

Drag debunked in new documentary 'Miss Gay Black America'

by Sarah Toce

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Outside of RuPaul's Drag Race and various Pride celebrations, how many of us truly understand drag? Not just the hair and makeup part, but the true inner-workings of what it means to present in drag? A new documentary seeks to highlight a part of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) history that is so often ignored, sometimes chided, misguided, or overlooked.

According to INDIEGOGO.COM, Miss Gay Black America "will explore the popularity of female impersonation in African American communities and the discussion that this topic lends itself to around the ideals of femininity and masculinity." The documentary film will highlight "stories of their careers and relationships, of loved ones lost to the AIDS epidemic, and of the kindness and insurmountable talent of performer Terri Livingston. Through these interviews as well as through re-imagined scenes from Terri's adolescence, Miss Gay Black America will tell the story of a man whose sheer brilliance and incredible heart touched the lives of everyone around him, underscored by the history and evolution of the world that he found to call home."

"The goal is to raise at least \$25,000 by August 1, if not more. This amount represents a very small portion of the budget that is almost half a million dollars," said director Mary Morten. "We have to do a lot of travel for this production, so road trips and cheap airfares here we come!"

Scrappy travel expenses will all aid in ensuring that future generations understand their LGBT history. Think these

firsthand accounts are in books you'll read in high school? Think again.

"Storytelling is important. We learn so much by reflecting on our history," added Morten. "Unfortunately, it is clear that most of us do not have access to materials that provide personal accounts [of] what it was like in the late 70s, 80s and 90s in the gay community. What was it like to be a black gay man who performed as a woman and did so with unbelievable style and class? Terri honored the art form and treated it with a great deal of reverence. I think my role as an activist has moved to that of a documentarian. I want these stories preserved."

Preserving also means understanding...and that leads to teaching, and the circle goes round and round.

"Female impersonation, or drag, is a very important cultural phenomenon. We will definitely highlight the split about what is or what is not drag. We have every kind of image available to us from RuPaul to Tyler Perry to Flip Wilson, etc. Are men who have transitioned to living as women full-time still considered to be drag queens? It's a spectrum and we are certainly exploring it in this film," said Morten.

Morten's first feature film, *Woke Up Black*, was cause for discussion post-screening. It followed five black youth for two straight years - during which time filmmakers (and the audience) witnessed interactions with family members, educational institutions and the legal and judicial system. *Miss Gay Black America* will also be released with a discussion guide. It's a necessary step, said Morten.

"I'm looking forward to these discussions after audiences see the film and as with my first feature film - *Woke Up Black*. We'll produce a discussion guide since I think there will be lot to talk about."

Audiences have so far responded positively to Morten's work-in-progress.

"It has been surprising to find a very robust drag performance community in some of the most conservative cities in the country. We have been to Indianapolis four times starting last fall since this is where my brother was living when he died. People have been so kind and generous to us. I cannot do my work as a director without research and thanks to the Chris Gonzales Library and Archives and places like Talbot's and Indy Pride in Indianapolis, I have been given unfettered access," Morten exuded.

Adding, "We were the beneficiaries of a fundraiser in Indianapolis about four weeks ago during their Pride festival activities. The Bag Ladies are men - and a few women/drag kings - willing to dress in high heels and wear outrageous costumes to entertain and raise money for the Indianapolis LGBT community and beyond. They have been around for more than 30 years and started raising money at the very beginning of the AIDS epidemic. I will be forever grateful for their inaugural support."

In fact, one of the performers followed in the documentary was filmed during the Indianapolis fundraiser. Morten recalled, "About three weeks ago, while in Indianapolis, we followed a performer, Asia Labouche, who still lives as a man full-time. We filmed him all day from beginning to end as he went about his day and then transformed into this 6'5" drag queen. It was unbelievable!"

Morten's Chicago roots run deep as well. "In Chicago, my brother worked at the Baton for many years. Jim Flint, the owner, who is in the film as well as several of the current performers, remember my brother. I have not met one person who knew Terri who will not talk to me about him. That's pretty amazing!"

Chicagoans will get a first sneak peak of the trailer for *Miss Gay Black America* at the Black Alphabet Film Festival on July 2-3 during Black Pride events. Support the documentary and Morten's work by donating to their Indiegogo fund here: WWW.INDIEGOGO.COM/PROJECTS/MISS-GAY-BLACK-AMERICA/X/417173 .