

SPOTLIGHT ON

# Men Dressing as Women



Katya



Kris Knieval



Lakia

by Clint Hamblin

It's 7:15 on a Saturday night. I'm surrounded by sequins, feathers, giant high-heel shoes, enough makeup to makeover a military band and dozens of colorful wigs. Am I dreaming? Nope! I'm in the middle of the backstage dressing room at Jacques Cabaret, Bay Village's historic drag bar of 60 years. I'm interviewing men who earn their living impersonating women and we're at the half-hour mark before the show starts.

Three full-sized men are transforming themselves into incredible-looking women. The makeup is intense, as is the reorganization of body parts all done to capture the illusion of femininity.

"What size are your shoes," I asked.

"Honey, this is a size 11," he — uh, she said.

As they borrow eyebrow pencil or mascara, they lovingly refer to each other as "girl" or some other female nickname including one or two names I dare not repeat.

Kris Knieval has been performing at Jacques for 10 years and now serves as the emcee of this fast-paced drag queen show.

"I did lots of theater in high school and college," Knieval remembered. "An uncle of an ex-girlfriend was a drag performer, and he dared me to enter a contest. I won first place, and it changed my life."

Knieval is so good he gave up his retail day job and now enjoys his various drag gigs and making costumes for the "girls" for a living.

"On Monday night, we're doing a show at Machine on Boylston Street. Drag queens wrestle male strippers in Jell-O. You should come," Knieval suggested. Yikes! How could I say no?

The audience is getting louder and loud-



Backstage at Jacques Cabaret

er as we approach the 15-minute mark, and there's something strange about the sound of this rather rambunctious group of people. They're all female!

"Once in a while we get a table of gay men, but mostly we do tons of bachelorette

parties," Knieval said.

"No bachelor parties?" I asked.

"We wish! But no, it's just women," Knieval said.

These days, Jacques is the only bar with a regularly scheduled full drag show, and the

biggest surprise is that gay people rarely attend. When asked about the difference between the two types of audiences, Knieval said, "The straights don't get everything. We have to dumb it down. They don't have the theatrical references that gay people have."

It's show time, and this audience is beyond ready. Eight brides and their accompanying female tribes are all ready to be entertained, insulted and humiliated. Like male strippers, the audience stuffs dollar bills into the costumes of the performers. Not an easy task considering you don't know what you'll find as you're stuffing your George Washington down Mizery's bosom.

When asked why women would choose drag queens over male strippers, clinical psychologist Dr. Bernice Kelly said, "The men dressed as woman are really a caricature of female behavior. Men who are stripping are being directly sexual. A drag queen is much less threatening to a woman as compared to going to see male strippers. Women love that."

"There are a lot of people who like the 'naughty' aspect of the entertainment," Kelly continued. "We all want to be naughty once in a while, and it's very acceptable to go to a place where there are very naughty things going on."

The 90-minute show raced to its conclusion, and this audience was totally thrilled as they posed for pictures with the stars when it was over. If you're looking for an alternative to Chippendale's for a bachelorette party or just a fun night out, take a look at Jacques. With a reasonable \$10 cover charge and drinks in the \$3.75 range, the price is right and everyone agrees: You'll have the time of your life!

But don't forget to tip. As Knieval said, "Feel free to tip us. It takes a lot of money to make us look this cheap."