

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO RuPaul

*H*is mother predicted he'd be a star when he was born forty-four years ago, and when is Mama ever wrong? True enough, little RuPaul Andre Charles grew to become a worldwide legend in his own time - a door-crashing history-maker - by discovering the gorgeous sashaying chanté-ing glamazon within.

Self-declared 'Supermodel of the World', recording artist, writer, actor, television talk show host and, currently, daily New York City morning radio personality, barrier-busting drag queen **RuPaul** has done it all.

But like many a star, her ride there was perilous from the get-go, beginning with the ugly and bitter divorce of her parents at an early age that left her welfare-dependant mother retreating for two years into a haze of Lithium and Valium. That in turn forced RuPaul and her older sisters to become mini-adults, guarding such secrets from their father, social services, any threat to the family unit such as it was.



At age 8, she needed a hernia operation. At age 9 she was abandoned by her two sisters, who ran away. Early in high school she was kicked out for never attending a class. She returned only to take daily two-hour drama lessons with the Lee Strasburg-educated teacher she adored.

Later she worked for four years helping sell used luxury cars, 'making little money and smoking a lot of pot'. But that wasn't the dead-end experience it could have been. However unlikely, it was a time that opened her eyes to life-changing ideas: the art of going after what you want, and the realization she had every right to fulfill a dream as anyone else did.

For RuPaul that dream was a life in show business. From her own initiatives over the next decade, a patch-work career very slowly began to fall into place. First RuPaul grabbed girlfriends, made costumes and appeared on a local cable show, where they performed a dance number which proved a big hit. Later, to promo herself (and for cigarette money), she sold photocopied and stapled autobiographies. She shot cheap movies on her brother-in-law's camera.

While she was – however haphazardly - heading down the right road to her obvious destiny, performing and making friends and connections in the business, her trail still remained fraught with tribulations including being homeless for well over a year, sleeping at friend's apartments, on piers, or in parks. Booze, pills, acid, coke, pot, poppers, shrooms, and special k all became part of her lifestyle.

RuPaul eventually cleaned up her act; just in time to receive a phone call from Tommy Boy Records. They offered her what became her big break: a recording deal, and on her birthday in 1992, ten years after first appearing on that cable show, a single called 'Supermodel' was released.

The song was a hit and 'You'd better *work!*' endures today as a peacock call for us all to strut our fine stuff. From that point RuPaul had a genuine show biz career to call her own. Elton John recorded a duet with her. Then, she made history, becoming the first face of M.A.C. cosmetics, launching M.A.C. stores in ten countries and raising over \$22 million for the M.A.C. AIDS fund. *The RuPaul Show* premiered soon after on VH1, which the drag queen calls the most 'creatively satisfying, fun-filled work experience' she's ever had. She has also written her life story, *Letting It All Hang Out*, bound and hardcover this time. A&E and Bravo! have produced bios (only one of which she has seen and claims it sent her into a month-long depression).



But how the times can change. Madame Tussaud's has even created a wax likeness of her.

Now RuPaul is playing out what she calls Act Three of her life, where she says she is finally feeling serene, with peace of mind and the ability to not only cut a break for herself, but also for the world around her. Currently touring the U.S. and Canada in support of her first CD in years: *Red Hot*, RuPaul touched down in Toronto for a half-hour set at Lust Nightclub towards the end of last month.

Shortly before appearing before the wildly enthusiastic fans packing Lust for a legend, RuPaul sat down with me for an exclusive interview. If she had pre-show jitters they weren't apparent. Sitting with her in her parked dressing room on wheels outside a building packed with partiers impatient to see her, the relaxed queen of queens told me with infectious feel-good energy and an at-the-ready laugh about the best advice she's ever been given, her current mission, what drag queens today are doing right and what they are doing wrong.



Are you excited about your performance shortly?



