IN FASHION

The Life of the Party

SUSANNE BARTSCH's worries are the worries of any anxious hostess: that nobody will show up for the night she organizes on the last Thursday of every month at the Copacabana, the club on East Sixtieth Street; that the people who do come will just stand around with drinks in their hands, looking bored; that the spontaneous combustion that makes for a successful party will never take place. "I'm sorry I have to charge you," she tells her friends, who number in the hundreds, "but you understand." She really is, and they do—after all, she has to make a living. Even so, she manages to keep the price at the door to ten dollars, which is fairly reasonable when you consider what you're getting: two dance floors, musclemen, voguers, drag queens, to say nothing of Bartsch herself, presiding over events in some gala showgirl concoction that pushes up her breasts and cinches in her waist, and wearing her trademark platform shoes, false eyelashes, and, often, a wig that makes no attempt to pass itself off as human hair. The truth is she has no cause for concern. The people who turn out for her nights at the Copa come determined to let loose for the space of a few hours, all got up—a large percentage of them in drag—in outfits they've been working on for weeks. Many of them look like refugees from a Fellini movie. Sooner or later, the place is so packed that the Fire Department arrives. Still, Bartsch gets on the phone the next day and calls her friends to ask if they had a good time.

Dubbed "the Queen of the Night," Bartsch is the first to admit that her empire isn't what it used to be, before she came to power, and that it's AIDS that has put a damper on the fun. Even so, although the prospect of spending the night with a stranger is now fraught with all kinds of qualifications, not everyone is staying home alone, and for many of those who do go out, the erotic adventures seem these days to be not so much sexual as sartorial. Despite the Dionysian mayhem, Bartsch's parties are closer in spirit to Disneyland than to bathhouse orgies. Louis Canales, a publicity agent and club owner who recently persuaded Bartsch to go to Miami and organize a monthly night there, characterizes the atmosphere as one of "naïve decadence." Marc Jacobs, the designer for Perry Ellis and a friend of Bartsch's, marvels at her seemingly indelible innocence. "She can talk about genitalia and having sex with sailors," he says, "and it doesn't seem dirty somehow."

A vixen with the heart of a Girl Scout, Bartsch is beloved by her friends, all of whom, either consciously or inadvertently, do impersonations of her Swiss-German accent, with its interchanged "v"s and "w"s, superimposed on a steady stream of Cockney turns of phrase. Her conversation is a constant source of entertainment. Nouns can become superlative adjectives, as in "a genius hairdo," or "That outfit is showtime!" Mostly because she can't remember people's names but also partly as a term of endearment, she calls everybody, regardless of sex or sexual preference, "girlfriend," the way someone of an older generation might call everybody "dear."

In January, a week before the club night in Miami, the scene in Bartsch's apartment, in the Chelsea Hotel, is one of happy, if way-out, domesticity. In the living room, painted an intense shade of pink, with fat pink and green swirls around a purple sunburst at the center of the ceiling, a hammer and screwdrivers lie scattered next to the fireplace, where her husband has been working, renovating the apartment. Susanne's Rolodexes are lined up on the table, by the phone. In the middle of the floor sits the vacuum cleaner. "Swiss foreplay," she explains.

A slender woman with long, dark, curly hair and bangs that obscure a lack of eyebrows, and with a pointy high-bridged nose and a mouth stained a medium red, Bartsch looks no more than two-thirds her age, which is close to forty. Because she has spent the afternoon calling on potential sponsors for the Love Ball, a benefit she is organizing for AIDS, she is wearing what she jokingly calls her "natural look": a Betsey Johnson jersey zip-front jacket, miniskirt, and leggings, all in a bright-colored print featuring the Statue of Liberty, roses, and hearts wrapped in banners emblazoned "MOM"; black Nike sneakers with two-inch black rubber platforms; and a duckbill cap covered with bright-colored sequins the size of Necco wafers. Her husband, Ty Bassett, who has pale-blue eyes and close-cut blond hair, looks barely twenty-three, which he is. They were married one afternoon three years ago, on a break from decorating a club called Bentley's, on East Fortieth Street, where Bartsch organized a weekly night; they took a cab down to City Hall with their friend Kenny, who works the door at Bartsch's clubs, for a witness. He was wearing a T-shirt that said "KISS ME" on the front and "FUCK ME" on the back. The bride wore jeans. The

