

# IDENTITIES IN DRAG: AN INTERVIEW WITH KING SAMMY SILVER

*Alexa Alice Joubin and Terri Power*

## Abstract

This interview with King Sammy Silver, conducted by Alexa Alice Joubin and Terri Power, explores drag as a stage practice. A London-based actor and YouTube personality, he represents a new generation of trans artists. He has worked with Power on multiple Shakespeare productions at Bath Spa University in the UK and elsewhere, and has been influenced by Power's *Drag King Richard III*. He has played Valentine in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Capulet and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. He reflects on Shakespeare's role in trans theater today as well as how drag can deconstruct toxic masculinity.



King Sammy Silver (Sam Allan Paskins) is a London-based drag king, lyric writer, and YouTube personality who focuses on comedy ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzJl04QjFNVIBKbw19jj\\_Ow](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzJl04QjFNVIBKbw19jj_Ow)). He has worked with Terri Power on many Shakespeare productions at Bath Spa University in the UK and elsewhere. An outstanding actor, Sammy represents a new generation of trans artists. His work has been influenced by, among other plays, Terri Power's *Drag King Richard III* (presented in collaboration with the Bristol Shakespeare Festival and Bristol Pride). He has played Valentine in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Capulet and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Based in Brighton, England, Sammy spoke to Power and Alexa Alice Joubin on August 20, 2020 about how drag performances deconstruct toxic masculinity.

**Terri Power (TP):** How did your queer trans masculine identities develop in life and in performance?

**King Sammy Silver (KSS):** I created a sassier character, Sammy, when I first started drag. Sammy was someone who I wanted to be rather than who I actually was. Sammy did a lot of big show numbers to entertain a crowd. However, over time I have found my true identity and the character of Sammy are really now blending into one. Now I create acts with Sammy that have a lot more to do with my life outside



of drag such as Sammy trying for an interview, Sammy dealing with heartbreak, Sammy goes dating, and more. Along the way, I discovered I am not a cis woman. Drag helped me deal with my gender and body dysphoria.

When I first started drag, I told myself “Yes, I am a woman dressing up as a man,” because that was what everybody else thought. I knew that description did not fit me. It was through drag that I discovered terms like non-binary and gender queer. Meeting people who identified with these terms through drag made me feel more comfortable.

**Alexa Alice Joubin (AAJ):** In your opinion, what are the differences between drag and trans performances?

**KSS:** Drag is very much an exploration and expression of gender which is very fluid. Anybody can do drag. You don’t have to be trans. You can be cis, binary, trans, or however you identify. And essentially I feel, as cheesy as it sounds, drag is

almost just being because I feel we are all drag artists in our lives. We all are putting on clothes to perform in a certain way and in certain situations. I feel drag is all that there is on a higher scale on stage. Being trans is certainly different to that because being trans is who you are when you’re not on stage, though it can be when you are on stage too. Drag pokes fun at stereotypes and society’s idea of what a man or woman should be.

**TP:** Everyone is born naked. The rest is drag. Drag is about persona. In contrast, trans identities refer to who you are in the world.

**AAJ:** Do drag acts have to be clownish and parodic?

**KSS:** I think drag can be comedic. I certainly do like the comedy aspect of it. It’s good when it pokes fun at stereotypes and shows how silly stereotypes are, such as the work by Virgin Xtravaganzah. However, I’ve certainly seen shows where a drag queen just says derogatory things about women on stage. There’s no cleverness, there’s no wit in that performance. We are taught how to behave depending on what genitals

we have at birth, which is ridiculous when you think about it. In my work, I deconstruct all of that and relay the message that actually we shouldn't be put in such a rigid box just because of the genitals we have.

**TP:** In what ways have your gender identities and sexuality enriched your performances?

**KSS:** I am a binary trans male, and have played cis, binary male roles. Being seen as a man is very liberating. Drag gave me permission to explore gender on stage. It gave me permission to be who I was and it made me. Throughout my childhood essentially I was always told I was naturally quite masculine, so it always came to me quite naturally. I was seen in inverted commas as “a girl” throughout my childhood. I was always shamed for it, because my families and friends thought I should not be masculine and butch. Butch is ugly. But doing drag and playing with Shakespeare at university was really wonderful. It made me realize that actually this is something beautiful about me. It was through that and doing drag that I realized I'm trans. I never have been a girl. Drag celebrates me and other people who are like me.

