

Drag Queen Show in Montreal Gay Bar

I was accompanied by a Chinese gay friend for this excursion, and we entered Bar Le Cocktail with the intention of observing the drag queen show. This moody, red-lit gay bar is located to the east of Catherine Street, near the edge of the Gay Village. It is open daily from 3 p.m. to 3 a.m. and features drag queen performances on Thursday through Sunday. The bar has two stories and is not particularly huge, accommodating approximately 50 to 60 people. There is a compact stage in the centre that is outfitted with comprehensive sound, live broadcast equipment, and stage lighting.

I was a complete "outsider" in this setting. Even though I was accompanied by a gay friend, it felt as though neither of us fully fit in, as neither of us had been to a gay bar in Gay Village or seen a drag show before. On the other hand, my positionality as a Chinese heterosexual student who has resided in Montreal for less than two years implies that I lack adequate knowledge of the LGBTQ community in Montreal, which might have impacted the way I observed the settings and people in the bar. In addition, since I do not speak French, whereas the performers and the audience talked in French most of the time, I can only record the English conversation. I did not feel that our presence impacted the actions of other patrons or actors, apart from a performer asking us where we were from during intermission, to which we replied "China" and received the response "Welcome!" The audience was so engrossed in the show and their conversations that few appeared to notice us taking notes.

We stayed at this bar from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. on a Friday night. We focused our observations on four aspects: the main purpose of guests' visit; the demography of the audience enjoying the drag queen show; the waiters and actors; and the show.

First, we discovered that most customers arrived after dinner for the drag queen show. From 7:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m., more than two-thirds of the chairs were vacant. The number of customers began to increase at 9:30 p.m., and by 10:00 p.m., when the show began, the bar

was packed. Numerous customers exited in quick succession after the show ended at 12:00 a.m. Until 1:00 a.m., only a handful of people remained in the tavern. During the show, one of the actors asked in English, "First time watching a drag show?" and received a lot of positive responses. It is evident that the drag performance is their primary method of client attraction, as just a small fraction of the clientele come here solely for drinking.

Second, the actors would converse with the audience between performances, so I gained a great deal of insight about the audience. After the first performance, the actor asked almost everyone in turn, "D'où venez-vous?" (Where do you come from? Most of the audience came from different provinces or cities in Canada, such as Gatineau, Ottawa, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Except for my Chinese companion and I, there were only two tourists from Belgium. Then, he asked a question in his non-native English, "Do you speak French? Raise your hands if you only speak English. " Four people in the room raised their hands, including me. With a strong Quebec French accent, he replied in English, "Great, most people understand French; my English is terrible." Everybody laughed out loud.

Aside from nationality and language, I focused on observing the audience's age, gender, racial composition, and sexual orientation. The audience consisted almost entirely of young or middle-aged white people. In contrast to several clubs in the gay village that are all-male, men and women are 50/50 here. In terms of sexual orientation, another actor who is relatively fluent in English asked us during intermission "Raise your hands if you are gay", a portion of the audience, all of whom were men, raised their hands, and two of them sat in front of me. Interestingly, he did not continue by asking about lesbians, queers, or transgender, so I could only speculate based on the audience's body language and dress. In front of the stage, there were five middle-aged women with short hair costumed as cowgirls, wearing colorful, glossy cowboy hats and elegant costumes. They each had only one ear pierced and wore oversized earrings. Everyone else was dressed in a fairly simple manner. Hence, I suppose they could

be queers. As for the two gay men sitting in front of me, I observed that they tended to use excessive hand gestures while talking to others, and this was confirmed by my gay friend, saying that he typically would use excessive hand gestures, high-pitched voice and gayish appearance to discern gay. There were also a lot of straight people in the audience. First, there were several intimate couples seated around me. Second, when one of the actors approached a woman sitting near the stage, she explained that she and her friends had come here to celebrate her bachelor row, and she was about to marry her childhood sweetheart. In a summary, most of the audience consisted of young or middle-aged domestic whites who were fluent in French, and the LGBTQ community was not an overwhelming majority.

Thirdly, I observed that the majority of the bar's servers and performers belonged to the LGBTQ community, based on their makeup and attire. As we entered the bar, a drag queen was responsible for checking our tickets and stamping. He wore a black sheath dress with a long black wig. Only one waiter who walked around was in the charge of order and payment. My gay friend informed me that he was unquestionably gay since he had a high-pitched tone, wore excessive makeup and a large purple earring. My friend further told me that some gay men wore only one earring to signal their sexual orientation. As for the performers, the show featured a total of three different performers in rotation, all of whom had male voices. In terms of appearance, they would feminize themselves as much as possible: Although they altered their cosmetics and style for each performance, they all wore exaggeratedly stunning bright-colored gowns, retro-inspired wigs, and extremely high heels or boots with heels. Everyone padded their chests to make them appear full and voluptuous. Some of looks included corsets that could wear outside to accentuate their female curves. When one of the performers wore a tube dress, I noted that he had even shaved his armpits.

Forth, as for the drag queen show, the three performers took turns singing or dancing, followed by three to five minutes of audience interaction apiece. Since the performers

had male voices, the drag show is not a real singing performance. The essence of the show is that the actor is acting, yet his timing, gestures, and emotions are identical to those of a genuine singer. During the performance, they also emphasized the chests as a prominent feminine physical characteristic. For example, they would guide the audience to voluntarily tuck their tips into their chests or intentionally took out napkins from their chests.

To increase the sense of interaction with the audience, most of the songs are rhythmic, joyful, and popular, such as “New Rules”, “Lover” and so on. Due to my lack of cultural experience from growing up in the West, I was unfamiliar with some of the older songs, but many people sang along with each one. At last, the show ended with the whole audience singing together in a chorus “Gens du pays”, which is recognized as the unofficial "national" anthem of Quebec.

The key findings of our study included the gay bar in Gay Village is not solely for LGBTQ community gathering nowadays, it has been commercialized and has gradually become one of recreation choices for heterosexuals as well. The drag queen show is the primary marketing scheme for the bar to attract French-speaking customers, most of whom are young or middle-aged domestic whites. Most servers and drag show performers are self-identified as LGBTQ, highlighting their identity through attire and behavior. As for the drag show, actors intentionally feminize themselves through various means, including lip-synching, heavy makeup, clothing that accentuates female curves, and a performance that emphasizes the chests repeatedly. In addition, actors attempt to boost audience participation by performing popular songs.

The limitations of our study were significant. We could not gain any opportunities for deep insight into the LGBTQ community as outsiders in this context. Since the bar was very noisy, we were unable to hear the content of the audience's conversations with each other beyond interactive snippets between audience and actors. It would be beneficial to undertake

additional research on the drag queen routine, the evolution of drag shows in Montreal, and the similarities and differences between drag queen shows and drag king shows. In addition, we only investigated one gay bar in Gay Village, which does not adequately represent the operation of all gay bars in Gay Village. Further ethnographic research in gay bars in Gay Village should focus on the customer composition of various bars and make comparisons, which help shed light on Gay Village's current condition.