

# ***Not Another Drag Competition***

## From amateur to professional drag performance

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### INTRODUCTION: YOU BETTER WORK

Shangela Laquifa Wadley's (2012) song 'Werqin' Girl (Professional)' extols the virtues of being a professional drag performer, drawing links between the extent to which you work, financial success and how professional you are. Shangela, a contestant on the drag competition *RuPaul's Drag Race* (World of Wonder, 2009) (*RPDR*), has had a successful career since appearing on the show. In the song, 'professional' signifies everything from working hard, being paid well, buying designer fashion and, importantly, *not being an amateur*. Shangela's song is among many drag queens' songs that refer to working, the accumulation of capital and being professional. RuPaul's 'Supermodel (You Better Work)' (RuPaul, Harry, Tee, 1993) makes links between 'working' and success, where working involves the ability to perform on a fashion runway. While Shangela's song references discourses of sex work in its title if not in its lyrics, and RuPaul's song arguably forms the basis of her development of *RPDR*, these tracks highlight a link between working – in whatever form – and financial success that is inherently linked to being a professional.

This article starts here to consider the relationship between professional and amateur drag performance through a consideration of how *RPDR* has described what a professional drag performer is. Moving forwards, I explore the ways in which success or failure in drag are framed within neoliberal economics. I consider a queer look at these systems to resist (or *drag backwards on*) these forms and find pathways through binaries of amateur and professional drag. I explore a competition, *Not Another Drag Competition*, as an example of how drag competitions can both uphold and challenge economic and political systems that are often uninhabitable for queer people. Ultimately, I argue that in resisting binaries of professional and amateur, and of drag as either being complicit

in or entirely resistive of neoliberal economics and politics, it is possible to locate alternative possibilities for drag and queer survival.

The songs above produce questions about what a professional drag performer is and therefore what an amateur performer looks like. Is a professional drag performer only deemed professional if drag is their main source of income? If a performer works a full-time job outside of drag performance (sometimes known colloquially as a 'muggle job'), but is booked regularly to perform in drag, are they an amateur? What hierarchies of access, resources, success and failure are being upheld? If markers of being amateur or professional uphold boundaries of success and failure within capitalism that are injurious to queer people what other frameworks are available to assess, understand and critique drag?

In the above examples, I take Shangela and RuPaul's lyrics literally. It is important to note, however, that there is clearly an awareness of the constructedness of professionalism in relation to success and money, and a critique. Drag is often uniquely positioned to both benefit from and critique the systems in which it resides. As Judith Butler acknowledges in *Gender Trouble* (1990), drag can serve both to critique norms (specifically gender normativities) and to uphold them: 'Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony' (1990: 176–7). As well as gender binaries and performativity, this is true of drag performance in relation to ideas of capitalism, success and professionalism.

Professional drag performers such as Shangela and RuPaul are understood as professional because of their participation in *RPDR* and their economic success from touring internationally

and the amount of money received for each show. If these economic markers of success are what frame the line between professional and amateur drag, then it is important to pay attention to the socio-cultural conditions of success or failure. Success, and becoming professional, are not a meritocratic process but are bound up in wider systems of privilege and access that underscore contemporary experiences of neoliberal capitalism.

#### CAPITALISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND SUCCESS

Any exploration of the relationship between economic and social success and failure requires an understanding that economic decisions are always already socio-political and cultural ones. This is simple, but as Lisa Duggan asserts

The most successful ruse of neoliberal dominance in both global and domestic affairs is the definition of *economic* policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise. This expertise is then presented as separate from *politics* and *culture*, and not properly subject to specifically political accountability or cultural critique. Opposition to material inequality is maligned as ‘class warfare’, while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial. (2003: xiv, emphasis in original)

Any exploration of professional and amateur drag, particularly framed within economic factors, is bound up in this issue. Who gets to succeed in drag is not exempt from socio-political and cultural impositions. Firstly, if *RPDR* is a gateway to being a professional it is important to note that it excludes certain performance forms and identities. It is a competition for drag queens and not drag kings. It refuses to represent female, female-identified or assigned female at birth (AFAB) drag performers. Until recently it actively refused the role of trans and/or non-binary performers in drag performance, while profiting from those complex histories. These are a set of political and cultural decisions that mark who gets to become ‘professional’.