OLD MACDONALD CHECKS HIS VOICE MAIL.

wedding rings, bought on Orchard Street, are gold B-boy rings that spread across two fingers: his says "I ♡ SB," hers "I ♡ TY." It seems, however, that Susanne has lost her ring. "Ty says it's an omen," she says. "I say rubbish, it's just a piece of jewelry."

IF there's a theme that runs through the various jobs Bartsch has held, it is perhaps a fascination with the way people present themselves—with clothes and the part they play in people's imaginations. But this was never a conscious preoccupation, and it's discernible only in retrospect. Bartsch was simply following her instincts.

She arrived in New York nine years ago, by way of London, where she had gone in 1967 to get out of Switzerland. Born and brought up in Bern, she comes from good, solid mountain stock—her parents were, by her own description, "the kind of people who went to school on skis." Her father was a flooring contractor. "Tiles and winyls," she says. "And my mother was a kept woman—she was at home doing the children." A few months before her sixteenth birthday, Susanne escaped to London, ostensibly to learn English. Before long, feeling restless, she ran out on her host family and, her allowance having been cut off and her student visa revoked, found herself slicing Emmenthal cheese at the Swiss Center. Eventually, she took up with a man who had a shop in the Fulham Road called Universal Witness, selling up-to-the-minute clothes. Gene Krell, who then owned a store in London called Granny Takes a Trip and knew Bartsch there, says that in those days everybody went out every night. "You would get your hair cut at Sweeney Todd's, you'd buy your clothes at Granny's or Emmerton & Lambert or Mr. Freedom, and you would go down to clubs like Speakeasy or the Revolution. What was the point of looking fabulous, being all dressed up, and having no place to go?"

One day, while Bartsch was minding the store for her boyfriend, knitting at the cash register, along came a woman who wanted to order a sweater like the one she was making. Bartsch quoted her the audacious price of three hundred pounds. "And she says fine. And I said, 'O.K. Well! Size?' " So began Bartsch's first commercial venture—designing sweaters that were knitted by women in Brixton and bought by Led Zeppelin and other rock groups. On a trip to Italy, she fell in love, and, spending all the money she'd earned, stayed six months—long enough for the business to collapse and her boyfriend to call it quits. In retrospect, however, she considers him an important influence on her life. "I was very young," she says, "and had I gone to the wrong people I could have ended up on the straight side."

Bartsch rattled around London, working as a hairdresser's receptionist, running an antique-clothing stand in the Chelsea Market, eventually dealing in old jewelry and, she says, "bric-a-brac." In 1981, she came to New York to visit an English painter living in the apartment that is now hers ("I did all right there, didn't I?" she says), and decided to stay. She recalls, "He used to tell me, 'You shouldn't be selling dead people's goods. You're very creative—you should make things and deal in what's happening now.' I said to myself, 'Why don't I import what I miss?' Which at that time was that ever-changing London fashion scene—one week it was the New Romantics, the next week something else. You just couldn't believe how different people looked from one week to the next, what fabulous statements they made. There was nothing like that here—here it was very straightforward. So I looked around: SoHo would be the place for me. And I found this little place down on Thompson Street, which was affordable, the right size, the landlord was gorgeous—everything seemed right. So I went back to London, and I asked all these people like Body Map, Stephen Jones, Andrew Logan, would they be interested? And they all said, 'Yeah, great.' Most of them were still at school, and they were happy to knock out a few tops."

