

Tacos and High Heels Diversion with a Different Twist

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By **SERGIO CHAPA/ Al Día**

It's Friday night and the customers inside the El Ceviche Loco seafood restaurant off Lake June Road in Pleasant Grove appear to be very excited.

The rhythms of cumbias fill the air of a place packed with families, children, young couples, grandparents and some men dressed in western-style clothes -- all of them are Hispanic.

The waitresses scramble to bring their customers frozen margaritas, beer, sodas and large platters of food.

In the back of the restaurant, the members of the transgendered performance group "Gaby Illusions" have created a makeshift dressing room where the artists quickly coordinate wigs, high heels, makeup and outfits while also preparing late-minute musical selections on compact discs and hand-written notes.

All of a sudden, one of the members of the group announces "first call" for the show. The audience is waiting.

A few minutes later, a cumbia titled "Por un Rato" by the Paraguayan group Aroma cues up as two transgendered performers come out of the dressing room, make their way through the crowd and take the stage where they lip-synched a duet launched into a dance routine.

The audience applauds and a few people raise their hands offering dollar bills as tips to the performers. A 5-year-old girl was given a dollar bill by her mother while a teenage boy at another table was later dared by his family to offer another dollar bill to the performers.

Shows like these repeat themselves almost daily at several taquerías and restaurants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area where owners already offer karaoke, mariachis and live music.



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Those same eating places have incorporated drag shows featuring celebrity imitations, dance routines and comedy as another way to attract Hispanic customers.

The phenomenon is almost exclusive to the Dallas-Fort Worth area where according to several restaurant owners, the number of establishments offering drag shows has increased over the last two or three years.

There are no exact numbers or studies to document the growth but crowds at restaurants such as Rio Bravo in Grand Prairie, Guadalajara Mariscos in Arlington, El Meson Maya in East Dallas, Chula Vista in Northwest Dallas and El Ceviche Loco in Pleasant Grove give a good idea about the popularity of the shows.

“Fridays were very bad for us,” recalled Jose Coria, owner of El Ceviche Loco. “But as soon as we brought in the show, business increased and I mean it increased good.”

Coria admits that he and his family feared that his restaurant would be labeled as a “gay” place in a predominately Hispanic immigrant neighborhood, but his fears quickly disappeared. The great majority of his clients are families who bring their children.



Diana Guzman is a frequent customer of the restaurant. The Mexican immigrant from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico said she attends the show at El Ceviche Loco with her husband and children almost every Friday where they enjoy the food, family atmosphere and variety show, which includes comedy and musical numbers.

“This is something that the kids can see because nothing bad happens,” she said. “It doesn’t make us blush in front of our children.”

Gabriela “Gaby” Duarte, the artistic leader of Gaby Illusions, said they faced prejudice, discrimination and sometimes insults when she and others first started performing in Mexican restaurants several years ago but over the last two or three years their shows have gained acceptance among a growing heterosexual audience.

“I’ll tell you one thing, we’re the only group that is being contracted for parties, baby showers and quinceañeras,” said Gaby, an immigrant from El Salvador. “So, there’s something there. You know it’s funny but a lot of people have told me, ‘Oh, we hired mariachis before but we bored with that and now we prefer to hire a drag show. We have more fun and it costs us the same.’”

Non-Threatening Shows

Leila Rupp, a gay and lesbian studies professor with the University of California in Santa Barbara, said a restaurant in Key West, Florida and other gay friendly areas have presented drag shows to straight audiences.

But she assured that the Dallas drag shows are the only ones in the United States that have succeeded in the sense that they are widely accepted by a large Hispanic and heterosexual audience.

“This has the potential to break down barriers of homophobia, especially in the Mexican community where it’s the effeminacy that’s considered negative,” Rupp said.

She added that the shows are successful because they are “non-threatening” and are limited to entertainment or the imitation of celebrities.

Pleasant Grove resident Miguel Garcia acknowledged that one would not be able to find such drag shows in his Durango, a state in western Mexico known for its masculine cowboys and distinctive style of music.

But Garcia said he, his wife, their four children and his sisters enjoy the show at El Ceviche Loco because “it’s the United States” and because it gives them the opportunity to see artists that would have cost them hundreds of dollars to see in concert.

“The kids like to come and see the stars,” he said.

Sylvia Rodriguez, an elderly Pleasant Grove resident, said she and her sisters were at a recent show to celebrate one of their birthdays and to enjoy the show but she said she would not bring her grandchildren to see it.

“The words they use are a little strong, but the show and what they are doing is nice,” Rodriguez said.