Secondly, it often represents a specific form of drag queening, with performers working outside of a particular aesthetic less likely to appear or succeed on the show. There have been performers who played with drag aesthetics and performance forms; however, those who succeed

predominantly fit into certain stereotypes of hyper-femininity and within a reasonably narrow set of performance forms. There are some key examples of performers who resist these ideas and use their platforms to present unconventional performance work and to explore politics. An example here is BenDeLaCreme, who now tours performances around complex material (such as the show *Inferno A-Go-Go*, which was a drag show based on Dante’s *Inferno*), and actively tells her audiences that she is using her platform to make work that she wants to make rather than conforming to any audiences’ expectations. BenDeLaCreme also uses her platform to discuss issues around trans and/or non-binary people in drag and in wider culture.

The final way the show marks who gets to succeed is that, as well as circulating normativities in form and identity, *RPDR* also recirculates assimilationist politics. This is, as Duggan states, an ‘emergent “multicultural”, neoliberal “equality” politics – a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of “equality” designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources’ (2003: xii). The show often articulates ideas of ‘love is love’, presenting an understanding of gay rights within neoliberal, assimilationist politics. This politics, including fighting for same-sex marriage or LGBTQ+ people to serve openly in the military in the USA, is about fitting into a system that is inhospitable and undesirable for many queer people. These assimilationist politics are the result of neoliberal policies in the UK and USA. As Elizabeth A. Povinelli establishes in *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan played a key role in the ‘demonization of racial and sexual minorities and alternative publics. If the conservative state was to replicate itself, it needed to deny the conditions of hospitality within which progressive life forms flourished’ (105). In a double bind, not only are the conditions of alternative lives and publics curtailed by the rise of neoliberal policies that frame economic decisions as devoid of socio-political and cultural implications, but eventually LGBTQ+ advocates and popular cultures serve to prop up these injurious systems. It is easy to argue that *RPDR* and other mainstream queer

popular cultures are always already bound up with neoliberal and assimilationist politics and devoid of resistance. Radical forms of performance such as drag can easily become synonymous with a depoliticized, assimilationist politics of ‘love’ that fails to account for or critique continued material inequalities for queer people. However, it is not that simple, and mainstream forms such as *RPDR*, and the performers who succeed on the show, might have a committed *and* ambivalent relationship with ideas of neoliberalism and assimilationist politics.

Within these frameworks, who or what is professional and amateur is bound up in a broader question of who or what is deemed to be professional or amateur within neoliberal capitalism. I do not argue that there is no outside to these debates, but do underscore that the very languages available are actively exclusionary to those performers they attempt to describe. If drag performance has the potential to resist contemporary socio-political conditions, then in order to recognize this it is important to find ways to talk about and evaluate drag that do not uphold these problematic conditions or binaries. Furthermore, as a queer theorist it is vital to resist binaries whenever they emerge. Taking time to unpick the binary between professional and amateur drag lays bare normative assumptions (both from within drag performance communities and beyond) that frame these debates only within neoliberal discourses. It also locates pathways beyond the confines of this binary. What alternatives are available beyond an understanding of economically successful professional drag, and poor and underfunded amateur drag? How might resisting these binaries exert a *drag* on wider understandings of contemporary notions of success and failure for non-normative, popular performance forms such as drag?

I draw from the work of Jack Halberstam (2011) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010). In an exploration of queer failure Halberstam questions, ‘What is the alternative ... to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?’ (2011: 1). This question underscores my thinking around the relationship between drag and capitalism. While not resigning ideas of professional drag to an a-political

and assimilationist form, I recognize how understandings of economic success as being professional fail to account for the material inequalities that many queer people face. An example of resisting would be the work of Sasha Velour, who toured a show called *Nightgowns* around the world after winning her season of *RPDR*. In each location she would work with local performers who were able to present their work to large crowds. This is an example of using the privileges of mainstream success (and being a professional) in order to champion the work of performers who are unlikely to be accepted within the often-rigid requirements of *RPDR*, thus disrupting any binary of amateur and professional as all get to share the same stage (and dressing rooms).