The shop, called simply Susanne Bartsch, created such interest in these designers that it was soon in danger of being crowded out of business. "Before I knew it," Bartsch says, "all these stores wanted to buy this stuff, and they all were going to England—Macy's and Bloomingdale's and Barneys—and I said, 'My God, I'm going to go under, I can't compete with that.' And then the competition angle and all that got me thinking, and I said, 'I know what to do—represent the people. If I represent them, I'm happy if the whole world sells them, because then I'm in, I'll make a little money from it.' "

Bartsch rounded up twenty English designers to take part in a show called "New London in New York," which she produced, first at the Roxy, in the spring of 1983, and in successive seasons at the Limelight. In the fall of 1984, she took her show to Tokyo, where it played for three days straight. Marc Jacobs, who was then working as a salesman at Charivari, says that Bartsch's English shows reminded him of the haute couture in a way—that although the attitude was, of course, completely different, these were clothes made for a very few people and for the sake of having a show. "I remember Leigh Bowery's segment of this one particular show," he says. "All these people came out onstage exposing their rear ends, and there were holes cut in all the shirts so the girls' tits stuck out. I thought that the idea of anyone buying these clothes made no sense whatsoever, because these were clothes for a very specific scene, and unless you were part of that scene you wouldn't wear them—they were too weird. Some lady from Long Island wearing a Leigh Bowery shirt just wouldn't make any sense—these clothes only made sense within their context. It was a for-us mentality. The thing about Susanne is it really doesn't matter who you are, no one is excluded from participating. So the idea of the clothes being for 'us'—well, 'us' is whoever wants to be 'us.' "

In the fall of 1984, having found a new store, on West Broadway, and someone to finance it, Bartsch made up her mind to put her energies back into retailing. On her way to work one day, she walked out the front door of the Chelsea Hotel and saw a construction site for a night club. "And I thought, Oh, wow, a club downstairs!" she says. "I should do a night here as a way of promoting the shop—people can wear what they buy and come as special guests. But the guy who was building the club hadn't got a license for drinks, and I said, 'I can't do it, you know—I need drinking, it's important.' "

Meanwhile, the shop was in a bad way. Halfway through the construction, her business partner had pulled out. Bartsch had seen things through by herself for a while, never having enough money to go around. Other

backers came to her rescue. As time went on, however, it was clear that their notion of what the shop was about was not hers. Miserable, aware that the battle was a losing one, she fought for her convictions until finally, one day in June, she walked out, taking nothing but her bottle of Shalimar. By quitting, she had broken her contract, and so she came away with no money. The phone rang: it was the night-club owner, who by this time had his liquor license, asking if Bartsch would like to do a night. "Yes, desperate," she said.

The club was called the Savage, and what started as a lark, on a Tuesday night in August of 1987, soon turned into a weekly tradition. John Badum, a vice-president of the sportswear company Go Silk and a friend of Bartsch's, says that the Savage was a departure from what most clubs had been—that it marked the start in New York of a trend that was already under way in London, where everyone would converge on a specific night "at a club that was otherwise totally naff." He calls the Savage's predecessors, clubs like Studio 54, Area, the Palladium, "superclubs put together by big investment groups—they wanted to be *the* hot spot in town every night." When Bartsch brought people to the Savage, it was to some place they had never heard of. At Studio 54, with its sod installed around the dance floor for a single night, at Area, with its animals and window displays, at the Palladium, with its wall of video monitors, the décor was part of the show. The Savage was a club completely devoid of décor; the experience consisted of the people and the music. It was, in short, a club that could move around, could convene and adjourn at will. Badum calls it "the born-in-the-wagon-of-a-travelling-show disco event."

