

## TUESDAY NIGHTS ARE A DRAG—AT CLUB CHAOS

BY ANDREW NOYES

WASHINGTON—In a cramped and dingy dressing room the leading lady lurches forward under the hot, bright glow of a small lamp. She squints into the mirror and slicks a coat of silky white foundation onto her smooth, dark skin as a wisp of bluish-gray cigarette smoke escapes from her full lips.

Robed, wigless, partially powdered and not yet perfumed, she bids a backstage visitor adieu: “Bye-bye and thank you, darling. Next time bring cameras, sweetheart. Capture my essence.”

The grand dame straightens her broad shoulders as she rakes through a makeup-caked container of cosmetics and proclaims that she, Xavier Onassis Bloomingdale, is the most beautiful woman here tonight—the shining star that the audience has come to see.

A loud voice from an adjoining dressing room begs to differ.

Enter Miss Gigi Couture, a delicate-featured creature with dangerous curves and impassable sass. She is echoed by Regina Jozcette Adams, a voluptuous character with a garish glaze of face paint.

“See, it’s starting already,” Bloomingdale screeches as she pats a puffball of powder across her cheeks. “I came in with a very good attitude tonight and I wasn’t going to be mean to those cows, but it’s just like ‘deja moo.’ I’ve heard this bull before.”

The rapid-fire remarks and insult slinging are standard procedure as the trio gets gussied up to host Tuesday night’s drag queen bingo at Dupont Circle’s Club Chaos.

Since 1999, this unique combination of curious crowds to this 17<sup>th</sup> Street basement bar. The audience is surprisingly mixed—a melting pot of ages, ethnicities and sexual orientations.

Couture estimates the typical Tuesday night crowd is 50 percent heterosexual, and straight women account for a growing

portion of bingo players. The weekly game has even become a popular date venue.

“A lot of the women bring their boyfriends just to see how they’re going to respond to it,” she says. “They love it! Some of them are a little nervous at first but we have no mercy on them, none whatsoever.”

The increasingly mixed audience creates a different atmosphere than one might find at typical drag shows—for better or for worse.



Gigi Couture | Photo: Roland Foster

The three agree that straight people and bingo newcomers simply don’t know how to tip.

“A lot of people come here expecting just to play the game. They’re coming because all of their office mates are coming—everyone’s talked so much about it and curiosity got the best of them,” Adams reasons.

“And they ain’t got no money,” Couture interjects.

When people attend a drag show, they expect to pay, not win; at bingo, people expect to win, not pay, Adams says. At this show, bingo is interspersed with costumed and choreographed performances by each drag queen.

Bloomingtondale coos: “Straight people don’t know that they have to tip from time to time—and we educate them. We just tell them ‘Pull out your damned money.’ Tipping’ is not a city in China and don’t forget that.”



Xavier Onassis Bloomingtondale | Photo: Roland Foster

A couple of feisty drag queens paired with an excitable audience at a bar aptly named Chaos can incite unruliness. As the evening progresses and the bingo rounds intensify, the cocktail-swilling gamers can get almost as raucous as the hostesses.

Good thing Bloomingtondale is an expert at crowd control.

“If somebody gets smart, I put them back in their place,” she says. “This is a costume, darling. Don’t let the smooth taste fool you.”

Fights have broken out mid-game. Bloomingtondale’s wig has been knocked off and Couture says an angry audience member once chucked a bingo prize at the stage and nearly hit her in the head.

A swirl of scandal swallowed up the bingo venue last year when city officials shut the show down for several months after word spread that “money rounds” were taking place and large sums of cash were changing hands. The hostesses now talk about the closure straight-faced and with subdued voices.

“Basically, we didn’t have a license for D.C. lottery—even though we weren’t charging people or anything,” Couture says.

Prior to the money round, hostesses gathered dollar bills from the audience and the amount collected was awarded to the winning contestant. Lottery officials promptly stopped the game, and after a several month hiatus, bingo was resurrected—minus the cash giveaways.

Couture suggests the shutdown was an act of sabotage by “an envious individual” who was attempting to launch drag queen bingo at another location.

“It never worked out but they wanted to do whatever possible to bring our bingo down,” she says.

During the break, people called constantly to complain about the absence of drag bingo and the community was disappointed, Bloomingtondale says. The night bingo was revived, the crowds returned full-force.

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This version of bingo is by no means your grandmother’s game.

The drag queens’ no-holds-barred hosting style is hilarious but oftentimes ‘rated R.’

Party favors and noisemakers abound, and tonight, the mainstream drag film “To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar” is playing on the bar’s giant television screens.

Around 9:30—half an hour after the advertised start time—the divas are finally dressed and ready. The lights dim and the familiar “Price is Right” theme song blares over the club’s sound system—all eyes are on the stage.

One by one, the femme fatales strut across the room under twinkling, multicolor spotlights as the audience roars with laughter and applause. With cocktails sloshing in one hand, and cigarettes smoldering in the other, Bloomingdale, Couture and Adams climb aboard their barstools behind the bingo board.

“Good evening—how ya’ll doin’? Y’all ready to have a good time?” Bloomingdale bellows. “Well, you came to the wrong damned place. We’ll see you in prison—how about that?”