Femininity Under Scrutiny

Gaby, the director of the El Ceviche Loco show, said her group employs at least five people full-time but also brings in out-of-town talent and other guests.

Each show is different and includes several musical numbers, outfit changes, dance routines, comedy and humorous exchanges between the performer and audience.

She said the members of the group combine their collective experience in theater, dance, makeup, costumes, perfume and the power of “illusion” to transform themselves into the most famous stars of Latin America.

Each night, the members of the group transform themselves into artists such as Paulina Rubio, Selena, Alejandra Guzman, Gloria Trevi and Jenni Rivera, among others. The men in the group imitate artists such as El Chapo de Sinaloa or Marco Antonio Solis.



“At first they didn’t (accept us), but now they do,” Gaby said. “And do you know why? Because we showed them that we didn’t come to play around, that we’re not people that by simply dressing up as women were going to put on a show. That is to say that in reality, we’re artists.”

Gaby said the heterosexual audiences in other restaurants did not like the “grotesque” appearance and behavior of other transgendered performers and as a consequence she now asks her performers to look as feminine, pleasant and charismatic as possible.

“In the restaurant drag shows, they didn’t like the ones before because they scared them, they put super giant wigs...they only accept the closet to a women they can see and for that reason we try to make ourselves look feminine,” she said.

The Value of Persistence

Oscar Palacios, who manages the transgendered performance group “Extasis”, said he performed in the first restaurant drag show about 10 years ago at the Chula Vista restaurant in Northwest Dallas but it was not well-received by a straight, male immigrant audience.

According to Palacios, he and his companions faced prejudice, discrimination and insults but found a loyal audience through their persistence. A few years ago, they began to receive calls from other restaurants that heard they were doing good business and wanted to start a show of their own.

“It was our persistence but also the people that changed,” Palacios said. “The people became accustomed to it, they adapted and they accepted us.”

Palacios said his group works full-time in five restaurants in Dallas, Fort Worth and Arlington as well as receiving invitations to perform in restaurants in other Texas cities such as San Antonio.

“In Dallas there are a lot of immigrants but there are also a lot of gay Latinos and we always pull for one another,” he said.

Mimi Casanova, an artist and leader of another performance group, said she recently began to offer a weekend drag show at Don Pedro’s restaurant in Pleasant Grove.

Casanova said her show has succeeded in attracting people to other restaurants such as the Taquería La Condesa in the Oak Lawn area.

The drag show veteran said she has performed in Los Angeles, Denver and Chicago but now has established herself in Dallas where she has found full-time work.



On top of the daily work, Casanova also performs in several fundraisers for various local non-profit organizations and children in need of organ donations.

Last December while attending a church service to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe, Casanova met Irving Olivas, a 13-year-old boy, who was suffering because he needed a liver transplant.

The encounter moved Casanova and prompted her to raise money to help him get the transplant. She personally held several events in local restaurants, dance halls and gay bars where she raised thousands of dollars for the family.

Olivas finally eventually received his liver transplant in a California hospital and is now recuperating from the surgery.

“It’s something I’ve always done,” Casanova said of her charity work.

Educating Latinos

For Dallas’ gay community, the popularity of shows has had many positive results.

Fernie Sanchez, an intake supervisor with AIDS Arms of Dallas and president of the gay Latino group Valiente, said the drag shows give honest employment to a group of people often marginalized by society’s prejudice and intolerance.

“(The shows) provide members of the transgendered Latino community with the means to have gainful employment where they’re not going to get beat up or put themselves at risk,” Sanchez said.

“A lot of the transgendered folks I work with at AIDS Arms at some point or another have turned to the sex industry because that’s all they have. They won’t get hired because of who they are and how they look and because they’re different. What better way to change that around and getting paid for who you are and doing something you like to do?”

While rejecting false stereotypes that all gay men like to dress up as women, Sanchez said the transgendered performers have the opportunity to educate their straight audience about issues that affect the gay community.

“(What they do) gives visibility and lets people know that there are transgendered people in the world and they are part of the community just like they are. Visibility is so important for gaining acceptance in a culture or community,” he said.



Monica Greene, a former city council candidate and owner of the Monica’s Acá y Allá restaurant in Deep Ellum, said she and other transgendered professionals have worked hard to find success in areas other than entertainment.

Although she believes the shows are beneficial, Greene said people need to accept the transgendered in any profession they choose.

Jesse Garcia, president of the Stonewall Democrats and member of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Rainbow Council, said the restaurant drag shows are another link between homosexual and heterosexual members of the Latino community.

“Dallas has one of the highest tolerance levels for gays,” Garcia said. “There are many openly gay elected officials with strong political and visible ties to the Hispanic community. They are accepted.”

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