When, several months later, Bartsch moved her weekly night to Bentley's, it was because she wanted a club with two dance floors—one for house music, one for disco. "And there I said, 'What can I add?' " she recalls. "I found these strippers who were brilliant, and, you know, they're always playing these sleazy clubs with drooling old men for an audience. I wanted to bring this stripping into a trendy environment—somewhere it wasn't about having a wank, excuse me." It was at Bentley's, in the beginning of 1988, that Bartsch started to add bodybuilders and drag queens, as go-go dancers, to the mix. Bartsch says that if she can be credited with some original contribution to night life in New York, it's that she took all these people out of their various corners—the drag queens out of the gay bars, the musclemen out of the gyms, the strippers out of the sex joints—and brought them into her club. With the drag queens, the standard for dressing up was raised even higher. "The night club was geared to being able to feature looks," Bartsch says. "I wanted people to come out there and show off their drag. And when I say 'drag' I don't mean that a woman has to turn into a man, or vice versa. I mean, get your goods out of the closet, you know? In England, it's slang for dressing up." By the time Bartsch's bandwagon pulled into the Copacabana, in July of 1988, a good percentage of the customers were turning out in drag as well—the show was no longer confined to the stage.

THE setup at the Copa is the same as it was at Bentley's: upstairs, a dark room throbbing to the beat of house music; downstairs, flashing colored lights and disco music. Bartsch says that she encourages people to dress up and "make a statement with themselves." Planning what to wear, shopping, getting ready all put a person in the right frame of mind for having a good time. "I mean, if you don't dress it's fine with me, too," she says. "It's not, like, a must. But I think it's an important ingredient of energy and successful atmosphere." Marc Jacobs, who has never missed a Copa night, thinks that there's essentially no difference between a drag queen getting dressed to go there and a socialite putting on her haute-couture gown for a charity ball; both are going to lengths that designate the evening as special, somehow—that invest it with a certain amount of expectation.

John Badum's guidelines for dressing for Bartsch's events are to break every rule and "go whole hog—and always more makeup." Badum says, "Getting dressed, you think, Oh, God, I feel so ridiculous putting this stuff on all alone at home. But then you get to the club, and everyone else is so over the top that you wish you'd done more. If you don't want to make an effort, go to another boring club, or stay home and watch television. But to be involved in any of Susanne's events is to have a little something extra demanded of you, and when you meet the demand I really think you have a better time for it."

There is nothing prurient or sentimental in Bartsch's interest in transvestites. She admires them for their ingenuity, applauds their fantasies, appreciates their outlook—their ability to laugh at themselves, to live for the moment. The fact that drag really works only one way—that a woman dressed as a man isn't as fascinating or as funny as a man dressed as a woman—has not escaped her attention. "It's the makeup that does it," she says. "And also the heels." Besides, she remarks, women today are already halfway there—wearing pants, flat shoes, little or no makeup. Jacobs thinks that a woman dressed as Cary Grant just isn't as interesting visually as a man dressed as Marilyn Monroe. "Glamour for a man runs a lot deeper than the surface," he explains, "whereas glamour for a woman in most people's minds is totally superficial."

Nearly everyone, when talking about Bartsch's parties, praises "the energy," describing it as "pure" and "positive," in contrast to the negative or druggy atmosphere of so many other clubs. Ronnie Cooke, a friend of Bartsch's who was for eight and a half years the fashion director of *Details*, says that she was "the first one to make it O.K. to have fun in New York." Before she ushered in a new era, night life here operated according to the same subtle distinctions that regulate life in New York by day: who you are, how much money you make, what you do for a living, who your father was. At clubs like Nell's and, before that, at Studio 54, status was a big part of the package. Club owners then "cast" their clubs the way directors cast a movie, with the audition at the door. Admission was an accomplishment on which the people inside could congratulate themselves; they felt special, chosen, superior to all those poor, shivering hopefuls lined up outside behind the ropes.

