most are still in their civvies, straddling a gendered line between man and woman.

The start time of 11pm nears and the club begins filling. A man with a Courtney Act (a Top 3 contestant on season 6 of *Drag Race*) shirt navigates through the crowd drink in hand, sitting at the table between the stage and the judge's table. Two young men, one in a blue plaid flannel shirt and one in a black polo sit towards the back of the audience area, dancing along to Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off". The bartender talks to a redhead in heels at the bar, remembering that she already had two vodka cranberries that night and suggests she has another before the drink prices go up at midnight.

"I'll have a tequila sunrise, actually," the redhead says to the bartender. "Also, where's the bathroom?"

"It's the door under the blue light," he says back to her. "It's gender neutral, but don't be scared." She pays, leaves her drink next to her friend, and heads off to the bathroom, only to see a queen in full drag peeing at a urinal.

The theme song to *Drag Race* starts to play, lights dimming as the woozy crowd cheers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your host for this evening, Mimi Imfurst!" the DJ bellows into the microphone, as the infamous queen herself steps out onto the stage. Bathed in purple stage lights, Mimi parades around in a patched denim minidress with purple sparkling fringe lining the hem and the arms of her dress, mid-calf black sandal boots with the same fringe, and purple sparkling cuffs holding

up a cape spray painted with the words “YANKEE GO HOME WITH ME.” Her face is painted with shimmering robin’s egg blue eye shadow that wings all the way out to her temple, bright pink blush in a garish line across each cheek, and purple lips to match the fringe on her dress. The blonde wig she wears is so blown out in a feathered 70s style that it’s as if she’s standing a foot away from a high-powered fan. Mimi’s entrance and look are an homage to the classic drag musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, as she belts out the words to “Sugar Daddy” while collecting tips from the audience.

“*If you’ve got some sugar for me, Sugar Daddy, bring it home!*” Mimi picks up an man’s wallet, leafing through the bills until she finds a ten. She stuffs it in the top of her dress, shrugging and singing, until she moves on to rubbing the head of a short, white haired man.

Mimi finishes her song, talking to the audience while the rest of queens and judges get ready.

“I took a ten! I’m not giving it back.” Mimi quips, laughing at the man, “What were you drinking?”

“Pineapple vodka,” the man in a sweater responds, holding up his half empty cup.

“Pineapple? Seriously? *Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?*” Mimi sings sarcastically

“SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS,” the audience replies to Mimi’s dismay.

“Call and response? What the fuck is this? Church?” Mimi shouts back to the jeering crowd. She walks back onto stage; making sure her “Pit Crew” (an almost naked, muscled blond man in Andrew Christina briefs) gets the man another pineapple vodka.

Mimi proceeds to choose that weeks extra Pit Crew member, the aforementioned blond “twink teacher” in UGG slippers. He spends the rest of the show hanging around the balcony above the stage, watching and drinking free drinks in his underwear. It’s certainly not the most shocking thing happening in the club.

The mentors each have their turn on the runway before taking their seats at the judges’ table. Aeryanah Von Moi wears floor length leopard print gown, her long black hair lays motionless against her back. Bev dons a doll getup in the likeness of the recent horror movie *Annabelle*, which is almost as unsettling as the film until Bev puts on her glasses. Brooklyn Ford pounds down the runway with each step in her red and black striped body suit, shimmering under the clubs heavy lights. Mimi comes back on stage in her latest costume change, laughing at how her new sequined minidress matches the pattern of Brooklyn Ford’s bodysuit.

The competing queens finally get to show their themed runway outfits to the judges and the crowd. The week before, the queens chose a shape and a color that

they had to wear. Each queen works the runway in her outfit, trying to impress the crowd with her craftsmanship or charisma. Some fall short, like Alana Extreme's 'orange star', looking more like a neon orange tee shirt belted at the waist with a flat orange wig that's more Halloween store than runway couture. Others, while impressive, are reminiscent of middle school art projects. Champagne Showers' 'grey square' strapless gown is made of newspaper, black duct tape, and string holding the train on front in place as she walk, with huge white wig teased out at least a foot from her head, creates a visual impact the crowd immediately falls in love with.

But Chachi Divine's 'purple Venn Diagram' look commands the audience. She marches down the runway in a bodycon sparkly jumpsuit, with a giant purple headpiece in the shape of a Venn diagram, a wrist piece to match, and a purple ponytail flowing from her headpiece all the way to her chest. She is powerful and commanding, well, as much as a drag queen showered in purple glitter can, stealing all the attention from the other queens. When all the queens finish their turn on the runway, the audience votes via text message for the queen they want to win, but it's clear that Chachi has stolen the vote.

After the runway show, each queen performs a three and a half minute themed performance. This week's is movies starring drag queens. With homages to

Tootsie, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Kinky Boots*, *Female Trouble*, and more, the queens meld dialogue directly from the film and songs in or relating to it.

There are memorable performances, like Anastasia Versace's tribute to the late Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Anastasia changes wigs and outfit three times in the short performance as Williams does in the film, before smashing a pie in her face to take her out of the performance. It is tasteful in a way that some of the others performances aren't; she acknowledges the mastery behind Williams' performance and adapts it to herself, knowing every single word with perfect timing, and truly embodying Daniel Hillard's embodiment of Mrs. Doubtfire and making it her own. The mentors have nothing but praise.

Champagne Showers' adaptation of *Female Trouble* isn't nearly as tailored as Anastasia's *Mrs. Doubtfire*, but instead shocks the crowd when Champagne pulls a fish out of her dress mid-performance, biting its head off and spitting it into a front row audience members drink. The man whose drink the fish head is now lying in jeers, unphased by his now ruined cocktail, instead standing up and throwing a folded dollar bill onto the stage. After Champagne finishes, Mimi shouts her critique.

"Girl, I told you this before. You need to spend at least an hour a day walking in heels, because it still looks like you're walking around with shit between your cheeks." The audience laughs, acknowledging that between her

cheeks where Champagne's penis is tucked back for her performance, an emulation of a non-existent vagina.

But the most groundbreaking act of the night is Astala Vista's homage to the iconic documentary *Paris is Burning*. Taking cues from the looks presented at the balls, Astala is dressed as a banjee girl in cutoff booty shorts, a tight red shirt that glistens in the stage lights, and knee high boots with an asymmetrical wig that's long and blonde on the left side, and short and black on the other side. After voguing down the runway, Astala perfectly lip syncs to Venus Xtravaganza's monologue, and as words "I want a pussy!" blares from the speaker, Astala brings out a cat, a hairless breed. She carries the cat like a baby and prances around the stage, the crowd losing it's collective shit.

"Touch this skin, darling, touch this skin honey, touch all of this skin!" The immortal words of Venus are clear over the speakers as Astala pets the hairless feline. Everyone is up out of their seats, shouting and throwing dollar bills at the stage, even mentor Brooklyn Ford and Mimi Imfurst are up waving their hands in praise. If Chachi's purple Venn diagram look stole the runway portion of the show, Astala Vista's *Paris is Burning* is a clear victor in tonight's war.

During critiques, mentor Aeryanah Von Moi said to Alana Extreme, "It IS drag, you have to be larger than life." For these queens, Drag Wars is experimentation in gender, performance, and becoming larger than life week after

week. RuPaul might say that drag is not a contact sport; but to win Drag Wars, one queen will have to beat the others down to become the biggest and best. So what if there's a little blood on the stage? It'll sit nicely alongside Champagne's headless fish.