SEEING & BEING SEEN AT MEOW MIX

There is a kind of energy that vibrates through the Sala Rossa on a Meow Mix night. It is frenetic and slow; a nervous jitter, a lazy hum. A few eager beavers show up early, save a table near the front of the stage and settle in for the night. They get some drinks and watch as the room fills up, cruising with their eyes. The cruising intensifies as all the chairs get claimed and that slice of floor in front of the bar becomes a catwalk, a gauntlet, a stroll. What the hell is dyke cruising, anyway? It’s a pastime and a mood. It is what you see and how you look. It is both oblivious and deliberate. And while the legendary Meow Mix DJs can be counted on to create a pre-show ambiance -- think still sober, dim lights, low pulse -- everyone who has been here before knows that the show starts when the doors open.

Like most cabarets, Meow Mix is not just an event where people show up, get entertained, and leave. It is a space of seeing and being seen. It is a tableau, a sequence of moments, a scene. There is what happens on stage -- maybe enabling a fiction that this is the real show -- and what is happening on the floor: a whole world of postures and glances as someone tries out a new look, shows off a new girlfriend, successfully or unsuccessfully avoids an ex-lover, picks up, drinks too much, smokes outside, gets inspired or emboldened, misses the show, helps clear the tables and chairs from the dance floor, comes for the dancing, goes home early, sees everyone they know, arrives as a stranger new to the city, emerges onto the scene. At a Meow Mix, the audience is the destination.

Just to the right of the stage at Sala Rossa is a tiny ‘green room’ area, which can comfortably sit two or three. On a Meow Mix night it is crammed with mirrors brought from home, a communal chair and maybe a dozen performers doing hair, make-up and last-minute rehearsals; the small room trembles. It is not overstating the case to say that cabarets like Meow Mix (also Le Boudoir, Kiss My Cabaret and more recent events like Faggity Ass Fridays and Cabaret Faux Pas) make performance happen in Montreal. In this cabaret city, short art forms flourish because artists are always developing new work, experimenting for the audiences of these regularly scheduled variety shows. In Montreal, cabaret is a scene with a deadline. At a Meow Mix, the stage is the destination.

As a flexible space that truly mixed the amateur with the pro, the raunchy with the earnest, the old with the new, Francophone and Anglophone, circus arts with stand-up comedy with burlesque with spoken word with contemporary dance, Meow Mix’s blend of “bent girls and their buddies” also hailed capital-L Lesbians along with small-q queers and questioning, as well as those letters, sizes, sounds and silences that roam between and beyond these signifiers. Within its lifespan, Meow Mix embodied a mode of existence, a way of living, and a life-style that underwent numerous transformations, along with the dyke, trans, feminist and queer scenes that fueled it. Importantly, it was also transformed through the world-making imagination of Meow Mixtress Miriam Ginestier, whose improvisatory curation
opened the stage to new performers (and their proliferating alter-egos!), and whose speculative programming ushered in drag king workshops, exciting and risky local, national and international acts, queer tango lessons and slowdance parties, along with the comfort of knowing that, even when there were no dyke bars still standing, every six weeks or so, a "bent girl" could count on an opportunity to build an outfit for an appreciative crowd, have a drink among fellow travelers, and maybe get laid.

The images collected in this exhibit represent an important form of memory. As an archive of viscera and ephemera -- of bodies and other materials in space and time -- the work here by Sasha La Photographe, Miriam Genestier, Viva Delorme, Valerie Sangin and the Dukes of Drag is a jackpot of performance history and of almost two decades of dyke-queer-trans-feminist cultures in Montreal. These photographs and videos, while standing as gorgeous action portraits on their own, together with their audience serve as prompts, reminding us how it felt to be on the Meow Mix stage, in the seats, sharing these spaces. Clearly, the Meow Mix Retrospective is an occasion for stories and for cruising. If you are here, the show has started.

-- T.L. Cowan