The snap judgments on which a club's exclusivity used to be based often came down to matters of fashion. Gene Krell, who now works the door for Bartsch's club nights, was born and brought up in Brooklyn; he recalls working the door at Xenon, where the management wanted him to turn away

his own brother because he was wearing an open-collared shirt with a gold chain. At Studio 54, the door policy was mostly concerned with keeping out the "Saturday Night Fever," John Travolta types. A lot of clubs disqualified anyone wearing acid-washed jeans. Krell says that at a club where he worked the door back in the mid-sixties men wearing hats didn't get in—an attempt to screen out the pimps. In those days, the enemy was easier to identify. Now, he says, the only surefire way to get turned away is "to be smug and tell the person at the door, 'I'm a friend of Jean Paul Gaultier.' "

The consensus is that Bartsch somehow manages to cross boundaries, to break down the barriers that divide New York into dozens of social ghettos. Uptown types, downtown types, East Siders, West Siders, movie stars, models, businessmen, transvestites—they're all there. One night, she introduced John Badum, who had come as Elizabeth Taylor, to Malcolm Forbes. Bartsch's standards are egalitarian, democratic. Krell says that to the extent that there's a formula to her success it's that she brought together the various factions that exist in New York. "She capitalized on the contrasts," he says.

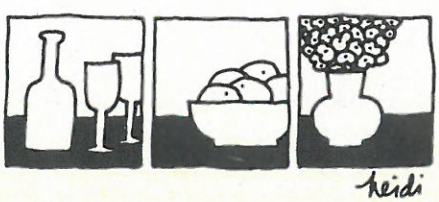
Celebrity is completely lost on Bartsch in most cases. "I'm So-and-So," some Hollywood actor will tell her, waiting for the door to swing open at the drop of his household name. "I don't care who you are," she replies. "Come on in and have a good time." If, however, a drag queen approaches her and introduces herself as Marlene Dietrich, Bartsch will say something on the order of "I'm glad to meet you, Marlene." Marc Jacobs compares Bartsch to party promoters like Nikki Haskell and Carmen d'Alessio, who presided over New York night life in the late seventies and early eighties and filled the clubs with Eurotrash. "They were so phony, running around with people with fake titles," he says. "If Susanne is running around with some drag queen with a fake title, it's *deliberately* fake, not trying to be something that it's not."

Occasionally, a friend will take her aside and point out the rich and the famous making their way through the crush at the door. "Good," she says. "Then they can afford to pay." Though Bartsch's nights have for some time now been her main means of support, the money always seems incidental. "You see, I want to do things people can afford, that don't cut a hole in their pockets," she explains. Beyond a certain price, she says, people have to think twice about coming, and then the whole prospect becomes more serious, and you attract a different crowd.

The one exception to Bartsch's admission policy is the Love Ball, the benefit for the Design Industries Foundation for AIDS that she masterminded two years ago, and its sequel, which she is planning now, to take place on May 22nd, at Roseland. Moved to action in 1988 by the news that several friends were sick, she organized an evening modelled on the house balls popular in Harlem: rigorously stylized sendups of fashion shows, in which various teams, or "houses," competed in several dance styles, including one called voguing—a sequence of freeze-frame moves based on the highly contrived poses found in old fashion photographs. She persuaded corporations to sponsor the event. People came from all corners of society and paid up to five hundred dollars for their tickets. In the end, the party went down in history as one of the best New York had ever seen and netted over four hundred thousand dollars for the cause. Bartsch calls it "the best thing I've ever done."

Her parties have by this time attracted a good many imitators—various entrepreneurs who have tried, unsuccessfully, to copy her formula. Bartsch has nothing against them. She says she thinks they fail because they're doing it "for the sake of promoting themselves and making a wage, and there just isn't the same flair as if it's something from your heart, you know?"

THE hotels lined up along Ocean Drive in Miami Beach are interrupted by an occasional convenience store in need of a new paint job or by a run-down deli selling pizza by the slice. On the inland side are low, pastel stucco apartment buildings with louvered windows, set back from the street. On Weber Beach, in front of the Waldorf, nicknamed after the Calvin Klein Obsession ads that Bruce Weber shot there, young men and women with well-oiled, muscular bodies sunbathe, hoping to get discovered. Up and down Lincoln Avenue, on the sidewalk in front of the souvenir shops and cut-rate clothing stores, the language buzzing through the air is Spanish.



