

THE LADY-BOY

Magic of Thailand's Cabaret



By Ayesha Cantrell

It's funny to think I have lived in Thailand on and off over the last five years, and up until a few months ago had never been to a lady-boy cabaret. It's not that I'm a prude, I guess I just never got around to it. Sure I've seen lady-boys, unless you have your eyes closed it's inevitable, but I'd never been to a show!

The show itself was great fun. The costumes, glamour and energetic dance routines set to lively upbeat belting songs was nothing short of fabulous. It was impossible not to smile, tap your feet, sing-along and get caught up in the infectious energy. I was there with a group of girls for a friend's birthday and it really hit the mark as an entertaining

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evening. However... I know the intrigue for every member of the audience surrounds the transformation from boy to girl, the he or she question. The, 'You would never know', amazement for some, mostly men, is a little frightening but all of this is part of the draw for the audience.

Watching the audience reaction, and seeing their manner change from nervous trepidation to riotous applause by the end was incredible too. When the time came, at the close of the show, for the audience to get involved, to go back stage and get dressed up and perform alongside the girls for the final number, there was no shortage of volunteers. Girls and guys alike returned from backstage with wigs and sequined-up for the finale, when it struck me that through this simple cabaret that social barriers were broken down. Being a little shy I wasn't one of the volunteers who got dressed, but I did wonder what went on backstage.

Was the atmosphere like the bitchy catty atmosphere synonymous with models and fashion shows, or a giggly effeminate experience? I was game to find out... I went to meet Big Mama, who runs the Queen's Cabaret on Koh Tao, to see if she would let me backstage to observe. Meeting her in her normal clothes was very different. The

costumes and make up for the show were gone, and with it the mystery. Just a lady doing her job. The cabaret queens were around as I sat talking to Mama, styling hair or eating lunch and chatting. She had no problem with what I was proposing. Clearly I was the only one wondering what I'd got myself into!

I did feel quite uneasy heading back stage, as I had no idea what to expect. Armed with my camera I felt like a snooper sticking my nose around a door that was supposed to be closed. Slipping behind the black curtains I entered into a fabulous world of dress up and costume. Every available shelf in front of the mirrors was covered with neatly organised cosmetics and brushes. The walls and ceilings were hung

with every conceivable wig, spangly tiaras and a myriad of fabulous headdresses. Brightly coloured costumes adorn every accessible hanging space. It would take you hours to try everything on. It would have been my little girls dream to play dress-up here.

Only a couple of girls were around, so there wasn't the frenetic activity that I was anticipating. In fact, it was all very calm. There was an air of quiet concentration about the dressing room, as foundation was expertly smoothed on and eyeliner precisely applied. Slowly more girls arrived, and the quiet reverence given over to making-up meant the level of chatter was confined to quick and controlled bursts when someone new arrived. Even while I was photographing no one stopped to pose, and nothing interrupted their absorption with their transformation.

Only once fully attired did the Showgirl appear. It was as if the clothes and make-up changed the personality. The quiet, almost demure girls who entered the dressing room became confident, strutting Cabaret Queens who were now pouting for the camera and engaging me. As the sun sets more performers arrive, dance steps are practiced, and the transformed head out onto the street to promote the show. On



Don't be scared... Grab you glitter, your dancing shoes and go and check one out!

the busy walkways the girls add a splash of colour and glamour, they pose and strut, genuinely revelling in the attention.

The cabaret community is a close one, but it seems like it could easily have been an isolated one. The Queens Cabaret has just celebrated its second anniversary, which saw a riotous party with many guest appearances from the western locals working on Koh Tao. Big Mama recognized that it wasn't always like this, as during their first year there seemed to be little acceptance of the community within the cabaret. Fear of the unknown and perception of media stereotypes seemed to foster uncertainty about their role within island life. Over time though, things have changed. Big Mama runs a very tight ship and strictly forbids drugs and prostitution, demonstrating a positive asset to the island. This year the performers raised over 20 thousand baht for the island school, selling flowers during their anniversary, which is indicative of their integration into Koh Tao society.

Big Mama has grand plans for the future and as the cabaret grows and the show develops she hopes to be able to build a mezzanine to make the show area more theatre like.

For now though the stage area is surrounded by a quiet audience, the lights dim and the cabaret bursts to life through the shimmering curtains. Once again the high energy is infectious and I'm torn between watching and taking photos, often getting drawn in and forgetting about the camera in my hand. The lively colourful show lasts just over an hour and leaves the world-wide audience wanting more. If you are visiting Koh Samui, be sure to take at least one evening to visit the stunning shows at StarClub Cabaret, where every night brings you different sets of acts that will leave you in awe!





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