I want to resist binaries of amateur and professional drag, and drag as conforming to or resisting injurious normativities. Like Halberstam, I want to search ‘for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject’ (Halberstam 2011: 2). This is difficult, when the ways in which queer people are subjectivized within, subjected to or become subjects through neoliberal capitalism mean that locating an outside or alternative to the tried and tested pathways often appears to be uncritical, undertheorized or glib. I propose that considering drag metaphorically may offer a potential framework to outline an outside to these problematic binaries.

I turn to Freeman’s understanding of ‘temporal drag’, which she asserts as the pull of lesbian feminism on queer theories where ‘even to entertain lesbian feminist ideas seems to somehow inexorably hearken back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of colour, the working class, and the transgendered’ (Freeman 2010: 62). Freeman uses this to establish how feminism and its histories, and alternative modes of living from the past, offer insights and potential for resistive ways of living in the present and future. The drag backwards that lesbian feminist ideas exert on queer fluidity is not a reinscription of essentialized identity forms that erase trans and/or non-binary people. Instead, it articulates how

material realities of alternative lives in the past might offer other ways of thinking through and beyond neoliberal political forms in the present. Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier assert that temporal drag ‘offers new ways to combat the paralysing binary between a gay identity politics and queer fluidity’ (2016: 152). I take up this idea to propose that it is important to consider what the *drag* of drag performance could exert on contemporary assimilationist discourses and to explore how forms of drag performance beyond *RPDR* might *drag* on the perpetual economic explosion of drag performance to find opportunities for alternative articulations beyond professional and amateur drag. Furthermore, speaking of amateur and professional drag at the same time, or resisting the notion of amateur or professional altogether, names a political imperative to value queer performance forms beyond the confines of economic, cultural and political discourses that are often uninhabitable for queer people.

It is also important, when considering the *drag* of drag performance as a metaphoric and intellectual strategy, to return to drag as ‘a queer performance form, rather than as an activity that exemplifies theorising around gender performativity’ (Farrier 2016: 192). Drag has been employed by theorists from Butler onwards to consider queer notions of identity, but returning to drag as a form of popular queer performance offers another way of resisting understandings of drag (and professional and amateur drag) as always already complicit within problematic neoliberal forms of politics and economics, or indeed as entirely resistive of them. I turn to a particular local drag competition to consider what alternatives to a binary of professional and amateur drag, and complicity or resistance to norms, might emerge when we consider other forms of drag beyond *RPDR*.

#### NOT ANOTHER DRAG COMPETITION

A number of drag competitions in the UK emerged as a resistance or homage to *RPDR*, as well as competitions that pre-date it. I focus on one particular competition in London that showcases some key strategies for resisting understandings of professional and amateur drag,

while not fully offering an escape from value understood through capital accumulation or a panacea to harmful notions of success.

*Not Another Drag Competition (NADC)* took place at Her Upstairs in Camden, London, a now closed queer bar and performance venue, between 2016 and 2018. I was one of the co-owners of Her Upstairs. Meth, the host and organizer of the competition and another co-owner of the venue, is also my husband, and I would often judge the semi-final of the competition. I disclose this here as important since I am implicated in these ideas as someone who is also involved in drag performance professionally and personally as a producer and community member, and because it offers me some unique insights into how the competition was run. This also indicates my personal and political investment in these performance scenes and communities; I cannot write about drag without wanting drag to survive and to thrive, and my analyses and conclusions are not separate from the socio-political and ethical imperatives that underscore my thinking around drag.

*NADC* was a weekly competition in which drag performers took part in a series of challenges, with one performer being eliminated each week until a winner was crowned. There were five ‘seasons’ of the competition, and one season of *All Stars* in which successful competitors from previous seasons came back to compete in a heightened version. Each week there was a different challenge themed around a performance form that is related to drag performance including lip-syncing, live singing, costume and look, comedy, celebrity impersonation, performing a ‘set’ and more. Before each challenge, performed on a Monday night, all of the participants attended a masterclass with an industry professional well-known for working within the performance form and received a one-to-one mentoring session with Meth, an established drag performer and the organizer and host of the competition. During the competition, each performer was judged live by a panel of three judges: a regular Head Judge; the industry professional who had led the workshop; and another judge who was usually an established performer, promoter or producer from the drag and cabaret scene. The judges would privately

