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JOUR 427

Final Narrative

3 May 2019

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In his dimly lit bathroom at the corner of his small apartment, Parker Willsey tries his best to glue on an eyelash extension. “This is the hardest part,” he says as he applies more glue. Elle makeup brushes and MAC products surround the sink. The mirror is decorated with mermaid stickers and an index card taped to the top corner that reads “Today’s going to be a great day because every day is a great day.”

Whitney Houston plays from his phone as he puts on the finishing touches. “Alright, four hours later and I’m finally finished,” he says. With his face beat for the gods, Willsey transforms from a normal college senior to Christina Stardust, a musically-inclined superstar drag queen.

Willsey began performing as Christina just over a year ago. His first show was at Ball State’s Spectrum drag show last spring where he danced and lip synced to Lady Gaga’s Lovegame. “It was terrifying at first, but once I stepped out on stage, I really felt like I became another person.” While it was his first time performing, he had been practicing makeup and a routine beforehand though because he didn’t want his first time in drag to look like it was his first time in drag.

But Willsey does more than just mouth words and dance on stage. His specialties include singing live and celebrity impersonations. His favorite person to impersonate: Mariah Carey. “She’s my everything. I identify most with her than anyone,” Willsey said. With posters of her covering his green-walled bedroom, it is easy to tell.

While Willsey has found his niche, he says a lot of drag is trial and error until you find something you're good at. And many queens, now more than ever, seem to be finding their own forte.

According to a study done by Michael Moncrieff and Pierre Liendard, both anthropologists at the University of Nevada, say that modern society is living in the "drag queen phenomenon." The researchers claim that drag queens have been able to climb the ladder of social and political influence among the gay community. With popular, yet controversial television shows like "RuPaul's Drag Race," that has won 9 Emmy Awards, it is easy to see this in our entertainment.

"RuPaul has done a lot for the drag community and I have to be grateful for that. But it's becoming clear that some of his views are outdated and harmful," explains Willsey. This is in reference to RuPaul's contentious comments made in 2018 about never letting a transgender man or woman compete on his show. Jake Allen, Willsey's drag sister who performs as Venus, refuses to watch the show altogether, saying he does not want to support RuPaul in any capacity until he actively becomes more inclusive. While there is a division about watching drag shows on television, many would say that the only true way to watch drag is to see it in person.

Sara Jarvis, a Ball State junior has been attending local drag shows since she got to college. "It's a fun experience. I always walk away feeling like I'm a part of a big community." Growing up in a small conservative town, Jarvis had never experienced anything like it. Performers like Willsey and Allen have opened her up to being more accepting of the people in her community, Jarvis explains.

Allen leads the charge of Be Here Now's drag scene. The venue is considered a home. While Allen has faced hard times in response to their drag career, they say the fans always make it worth it. Willsey echoes Allen's emphasis on the importance of local drag. "Don't just support the people you see on television. Support the queens around you," he says.

Support has not always come smoothly for Willsey since he has started performing as Christina. Willsey was raised in Fishers and grew up in a relatively normal Midwestern household. At age 8, complications arose, and his mother left for a few years. The time allowed Willsey to cultivate a close relationship with his father. "We really became like best friends, no matter how cliché it sounds."

When he came out as gay in high school, he says his family wasn't surprised. His limp wrists and an obsession for Britney Spears confirmed their preconceived notions. But when Willsey revealed his interest in makeup and drag, they were not so accepting. "It was kind of like a second coming out, like the first one wasn't hard enough," he said. Today, Willsey's close relatives and parents refuse to attend his drag shows and recognize it as one of his aspirations. But this doesn't stop Willsey from doing what he loves. As he brushes out his brown wig, he says that he's found his chosen family, one of drag mothers, drag sisters and his fans. While doing drag has its ups and downs though, Willsey's main focus is on graduating.

Majoring in journalism graphics and telecommunications, Willsey finds much of his drag creativity comes from his studies. While the mediums are very different, he believes all art stems from other art. Wrapping up his senior year, the future is not set in stone. As he sits on his sequin-covered carpet, Willsey talks about his dreams of designing for magazine like Vogue and Vanity Fair. He goes on to talk about how his home Hoosier state can seem limiting and suffocating sometimes. "Especially as a gay kid, I remember being terrified that I would have to

grow up and be a farmer or work in a factory.” While he’s not sure exactly what he wants to do once he finishes school in May, he has realized that Indiana isn’t as bad as he thought and will be living in Indianapolis.

Willsey has big dreams for Christina Stardust too. He hopes to one day perform his own cabaret show and record music as Christina. “I’d love to make performing as Christina a full-time gig, but for drag queens, that rarely happens,” Willsey says. Isaac Oliver, writer for New York Times, discusses the challenges many drag queens face in a 2018 article, such as discrimination and the extensive financial costs drag takes. Famous drag queens such as Eureka O’ Hara and Pearl told Oliver how hard it was to go from having nothing to being wealthy. “I live in constant fear Drag Race will end... know what it feels like to struggle every single day to do this,” says O’ Hara. Willsey understands this struggle as well. With all of his outfits purchased from Goodwill or other thrift shops, he takes them home and redesigns them with sewing and patching. Balling on a budget, he calls it. This is why the importance of going to local drag shows and tipping queens is vital for many.

The future of drag depends on people like Parker Willsey and he agrees. He desires for more people to see drag as an art form and a form of entertainment rather than something sexual or controversial. He also wants more diversity to be seen in the realm of drag. As for Christina Stardust, she is not going anywhere he says. “She is a part of me now. She’s my outlet, my escapism.”

SOURCES

- 1.) Parker Willsey, face-to-face, Muncie, 317-699-5484
- 2.) Jake Allen, face-to-face, Muncie, 765-282-4737
- 3.) Sara Jarvis, face-to-face, Muncie, 756-461-0604
- 4.) Isaac Oliver, news article, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/arts/drag-queens-rupaul-drag-race.html>
- 5.) Michael Moncrieff and Pierre Liendard, academic study, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1474704917707591>