I have a performance to do? (*Laughs.*) Yeah, I'm very excited. I love Toronto . We were just talking about all the used CD stores I got to go to in my little break after the (*raises an eyebrow*) ... extended ... sound check.



How is the *Red Hot* tour going?



Great, I did Halifax last night; we're in Boston tomorrow night. You know, I go out and do this on weekends then I work – honestly – a five-to-nine job every day. I do morning radio in New York City. So from five o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock in the morning I'm on the air. Which means I get up at three, run a bath, make some oatmeal, watch *Three's Company*, take my bath, go to work.



How do you balance all this?



You know what? It's clean living. I eat right, I exercise and I sleep. And I drink lots of water and I don't smoke cigarettes.




*My boyfriend, a make up artist along for the interview to see RuPaul's paint up close, interjects) Your make up is flawless.*




I'm not wearing any! (*Laughs.*) I have a little mascara on and some lip gloss – that's *it!* That's *all* I have on! (*Cracks herself up.*)




What's the RuPaul philosophy in 2004?



It's learn to love yourself, same philosophy as always. This life is a gift. And you gotta enjoy it. You should enjoy it. It makes it better. But you know what? The truth is you have choices. You can either choose joy or choose pain. Both choices are correct; one is, I think, more enjoyable.




What is your *modus operandi* right now?




It is to do what's in front of me: unzip your flies' fellas.




That'd make you very late for your gig.




(*Laughing.*) No, my mission is to be in the moment. If I look at the whole mountain of things I have to do in front of me? (*Bursts into laughter.*) I couldn't do it. And I've learned the hard way to keep that my *modus operandi*.




Your high school drama teacher told you not to take life seriously and you've said before that's the best advice you ever got. Is it still?




Absolutely. Best advice ever. I would add to that too: laugh a lot. Laugh a lot because a lot of life is really absurd and doesn't make any sense.




'Red Hot' was what you labeled yourself in the 1983 promo posters you put up all over Atlanta. Now nearly twenty years later it's the name of your latest CD. What's the connection?




I took about four years off from show business and in coming back I thought, 'you know, it's full circle, I'll start at the beginning again'. 'RuPaul is red hot' was the first big slogan for me that really took off in Atlanta, Georgia. And I thought it would just be funny to use it again. Life is cyclical that way and I do think it's important to notice milestones and recognize them.




Following the time you've taken off, you now say you're ready again to share your creativity with the world. Why is sharing it important to you in the first place?



At this point in America right now it's like we're living in the 1950's, and it's important for young people to see that there are other ways to skin a cat, to pluck a chicken. And I'm an example of that. I'm a living example of doing my own thing and creating a life for myself. And I think it's important for young people to see that. I know I had it when I was young: Cher, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Diana Ross ... All of those people were one-of-a-kind creative forces in my life and it inspired me to look outside the box and to think outside the box. But you don't get that – in my view – you don't get a lot of that these days. Everything is so packaged, and approved and homogenized. I want to be out there to stand for that.



What are drag queens today doing right?



What are drag queens doing right? Well they are keeping on being drag queens, especially in this political climate, you know? Drag queens in every age throughout humanity – shamans or witch doctors – remind a culture to not take themselves so seriously, and to remind you that this body is not who you really are. (*Smirking, leaning in conspiratorially.*) Lip gloss is *not* who I really am.



What are drag queens today doing wrong?



People have asked me why I thought that I was able to step out and become very popular. And I think it's because I'm a sweet person, I'm a kind person and I didn't grab the mic to right all the wrongs that have been done to me, you know? I was never an evil queen. I was sassy, never bitchy, never evil. I think that a lot of boys who have been trounced upon, once they get a microphone and get the power they start to do to other people what their oppressor did to them. It's a cycle, everybody goes through it. I think that's one thing a drag queen could do wrong.



Complete this sentence: RuPaul was a \_\_\_\_\_.



*(Bursts out laughing.)* RuPaul? RuPaul was a HOOT-'N-ANNY GOOD TIME!