score each performance out of ten. The audience were able to vote for their favourite after all of the performances had happened, with each audience member receiving one vote on entry and another vote for every £5 they spent at the bar. Paying for votes is, indeed, a contentious part of this competition, although one that mirrors many other local drag competitions. It is the clearest way in which *NADC* conformed to problematic neoliberal discourses, and yet was also one of the ways in which Her Upstairs as a venue was able to accumulate enough capital to continue running, since the competition was one of the most successful events. This speaks to the complex ways in which drag can be both resistive of normativities, and uphold them; and the venues in which drag happens are not separate from these complexities. Following Halberstam, I also consider how these venues can be complicit within problematic systems such as neoliberalism, and simultaneously offer modes of survival within them. This is not a simple process, however, and although my impulse is to resist 'cynical resignation' (Halberstam 2011: 1) I am sensitive to the ways in which forms of oppression are as easily taken up by queer performers as they are resisted. In this case, however, the charge for additional votes contributed to the temporary survival of a queer venue and the failsafe of judges' scores would often account for anyone who was successful in the competition but had less affluent friends to purchase more votes for them. Similarly to how drag might both reinscribe and resist normativities, this caveat was not a panacea. It instead speaks again to the complex ways in which marginalized subjects and communities might resist, survive and thrive within wider problematic systems, and how they might become complicit.

In the competition, audience votes and judges' scores were combined to work out the winners ('the tops', as Meth called them) and those with the lowest scores (or 'the bottoms', as Meth referred to them, to cheers from the crowd), with those with the two lowest scores performing a lip-sync battle against one another. The judges decided who stayed based on that final lip-sync performance. Each season grew bigger, with later seasons using heats prior to the competition starting in order to decide which final ten would

make the competition proper. With each season more established performers started to apply to be involved. In the wake of the competition a large number of performers have gone on to great success, as well as to produce their own versions of the competition.

This competition is redolent of *RPDR* while purposefully playing with it. It takes the format of *RPDR* with weekly challenges and a lip-sync competition to decide who goes home, but also is deliberately resistant of it in terms of the forms and identities of drag that participate in it. Each season has featured performers from vastly different styles with influences from drag, cabaret and burlesque practice, as well as live and performance art. There have been both kings and queens in the competition, as well as those who may not neatly fall into either category. Beyond this, performers who identify across a spectrum of gender positionalities have also participated. The winners have included traditional drag queens as well as kings and those who might be from a performance or live art background, and the competition has been won by cis-identifying male and female performers as well as trans and/or non-binary performers. Examples include: Herr, a drag queen known for her often-whimsical and silly performance work; Tracy La Bouche, who is a singer and comedian who also went on to win another, more mainstream national drag competition *Drag Idol* after winning *NADC*; Tayce, a Welsh performer of colour who is a successful dancer, high-energy lip-syncer and an accomplished comic performer; and Mark Anthony, a drag king who makes work parodying ideas of masculinity and highlighting conversations about trans and non-/binary identities in drag and wider culture. These are four examples from a large range of performers, but are notable for the different positions of identity and performance form that they occupy.

This diversity in form and identity is the strongest example of how a drag competition such as *NADC* can work to resist or *drag against* mainstream forms of drag and understandings of professional drag that do not take into account material inequalities for diverse or marginalized drag performers. It also offers pathways through and into success that do not rely on a performer fitting into particular identity-based or formal

categories. It instead recognizes that although there are important differences in how drag kings, queens and those in between might function, it is possible to locate links and affinities between these drag styles as queer performance forms. I propose that a competition such as *NADC* provides a way of existing within a problematic system, but also platforms and stages for those performers who may be erased or ignored by more mainstream ideas of drag, and therefore what a professional drag artist looks like. For example, Mark Anthony referred to above has gone on to work with the Head Judge of his season, Lilly Snatchdragon. This demonstrates the ways in which the competition can facilitate exchanges across and between amateur and professional forms and those at different stages of their careers, allowing for artistic development and opportunities to learn across performance fields and forms. Lilly's work as a burlesque artist has clearly informed Mark's development after the competition and has allowed him to find different ways of working that allow him to perform in various forms and at other shows beyond the drag scene.