The room erupts with cheers and laughter and the evening commences with the divas’ standard, interactive audience greeting:

“Are there any straight men here?” they inquire. A few hands are raised. “Which one of you is straight?” Couture shrieks. “You all look alike to me.” “Are there any straight women here?” Many more hands are raised. “Like we give a f--k,” they jeer in unison.

The game begins promptly with the early bird round. The winner will take home an adult novelty item.

Subsequent prizes include a cellular phone, bar tabs, pornography videos and an audience favorite—Xavier’s Beauty Kit, a gift basket filled with self-pampering products, fuzzy slippers and aromatherapy candles.

The hostesses skewer each other with catty quips and take great pleasure in ridiculing audience members and bingo winners. Boundaries are broken and lines are crossed, Bloomingdale says.

“We make jokes about everybody involved. You can walk across that stage and you’re gonna get something,” she promises.

Frequent discussion topics for this trio are race and ethnicity—typically untouchable subjects in American culture.

“We have to do that because there’s a whole lot of racism going on and people don’t talk about it. And we do—we have to,” Bloomingdale says.

Adams is repeatedly referred to as trailer park trash, Couture is threatened with deportment and Bloomingdale is introduced

at each show as “the oldest living white woman in captivity.”

“I’m a white woman trapped in a black man’s body—a big man’s body,” Bloomingdale scoffs.

Do these ladies have limits and are they mindful of sensitive audience members? The short answer is no.

“You don’t test the waters. You just go for it—dive in and go for it. If they get upset, oh well,” Bloomingdale says.

A handful of supporting characters are regularly incorporated into the hostesses’ number-calling, shtick.

Manny, the bar’s jovial manager and co-owner, tends to the leading lady’s drink desires and commonly serves as ringmaster in this chaotic circus. And leggy, lanky drag waitress Christian sashays across the bar and swoops down to refresh customers’ cocktails.

Behind the scenes, the infrequently spotted bar owner Carlos provides musical accompaniment for the evening’s entertainment—carefully selecting songs that reflect each exciting moment.

From television’s “Love Boat” theme and “Movin’ on Up” from the “The Jeffersons” to Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” and Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,” The up-tempo tunes inspire the audience to clap, sing along and intermittently rise to their feet for a minute or two of blissful boogying.

Like clockwork, in shuffles the “Rose Man,” a teddy bearish elder whose seemingly peculiar presence at Drag Bingo has become so commonplace, his arrival is always announced over the loudspeakers.

“Give it up for the Rose Man. It’s the hardest working man on 17<sup>th</sup> Street,” Couture croons. “He’s been up since 6 a.m. stealing the roses from every cemetery in D.C. Please buy his roses.”

An unidentified customer buys roses for the hostesses and the Rose Man allows the gals to select their flowers from his overflowing basket.

“We got roses!” Couture announces. “Why?” Adams wonders.

“Because we’re beautiful—dammit,”  
Couture yaps back.

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Watching the hilarity ensue from a front and center table are Roland Foster, Darren Silvis and Kristina Sine—drag bingo regulars. Their loyalty to the game has generated camaraderie between them and the drag divas, Sine says.

“Xavier and Gigi are more like friends. They know us by name and we see them on the street,” she adds.

The three speak about the drag queens with reverence and admiration, and attending bingo is clearly a highlight of their workweek. Silvis calls Bloomingdale and Couture “celebrities in their own right” and promises “you won’t find this at any other bar.”

Several other nightclubs in the area have tried to woo bingo devotees with similar game nights—with what Chaos regulars deem unimpressive results.

Cobalt, a club just two blocks from Chaos, introduced drag queen bingo—on the same night, at the same time, Silvis says. Cobalt’s version “has a little snootier feel,” he says.

Bingo enthusiast Foster adds 14<sup>th</sup> Street eatery Hamburger Mary’s to the list of bingo bars.

“They are all very different,” Sine says. “Hamburger Mary’s was lame. They gave away plastic [prizes] and food from the restaurant. At Cobalt, you had to pay to play. It was kind of like a Moose club minus the old ladies...and instead there were a bunch of old queens.”

Unlike for the threesome at the front table, for Jefferson Tucker tonight is a first for

drag bingo. Tucker, who has heard about the event for several years, finally came to see what all the fuss was about.

“I liked the way they kept joking throughout the bingo,” he recalls after the event. “It was more like a comedy show than anything else.”

Although he wasn’t fortunate enough to win all night, Tucker left with high spirits. Next time, he’ll persuade some friends and coworkers to come along.

“Everybody needs a good time out...to get away from work and stress,” he says. “I think it was the best time I’ve had in a while.”

The front table regulars agree.

“The girls are totally uncensored,” Sine says. “They say whatever the hell they want...It’s comedy, it’s entertainment.”

For Foster, attending drag queen bingo is a reminder of church-sponsored bingo games he played as a child.

“It’s much better when the drag queens run it than when the nuns do...although they were fun too,” he muses.

A round of bingo comes to a close and three fresh drinks are delivered to the divas on stage. The audience is overflowing with exuberance, and before the next round begins, a favorite toast is offered up by the hostesses.

“To all the men we’ve loved before; to all the men we’re loving right now; to all the men we’ll love in our future...f--k ‘em.”  
The show must go on.!

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