

## **What Makes A Man, A Man?**

*Brian D Gryphon*

Even before Milton Berle wore dresses on television, drag has been used as a source of humour, and on occasion, pathos. Two films from the turn of the century take us deeper. Both “*Flawless*” (released in 1999) and “*To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*” (1995) use men in dresses and their interactions with 'normal men' to present the argument that the age-old advertising slogan “*the clothes make the man*” has its limits. Each film succeeds in illustrating that courage and honesty can be an integral part of living life as 'the other sex'.

In “*Flawless*” Philip Seymour Hoffman is cast as Russell Zimmerman ('Rusty' to his friends) who works as a female impressionist, seamstress and vocal coach as he saves up for gender reassignment surgery. Living in a very 'low rent' building in Manhattan he is surrounded by drug dealers, hookers, fellow drag artists, and Walter Koontz, a divorced police officer. Walt (Robert DeNiro) is a decorated hero who awakes one night to the sound of gunfire in the building. A local drug baron has been robbed and his crew is aggressively seeking the guilty; or whatever information they can convince people to share. Taking his gun, Walt is climbing stairs when he suffers a stroke. After his release from hospital he pays Rusty for singing lessons to help improve his speech. They don't become friends, but Rusty does reveal his inner demons while sharing wisdom learned by living life in a dress. In time, Walt learns that Rusty removed the stolen funds from a friend's apartment and will use it to pay for his surgeries; if the drug baron doesn't find out. He does, and when he confronts Rusty, we (and Walt) find out just how tough Rusty is

As an example, during one argument Walter boasts “*At least I'm a real man*” to which Rusty replies “*It takes a shitload more courage to wake up and face my life than anything that you've ever fuckin' dreamed of!*” As if to prove this point, the film shows us scenes from

Rusty's life. While on-stage he tells the audience that the boys from Queens who are laughing and applauding now are the same ones that would beat him up in an alley if given the chance. The gay Republicans at the Pride Centre suggest that the Parade that year not include floats; one drag artist replies that if they think the queens won't walk the parade in high heels, they will be disappointed. Rusty tells the Republicans “*we are different; but not in the way that you mean. We are different because you are ashamed of us and we aren't ashamed of you.*”

In the denouement, the drug lord finds out that Rusty has his money. He and his crew prepare to tear Rusty and the apartment apart. Walt grabs his gun and while interrupting the assault loses his balance. Rusty gets Walt to go into the bedroom and lock the steel-plated door as he runs out with the crew following. Rusty manages to disable each of the crew, in true drag style. Rather than wait for the police, Rusty climbs the outside of the building then smashes through his bedroom window to help Walt bring an end to the drug lord.

There is a greater emphasis on humour, and more leading roles, in “*To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*” Three drag artists (Patrick Swayze as 'Vida', Wesley Snipes as 'Noxema', and John Leguizamo as 'Chi Chi') are driving across the country to Los Angeles to enter a drag contest. Along the way the first two teach the newest performer what it means to be a Drag Queen; lessons on manners, protocol and 'lady-like' character. Their vehicle expires at a rest stop in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere. They are rescued by a young man in a pick-up and driven to Snyder'sville where Virgil and his wife run the area's hotel and auto repair business. While waiting for the car to be fixed they explore the hamlet and make friends. The town ends up saving them from Virgil and a local Sheriff's Deputy so that the trio can finish their trip and Chi Chi be crowned by Julie Newmar herself.

The argument that Rusty makes explicit in “*Flawless*” ('presenting one's self as a woman to a world that sees only the gender identified by what's between your legs takes real

courage') is only implied in this movie but the point that heroism may be found in even the most feminine of men is clearly presented. We quickly learn that Virgil has a fondness for physically abusing Carol Ann, his wife. Vida finds Carol Ann alone in the kitchen cleaning up after an apparent assault and asks her “*do you, like, ever not cry in this room?*” Carol Ann admits nothing. Noxema is adamant that their hosts' relationship is none of their business. Vida can not stand idly by when the sounds of another assault are unmistakable. She enters the room and has her two friends take Carol Ann out. “*Virgil, I gather you like hitting ladies,*” is met with “*Some ladies need to be hit.*” Vida states “*And conversely, some men need to be hit back,*” before demonstrating her belief that Virgil is in that category. We hear noises of a fight, ending with Vida throwing Virgil out of the building.

With its greater emphasis on humour, moments of self-realization are less frequent and shorter than in “*Flawless*” The best example being when Vida, who early in the film was unwilling to confront her parents, is now ready to do so. She rehearses her line “*my name is Miss Vida Boheme- and your approval is not needed*” (Noxema in the role of chorus, “*that's right; approval neither desired nor required “but I will take your acceptance.”*” After Virgil leaves, Carol Ann shows that she has learned a few things from him and soon has the trio's old Cadillac? road-worthy. Before their departure, Vida decides she should tell Carol Ann the truth. Carol Ann makes it clear that she knows (she mentions seeing Vida's Adam's Apple upon meeting) and more, that she doesn't care; “*I know that I'm very fortunate to have a lady friend that just happens to have an Adam's Apple*”. As the residents say their good-byes, Carol Ann says “*I love you, Vida Boheme.*” To which Vida replies “*I've waited my whole life to hear those words said to that name.*”

To the extent that each movie features heroes that are men in dresses, they both argue that being a transsexual does not define a person's value or values. “*Flawless*” is the darker of

the two movies; life is seedier, the hero greedy and much less pleasant. But hero she is; saving Walt while managing to retain the drug lord's stash. Vida's heroism, while valued, is ultimately less important than her courage to demand the acceptance that she deserves.

### **Works Cited**

*Flawless*. Joel Schumacher, Dir. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures. 1999. Film.

*To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*. Beeban Kidron, Dir. Universal Pictures. 1995. Film