**AAJ:** Can you talk about your experiences performing Shakespeare?

**KSS:** Yes, of course. I played Valentine in a campy *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (dir. Tessa Grant Walker, Bath Spa University, 2013). It was my first major male role. Before that, I was always put in female roles, and I wasn't comfortable in them. This production was a breakthrough for me, as I mixed masculine and feminine energies in my portrayal of Valentine, dildo in hand! *Two Gents* isn't a celebrated Shakespeare play, but it's a great play with so much campy comedy in it.

**TP:** Indeed we were performing in the Italian Gardens and I remember it was the Kabuki inspired production. There was a moment that you dressed up in biker gear and you ran through the audience with a dildo or vibrator in your hands.

**KSS:** Yes, I do remember that!

**AAJ:** Were you the only trans actor in that production? Were there others in cross-gender roles?

**KSS:** I was the only trans person in that production. Although at the time I hadn't quite realized I was trans. There was lots of cross-gedner roles. There certainly were others that weren't playing the gender they were assigned at birth. It was actually really beautiful to see because of everybody's different take on that. I remember that Stephen Horncastle played a female character without doing the stereotypical camping it up pantomime. He played it as a softer version of himself.

**AAJ:** Terri, did you co-direct *Two Gentlemen of Verona*? How did you interpret the final scene?

**TP:** I was facilitating the production, though I did direct the last act because that is the hardest act to navigate so that it doesn't turn into a rape scene. My approach was to empower the women in the last act

in order to change the dynamic of the play, because otherwise that would have ruined everything we built up to that point.

**AAJ:** Was there a difference in audience perception of trans feminine and trans masculine characters?

**KSS:** When women come to a male role it is all about taking up space and being big, and being a bit cocky and boisterous, whereas when men come to a female role it's the opposite. It's about taking up very little space. I feel that gender is a social construct. That's how we are taught to behave. It would be nice to completely mix around with that, which I feel we definitely did in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

**AAJ:** Yes, women are constantly taught to power talk and power dress. Were you involved in other Shakespeare plays?

**KSS:** Yes, I did an amateur dramatic performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 2013 with Cock-a-Hoop Theatre Company and I had the role of Benedict. I was the only trans actor in the show. It was a liberating moment for me. When I came to the play I asked myself: "Are they going to see me as trans or are they just going to put me in a female role?" As it turned out, they gave me the role of Benedict and it was an interesting part because Benedict is that cocky, boisterous guy who really fancies himself. At first I didn't want to play it obviously like that because he bordered on toxic masculinity. I think at the end of the day Benedict is a big softie and his heart is in the right place. He's all bark and no bite, that's what brought it all back to me and I thought "oh no he isn't toxic. I think he's a good guy." I also performed Benedict in Dome6 Theatre Company's *Much Ado* (dir. Laura Brady, 2017) and his monologue "I do much wonder that one man . . ." at the Queerdom Cabaret, a show directed by Rosamund Blackwell Sutton in 2018.

**TP:** How about your role in *Romeo and Juliet*?

**KSS:** I played Capulet and Tybalt in Cock-a-Hoop Theatre Company's production (dir. Terri Power) at the Wardrobe Theatre in Bristol in 2013. We got to play multiple roles and do theatre games. Every production I've seen of *Romeo and Juliet* they always miss the great comedy.

**TP:** Yes, it's so funny up until it gets tragic. That's why the tragedy hits you so hard. Before that, you have a great time following the story and laughing with the characters and then it's like the breath is taken out of you. I feel like if people don't capture the comedy we don't get to feel that dichotomy of humor and love, and then to tragedy.

**KSS:** It was like a big DJ remix of Shakespeare. In the production, two actors did the same monologue back to back. Audiences voted on which one they preferred. It was just so great to see actors' interpretation of a particular monologue or scene. I also performed Viola's "I left no ring with her" monologue in Cock-a-Hoop Theatre Company's *Twelfth Night* (dir. Terri Power, 2013).

**AAJ:** How did you navigate the gendered terrain of playing such a complex character? In Shakespeare's time, it would be a boy actor playing Viola playing the role of Cesario.

**TP:** It's interesting because there are all of these special characters in Shakespeare's plays that you have to consider that this is a boy playing a woman playing a man, such as Rosalind disguised as Ganymede. So, we get layer upon layer, upon layer, upon layer of gender performance, which is mindboggling to think how that was conveyed to Elizabethan audiences. To me, Shakespeare was saying gender is fluid. He is the true non-binary playwright. It is your drag that you are presenting. That's how fluid gender is on his stage.

