



TEXT nic frankham

Five years in the making, SCREAM QUEEN showcases the diversity of Sydney's drag scene.

**ON STAGE, SYDNEY'S** drag queens are a formidable cocktail of talent, bravado and bad jokes. Off stage, they're a quiet, retiring breed. Seriously. Getting a drag queen to talk about her work is rare. Getting nearly every drag queen who has ever graced the stages of Sydney's bars and parties to talk is remarkable. And the number of drag queens Sydney has produced over the last 30 years is extraordinary, if not frightening.

*Scream Queen*, a new documentary by Gary Stalker, Victoria Taylor and Stefan Bear, has almost all of them. A five-year film and animation project, *Scream Queen* casts a long-lashed eye over the diversity of drag on offer in Sydney, showcasing a brilliant array of personalities in the process. Every crevice of the film contains rare footage and even rarer insight into the motivation of some notorious drag idols.

Cindy Pastel, Miss 3D, Bernina Bod, Ayesha, Simone Troy, Penny Clifford, Maude Boate and Lady Bump plus a cast of hundreds of frocked-up Sydneysiders strut, stagger and waddle through the film, making drag love to the cameras. There's loud, booze-soaked nights at the Albury helmed by Pastel; show-stopping drag moments at Mardi Gras; rare footage of the late Brenton Heath-Kerr's unsettling gingham, latex and plastic costumes; sexy lesbian drag at the

Inquisition leather ball; and CNN-style footage of the glamorous competitive DIVA awards, the Oscars of drag.

Bernina Bod sashays through the streets in a dream sequence to the theme song of the film falling excitedly from her glittering lips. "Come on get dressed/it's a glamour fest!" A visual encyclopaedia of drag, *Scream Queen* does nothing to alter Sydney's reputation as being a culture of show-offs and captures the city at its flashy, trashy best.

It's worth mentioning that many of the seminal performers no longer exist. They either grew tired of the demanding personae their drag created or they were stolen by Aids. But drag queens are survivors. Ayesha, who was doing late-night spots at Les Girls in 1963, is still as gorgeous as ever ... 35 years later. But make no mistake. Drag is no picnic. It's damn hard work.

So why would you do it, except maybe to be chic every night of the week and get free drinks? It seems that for some of the enduring talent, the urge sets in early. As a young child, Pastel's parents wanted him to be a jockey. Instead, Pastel became the most famous drag queen in the southern hemisphere. At an even earlier age, Miss 3D refused to go to a friend's birthday party unless he could wear a fairy dress. Two decades later, she was hosting Sydney's biggest mid-week club event, Glamour World.

For others, the desire for drag comes later. As a high school student, Lady Bump got over the suburbs, instead preferring the company of drag queens and the 'fabulously interesting' things on offer in Darlinghurst and Kings Cross. Well, wouldn't you?

The sheer determination to please the crowd at whatever cost has inspired hundreds to follow their lead. The drag art form has had palpable ramifications on performance in the broader gay and lesbian community. Since capturing the collective imagination from the '70s onwards, drag performers have created an expectation of onstage entertainment that is increasingly ambitious. Thing big. Now think bigger. Contemporary party productions feature dykes, muscle men, leather men, leather dykes, as well as drag.

*Scream Queen's* exhausting montage of party production madness demonstrates not only the extent the gay and lesbian community is prepared to go for a good show (much further than the crumpled offerings of any casino or RSL) but the passion for performing that drives the shows to greater heights. Drag queens have played a pivotal role in endowing these productions with the centrality they enjoy today. Think about that next time you have the good fortune to see a fantastically tragic number at the local bar, before you croak 'get off!' into your beer. Then tell her to get off anyway.

*Scream Queen is coming soon to a cinema near you.*