South Beach, as this whole area is called, is what's known as a "transitional" or "up-and-coming" neighborhood, and it's following the usual trajectory. Ten years ago, this was primarily a ghetto for two populations living side by side and ignoring each other: for elderly Jewish people living in furnished rooms—people who on their Social Security and their small pensions couldn't afford to move to the condos in Broward—and for the residue of the 1980 Mariel boatlift. The crime rate ran high. Louis Canales remembers that six years ago, when he was a photographer's rep in New York and started commuting to Miami, he would run red lights on Washington Avenue if there was a gang standing on a street corner. Then the neighborhood started to turn around, as preservationists came to the defense of the outstanding tropical Art Deco architecture that fills the landscape, and as photographers and art directors began to discover that Miami has, as Canales puts it, "perfect light three hundred days a year." New York modelling agencies like Zoli, Click, Ford, and Wilhelmina opened branch offices there, and now you can find, by Canales' estimate, some twenty-four hundred professionally attractive people in a ten-block stretch—people who frequent the new restaurants, serving grilled vegetables, and the gay bars that have sprung up in the area. Local artists have taken space in its commercial buildings. Riding the crest of the trend are the New Yorkers who have bought houses or apartments in Miami as a wintertime alternative to Southampton or Fire Island. A changing parade of tan Europeans passes through, lingering in the late afternoon at the sidewalk tables of the Time Café.

In 1986, when Canales, who is Cuban-American and grew up in New York, moved to Miami Beach, he found a city so socially segregated that not only, for example, would Cubans refuse to speak to Puerto Ricans, but upper-class Cubans from Coral Gables would have nothing to do with blue-collar Cubans from Hialeah. Canales, an affable man in his forties, who

dresses entirely in black, has a vision, though he's too modest to call it that: he wants to "build bridges" across these lines and get everybody talking to everybody else. "Not that I think that I'm a knight on a white horse," he says, "but if I'm going to live here I want to make things happen." At first, trusting in the universal language of music and art, he tried producing cultural events, and lost a lot of money doing it. "But after being here and going out every night I realized that Miami is a party town," he says, "and, as pathetic as it may seem, the agora of Miami is going to be the dance floor."

Canales and his wife, Jan, managed the Miami Film Festival. They were instrumental in starting a local magazine, modelled on *Interview* and called *Post Mortem*. They opened a private club, called Semper's, in South Beach. For a while, Canales organized a weekly party that moved from place to place, drawing people from Coral Gables, from Turnberry, from Coconut Grove: he would leave the particulars on his answering machine—a tactic he describes as "egalitarian but élitist." Anyone could get the number, which was listed in the directory, but you had to know enough to call.

It was last fall that Canales persuaded Bartsch to come to Miami and do a monthly party along the lines of her nights at the Copa. "Miami needed an infusion of Susanne—her point of view, her sense of fun," he says. He introduced her to the owners of a club called Warsaw, on Ocean Drive. For the first party, in November, there was no charge at the door—a gesture that Bartsch considered an investment. For the second, she charged five dollars. This time, she's raising the price to seven to help cover the expenses—plane tickets, taxis, hotel rooms for two d.j.s and nine drag queens. "I keep them there for three days, so they don't get worn out," she says. "I could send them overnight, but I think that's a bit mean, and I want them to be in good spirits."

On a Thursday afternoon in January, Bartsch and her husband are installed at 100 Lincoln Road, a crescent-shaped high-rise residence hotel that is set roughly perpendicular to the shore, so that its balconies look straight down the beach. The hotel's elderly permanent residents are by now accustomed to a procession of exotic characters through their midst once a month. "So!" one woman, with a poodle on a leash, says to another, carrying a bag of groceries, as they stand waiting for the elevators. "I hear Susanne Bartsch is back in town."

Bartsch looks after her charges, making their reservations, registering their complaints. "Mother Teresa in a glitter G-string," John Badum calls her. That afternoon, there had been an altercation at the hotel pool involving Alexis del Lago, a drag queen in her late forties who has come out of retirement in San Juan to work Bartsch's party. To swim in the pool is free; to sit on one of the chaise longues is a dollar. Alexis is indignant that she had to pay to sunbathe, and she explains to Bartsch that, being a diva, she felt justified in pitching a fit. "A diva wouldn't make a fuss about a dollar," Bartsch tells her. "I'll reimburse you."