**AAJ:** As a male actor playing the role, how did you dramatize Viola's anxiety about being outed when dressing as Cesario?

**KSS:** I always felt with Viola that there is that anxiety throughout it. Are they going to find out? Do they know already but they are just pretending? But I also feel that being who I am that it was, dare I say, almost erotic. There was this feeling of "Oh, but I don't mind if they do find out." Certainly when coming into a room, putting that into my own life, and no one knows I'm trans I just want to blurt it out right away. I'm like "I'm here and I'm trans and I'm really queer and I want you to know it" but then I think maybe I shouldn't. I could feel for and with Viola, and empathize with her because I feel that's the kind of game she's playing throughout *Twelfth Night*.

**AAJ:** What were the influences that helped shape your performance work?

**KSS:** *Orange Is the New Black!* There is an unapologetic queerness to it. Other big influences include Freddie Mercury [lead vocalist of the rock band Queen], flamboyant 1980s fashion, images of macho men, gay culture, and LGBT activist and openly gay singer George Michael. Even though I am a trans man, I am happy to see butch women being celebrated. Butch is cool and sexy. I support raw, un-Photoshopped femaleness on screen. When I saw Terri Power's *Drag King Richard III*, I saw that my story matters in the show. When your story isn't told, you do not matter. You do not exist.

But there are other works that do not represent the trans experience accurately. I would love to see a show where some characters happen to be trans, but their transness is not the main focus of the story. They come home after a hard day at work, and we see a shot of them taking their hormones or binding their chest, and yes it's important that's who they are but it's not the central point. I feel that the more we see trans people in this way it will humanize us a lot more, and there will be less transphobia. Not just trans people but LGBT people across the board. The more we see trans people in a normalized scenario the less people will be so afraid of it.

**AAJ:** That is so beautifully said. I totally agree. They can be characters that can be badass, they can be soft, but happen to be trans.

**TP:** How do we move forward to make sure that the right stories and right representation is happening in film, television, and theater as well as our queer stages? How do we remain conscious of it?

**KSS:** Talking particularly about the big Hollywood, I think we need to try to get more queer directors, queer writers, queer camera people. We need more queer artists behind the scenes. There are still a lot of non-queer artists telling queer stories. Obviously having some stories told is better than none, but we need more self-representation. We need to humanize queer people. I quite like the film *Danish Girl* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2015). I thought that was done quite well. We need more people actually not being afraid to let the queers go mainstream.

**TP:** I agree. There's a part of me that always thinks back to when I was at UCLA. I was playwriting and my mentor was Hanay Geiogamah, who is a Native American playwright. I was writing a play about Essex Hemphill who was an African American gay artist and poet who died of AIDS and I stopped writing because I thought I can't write this because I'm not any of these identities. Hanay said to me "If you don't write that story, who will? If you have the passion and you have the love, you're an ally. As a lesbian, you're an ally and I'll help you through that." Then in telling these stories you have a deep responsibility, and hopefully, you're empathetic and coming from a place of empathy and social justice. The goals of social justice, particularly for the trans community, are going to have to be a collective effort because it is such a small community.

Similarly, I understood the criticism with *Drag King Richard III* at that level [see Terri Power's interview in this special issue] because, yes, it was my responsibility to make sure that I did everything I could to place a trans actor in that role, to do everything I could to say that it was a dated dialogue because it took place in the 1990s and things have moved on. The story is just a microscopic look at a personal story, but hopefully we can have that discussion.

To our readers I would like to share this idea: being part of this movement but also being responsible for what we are representing.

**AAJ:** Both are very important: self-representation and responsible representation. There is the risk of ghettoization, and there is the pitfall of misrepresentation. Do you prefer modern plays or classical plays?

**KSS:** I think I'm always going to be a Shakespeare fan. My mom gave me the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* when I was really young and then I had a copy when working with Terri, so I had two! I just feel that the language is just so beautiful. So, I'm a classical Shakespeare fan. I don't think people are celebrating Shakespeare as much as they used to.

**AAJ:** What suggestions would you give for emerging artists and producers?

**KSS:** What I would like to see more is there are badass police detectives who happen to be trans. Stories in which being trans ceases to be the central point. Stories that humanize their characters and us all. There will be less transphobia.