

Bradford Nordeen
“Review: *Rupaul’s Drag Race*”
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In the startlingly successful series, *Rupaul’s Drag Race*, a troupe of drag queens (which is to say, men who dress in femininely coded clothing) face off to become the next drag superstar. Picture *Top Model* meets *Project Runway*, racked with economic constraints that require one celeb to fill both Tim and Heidi's shoes. Who better than RuPaul, right? But problems are quite foreseeable from the get-go. On the debut episode, one figure stands out, not explicitly fitting the mold that the Logo network fashioned for the show. Victoria “Porkchop” Parker, the assumed name of Victor Bowling, is, as she puts it, a plus-sized girl with a great deal of experience under that hosiery band. She’s been shot at and harassed, just because she dared to drag way back when. “Y’all have it easy...all you young girls,” she informs her contestants. They cluck their tongues, “no way...really?” then roll their eyes in the candid interview portions, calling her “old,” “a visual joke,” and “a football field.”

This kind of candor and upfront bitchiness, the sort that one expects from a show about competitive drag queens, was notably slight in much of the first season, which mostly trafficked in suggestive asides or surrogate insults that, nonetheless, carried their message. Porkchop is the first to go on account of being too... pause... “regional.” Parker’s departure imparts the dismissal of her narrative, and you sense that such lives are fleeting in Logo's death race. As that first season progressed and the fat was pared away, each element that I celebrate within drag culture was vetoed, ridiculed and sent packing. I rooted for Ms. Tammie Brown, with her lampooning, kooky smile, resembling an off(er)-kilter Bettie Davis. She's the next to go. She scared people. And she refused to

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"lip sync for her life" to Michelle Williams. The exuberant Ongina is tossed out for siding with androgyny instead of the full illusion (one episode after she discloses her HIV+ status). The punky Nina Flores stuck around, but doesn't her title of Ms. Congeniality say it all? You began to get the sense that the show might be exorcising away any funky flesh for fantasy. Figures like the malodorously bitchy Akasha ("If I were a girl I'd be a stripper or a slut and pregnant with a whole bunch of children") and the flatly mediocre Rebecca Glasscock, who brings the drama into the final episode, reigned: performers who don't poke fun at the game or allow the seams of their performative fantasy to show. The winner, Bebe Zahara Benet, paraded a strange selflessness, displacing any woe onto a far more de rigeur cause, the suffering in her native country of Cameroon. Just like Miss America, she teared up and strived for world peace. All of the personal drama and trauma was near gone for a tidy, spokeswoman image.

Which I'm sure pleased Absolut Vodka, the numbingly name-dropped sponsor. If the series were to spawn a drinking game, the catalyst for each shot would not be snide remarks or catty blows, but the insistent mention of its advertisers. Such tie-ins infect even the challenges; one day contestants are treated to a cart of Absolut vodkas by a bemused (and ALWAYS game) Charo, only to discover this momentary cocktail break is not merely for grins, but a segue to craft a dress that incorporates the real fruit from each branded flavor of their sponsor's product. And that the judge will be the image consultant for Absolut! The bemused unease that I felt in that repeated brand placement seemed to invade the attitude that many of these contestant took to their trade. The first challenge,

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Drag on a Dime, inspired audible gasps when the contestants are barred from their own frocks for the challenge. "I've probably got over \$25,000 of costuming and rhinestones with me; I've got headpieces and headdresses and 16 pairs of shoes...things with Versace buckles on them," Shanelle, a Vegas showgirl, exclaims. The "ugly" hand-me-downs that they are presented with pose a challenge to the queens. (There's a suspicious tendency here to role-play the very real world concerns of drag culture: Drag on a Dime presents constructing a costume on the cheap as if it's something rare; whereas a post-*Drag Race* trip last night to the drag show at Barracuda confirms quite the contrary, as resident diva Peppermint regaled the audience with her experiences fighting the Con Edison bill collection team.) The first season dropped this kind of hokey fun that certain drag performers maintain, suggesting that the critical elements that camp once offered are (like poor Porkchop) a thing of the past. Instead, lavish couture gowns and MAC cosmetics maintain the interior illusion (the room in which they await the judges' decision is called, to my constant chagrin, the "interior illusions lounge!"). The quite-commercial endeavors of these queens became a startlingly distorted mirror to the prime time efforts of the reality shows from which their drag race was carbon copied. And this narrative seemed not different enough.

Through - or perhaps, because of - all of this, the first season was deliciously addictive and rather fun to regard. The show's racial and gendered implications are handled like Play Doh, tossed around without the slightest care. My mixture of horror, offense and delight when the first season was first streamed for me from Logo's website in my

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friend's apartment made me feel far more conflicted than any of the contestants, I'm sure. With season two, I'm on the fence. The dirt-cheap production is gone and the sets are a little more lavish. But with success comes the sheen of industry. The first challenge presents a marketing opportunity for some home decor line to flash its wares (literally, curtains), which means that most of the girls are making frocks from L. L. Bean style, ho-hum fabrics. It's all somehow Martha Stewart.

Yet the show has become more meanly exploitative in the blatant antagonism aimed at and around its contestants. The whole first episode is *Gone with the Wind*-themed and, indeed, false lashes and wigs flutter and take flight during a photo shoot that hoists the girls atop a cannon, bolstered between two hunky bare-chested BLACK MEN IN THE CIVIL WAR-THEMED PHOTO SHOOT (with no hint of irony or self-awareness with regards to such a charged image). The gale-force wind machine is unnecessarily high and the anxiety and pain that these contestants exhibit as they pose and falter does not go down well at all. I feel like the ladies are a bit more mediocre, too. My viewing companions last night did not agree, though; they said my reticence was based on the narrative I had created about the old contestants, on a nostalgia for those competitors. My friend Brian assures me that they are just as homogenous this time as they were the first time around the track, but I pass by a life-size ad for the show every day. Plastered over a vacant storefront, the contestants look even less varied in my habitual inspection. Sure, there is variety in ethnicities and, in (again) one instance, waistlines, but the type of drag that they seem to employ comes from a far more mimetic tendency than the range

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between Tammie Brown’s parodic cabaret and Shanelle’s Vegas “Eleganza”. Maybe I’ll become bizarrely enamored with these girls as I did those of season one. At present, I’m skeptical.

Season one seemed to ultimately crown itself in futility. In the show's final episode, the theme song is revealed to be RuPaul's new single and that the winner will walk away with a rap cameo on the video for "Covergirl (Put the Bass in your Walk)". Posing the final event as a casting call seemed to suggest that the entire affair was conducted to find talent for a 14 second interlude on a song only available on iTunes. When viewed as a commercial venture, that these 9 hours of viewing time correlated to these precious seconds, RuPaul's Drag Race becomes a rather beautifully epic illustration of the fame circuit and of the contemporary vicissitudes of capital. The (interior) illusion was shattered when, on Logo's online extras - the show knew better than to broadcast it - you finally watch the fruit of this labor. The final music video for RuPaul's single is cheap, even compared to the modest budget Logo supplied for the season. All of this effort, all of the pathos, all of your time seemed funneled into this pop clip that is so thoughtlessly tacky that it deflates the process of its making. The joke, it seemed, was on us. It remains to be seen if this new season has any loftier ambitions. Product placement thus far suggests little more. And if it’s any indication, the song to which the contestants are forced to dance as the closing credits roll is RuPaul’s new single, “Jealous of my Boogie.”