It is true that returning to the notion of a competition reifies the idea of competition within capitalism, and I am not so naive as to suggest that just because queer people are running the competition it automatically transgresses these boundaries. However, I argue that the inclusion of identities and forms not seen in mainstream drag competitions, and the role of mentorship and masterclasses, provide simple yet effective strategies of resistance. The competition is still a competition and people are disappointed to be sent home or not win. However, it recognizes the limits of what a competition can do and considers possibilities for learning, mentorship and exchange between drag performers as integral to the development of drag. This is something that happens rarely in a performance form that is often solo and informally trained, with possibilities for intergenerational exchange, learning and collaboration often being minimal or non-existent. *NADC* does fold back into problematic notions of competition, but it also resists and drags backwards on ideas of individualism integral to neoliberal ideologies. By staging collectivity, support and learning as a possibility, *NADC* locates alternatives to

professionalism and individualism and finds potential for collectivity and community that resists any binary of success and failure or amateur and professional.

Of note after the competition is the number of performers who have gone on to work together in various forms and collectives. This is potentially facilitated by the examples of the host Meth and the Head Judge of later seasons, Lilly Snatchdragon, both of whom were well-known for working as part of larger collectives. This sense of collectivity and community clearly rubbed off on performers, many of whom still work together in various capacities, and a number of whom continue to work with Meth at a regular show in London in the wake of the closure of Her Upstairs. This possibility of working together across forms of performance and across generational lines or lines delineating amateur and professional offers critiques and resistances to neoliberal modes of individualism, encouraging a breaking down of those binaries. This is not simple, and it is important to note that it does not always work, but it is also important to understand how the competition stages the possibility of resistance by foregrounding or performing ideas of togetherness, collectivity and community on and off stage. To recall Sara Ahmed, who argues that 'Possibilities have to be recognized as possibilities to become possible' (2010: 218), *NADC* makes resistance possible, by considering it as possible.

#### CONCLUSION: AMATEUR POSSIBILITIES

Locating an outside of or alternative to contemporary neoliberal and capitalist discourses is not only difficult because *it is* difficult, but also because these socio-political and economic discourses are framed as natural and inevitable (Duggan 2003). With drag in particular, Butler made it clear that drag as a form is often easily co-opted into the very systems it might be trying to subvert. This is as true for neoliberal capitalism now as it was for gender binaries and essentialism in Butler's writing. However, in looking at a drag competition that both challenges and adheres to contemporary neoliberal forms I have attempted to articulate the possibility of resistance to these forms and therefore a resistance to a binary of professional or amateur drag.

Articulating something as possible is not a simple act, particularly for those of us whose lives are often deemed impossible or unliveable as can be seen in many contemporary debates in the UK and the USA surrounding queer, trans and/non-binary lives. In articulating drag performance as offering the possibility to resist neoliberal politics and capitalist forms that frame alternatives and even queer lives as impossible, I name a political act of recognizing the importance of alternatives as liveable sites for queer people. In attempting to articulate an outside of professional/amateur drag, I understand how even the most normative conceptions of professional drag, such as RuPaul's and Shangela's explored above, are aware of how adhering to these ideas of professionalism is often temporary, purposeful and always already both a reification and a subversion. In thinking through how drag can *drag* backwards on tides of progress that ignore material inequalities for queer people and find alternative pathways through neoliberal forms, I argue that drag performers are conforming to expectations of professionalism and parodying them. Furthermore, in starting to unpick, resist and parodically re-perform the binary of professional and amateur drag, drag performers have the possibility to expose binaries that are always already injurious for queer people. In an insistence on the idea of both/and rather than either/or, I propose an outside of understandings of amateur and professional drag that all drag performers might complexly occupy, purposefully or not. Furthermore, occupying amateur spaces and positions deliberately, and finding value in them, is a further area for critical engagement and enquiry. However, in occupying both of these positions complexly, and potentially occupying unarticulated and impossible positions beyond, drag performers may move to alternative modes and models of being and doing in the world that speak beyond drag and start to *drag backwards* on broader neoliberal capitalist forms. You better work, RuPaul reminds us, but it is what you are working *towards* (or away from) that is important.

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