

My First Night as a Drag Queen Was Both Terrifying and Life-Changing

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If you've spent much time in UK queer clubs over the past decade, there's a chance you'll have come across Denim, the drag troupe slash girl band made up of Glamrou La Denim, Aphrodite Greene, Crystal Rasmussen OBE, Elektra Cute and Shirley DuNaughty. I was lucky enough to catch them at Glastonbury's NYC Downlow one year, long before "the virus", when they stormed the stage with Florence Welch at around 2 AM to deliver the campest, most pumped up and effervescent rendition of "Spectrum" imaginable.

But there's more to the drag troupe than pop tracks and parody. Frontperson Glamrou La Denim – real name Amrou Al-Kadhi – has just released a book, *Life As a Unicorn*, out on paperback now, in which they detail everything that happened beforehand. And I mean everything: Growing up in a devout Muslim family in Dubai, then Bahrain, then London. Going to Eton, then Cambridge. Discovering their queerness and gender identity as a non-binary person. Chemsex parties, abusive relationships, friendships gone awry. How all of these things can create a sense of fragmentation and unease, and how drag and performing was what, in many ways, helped meld it back together.

Throughout the book, you're presented with a young Amrou who seems to internalise the Islamophobia and homophobia around them in equal measure, reticent to embrace both identities at all times simultaneously. But as time goes on, they build a new way, and show that they found freedom in being a queer, Muslim drag queen.

Read an extract from *Life As a Unicorn* below:

To cement my position as a drag mother hen, I did what any misguided drag queen does at the start of their career – I sang a song from a famous musical. My chosen number was "When You're Good to Mama" from *Chicago*. CRINGE. The day itself was utterly chaotic. At one point I had to schlep all the decorations from one side of Cambridge to the other in a wheelie bin. Every single performer was a bundle of nerves, not one of us having ever done this before. But it fell on me to provide the words of comfort – I was mother after all – and while everyone got ready, I watched as each of them had a partner or a friend to help them with their make-up and costume. They all probably thought I didn't need any help, but in truth I needed the most out of all of them. As I retreated to the corner, trying to figure out a way to stop my wig obeying the laws of gravity, I went over the lyrics to "When You're Good to Mama", and started thinking about my own. If she found out about tonight, she'd be so ashamed of me ... whatever I do, there's no way she or Dad can know about this. I started to take in the crumbling brown walls of the mouldy crypt, the condensation coating its ceiling, and the general mess and chaos around me. I felt an intense pang of anguish, as if a capsule of sorrow had suddenly dissolved in my gut and was spreading rapidly around my bloodstream. I

couldn't help but equate the filth of the room with the image my mother had of me – a skinny, broke Arab son in a dress, wheezing because of the disgusting room they now found themselves in. It was as though the dirt of the surroundings was a mirror to the person I really was, and I sat immobilised, unable to do anything, locked in a limbo of heartache.

Soon though, one of the other queens saw me sitting in stasis with the doors about to open at any moment. In a silent act of solidarity, they made up my face. This was the first instance of the powerful sisterhood I have come to find in the drag community. On later getting to know this person, I discovered that they had lost their father as a baby, and also struggled with feelings of familial dislocation. In that moment, both of us were grieving and being restored.

Before I could fully tumble down this well of sadness, the first guests arrived, and I ran to the bathroom to firmly place a lid on it. Seeing my reflection in drag for the very first time was an uncanny kind of reunion, an introduction to a person I had always had inside me, yet had somehow always missed. I recognised the person in the mirror more than I had ever recognised my own image, experiencing the same fuzzy harmony as when I first gazed into a formless marine aquarium. Again, my gender dysphoria was suddenly appeased, and here in front of me was a true manifestation of my internal self. It was time for everyone to meet her.

It was moving to see so many students come to support the evening, most of whom attended in some kind of drag. As soon as there was an audience, I interacted with them as my drag character Glamrou, an overly confident and acerbic queen who says the things that nobody else dares to. As people took their seats – i.e. the floor of a low-ceilinged cave – I lap-danced those who were willing, with the sexual litheness of a lemur and the confidence of a peacock.

One of the things that I've come to find interesting about being in drag, is that once you're dressed and made up, you so rarely see yourself in drag (unless your outfit involves some kind of reflective device). As a result, your image belongs more to the people who are viewing you, and you start to perceive yourself in how you are being perceived in the eyes gazing at you. That night, the eyes of everyone I spoke to seemed bewitched by the confidence of the queen in their presence, with no knowledge of the sorrowing mess she had been just moments before the doors opened. By the time it came to perform my number, I tried to summon the matriarchal majesty of Queen Latifah in the *Chicago* ballad, and my performance, though unquestionably a hot mess, incorporated numerous thigh slaps, grinding of audience members, and a power that I didn't even know I had. There was a person in the front row whose mouth was on the floor as they stared up at me, and afterwards they remarked that they'd never seen "femininity" so unreservedly celebrated before.

After the final number – one of the queens singing an aching rendition of "I Am What I Am" – I thanked the crowd for coming to support us, and whipped out a set of queer platitudes you'd find in any gay anthem – "Remember to be yourself", "You're all

superstars”, and a direct bit of plagiarism, “You were born this way!” After that, Lady Gaga’s empowering queer anthem blasted through the room, every single person stood up, and we danced in what was one of the biggest emotional releases of my life. One of the queens who I still perform with, Shirley Du Naughty, ran up to me, and we hugged tightly. The evening was a beautiful celebration of so much. It went on late into the night, and I can still feel every single beat of it.

When I finally got to my room at about five in the morning, the intense triumph of the evening slowly dissipated, and, as the wig came off, the shame slid over me to replace it. I stared at my reflection. I looked like a genderless newt whose face had melted, and the starkness of my bare-walled college room made me feel terrifyingly lonely. I took a sleeping pill and didn’t wake until 3 PM the next day.

Life As A Unicorn by Amrou Al-Kadhi is out now on 4th Estate.