Thursday night, Bartsch and her husband go out to dinner with Canales, his wife, and Marc Jacobs and his friend Scott Fritz, who have flown in for the party. The conversation turns to drag bars in Tokyo, where Jacobs reports having seen a sumo wrestler in fish-net stockings who, in a variation on the old karate cliché, puts a piece of wood on two supports and chops it in half with his penis.

Bartsch recommends a Thai restaurant in Paris where, after the dinner is served, a curtain is drawn across the entrance to the kitchen, and the waiters and cooks change into drag. But, for the most part, she says, the drag queens in Europe "want to *be* women—they want to be real."

Jacobs says, "The ones in Japan aren't doing the more glamorous side of it—they're lip-synching to Madonna or Paula Abdul and wearing really trashy lingerie, but not, like, *old* trashy, and there isn't humor in it. Somehow, it's too serious. Also, a lot of them are heroin addicts, and they're really high on stage, and you know that they're doing these shows to pay for their operations or their junk." It is agreed all around that the best drag queens are right here in America.

"For sure," Bartsch says. "Better than anywhere." She has been trying to persuade Ty to go to the party tomorrow night in drag. He doesn't seem too keen.

FRIDAY afternoon, Bartsch summons the members of her crew to the club at one to help her decorate. But the day is bright, and the warm air has slowed

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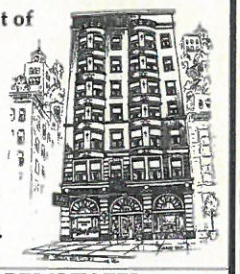

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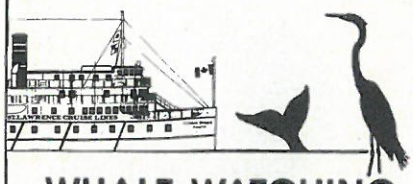

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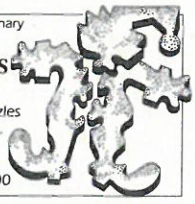

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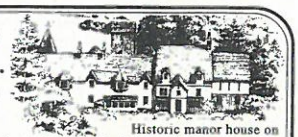

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everyone's pace. At one-thirty, I step into Warsaw's cavernous darkness—black walls, black ceiling, black bar—and find Susanne cutting crêpe-paper streamers, Ty trying to figure out how the machine that blows up the balloons works, and a handful of local guys setting up the lights. Only Mme. Ekathrina Sobechanskaya, otherwise known as Madame, has been by. The founder and director (as Larry Ree) and prima ballerina of the Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet Company, a drag-ballet company based in New York, she stayed long enough to complain about the gels, announced that she was not about to waste her time waiting for "all these queens," and left. One by one, in good time, the others drift in.

Alan Mace, the d.j., who has been with Bartsch since Bentley's, arrives. He says that for these parties in Miami he plays "the latest, most up-to-date New York sound, mostly house music," but that tonight he'll be sharing the booth with Johnny Dynell, another New York d.j., and that they'll mix in some old disco as well. "I don't have a serious attitude about the music," he explains. "I just try to keep the energy up. My emphasis is for everybody to have a good time, so they can drop their worries from the outside world." Mace also d.j.s at the Limelight on Saturday nights. "That's a more conservative, straight crowd, and I have to work a lot harder," he says. "Susanne's parties are the best. People come expecting a circus, and they get it. They're in a party mood, rarin' to go. And you have all the visuals." Mace d.j.s. in drag, as Sister Dimension—affectionately known as Sister. To look up at the booth and see, say, a nurse spinning the records "adds to the madness," he explains.

Bartsch's costumes are designed by Pearl, who also works her parties. In a voice so soft that a listener has to lean forward to hear the ends of his sentences, he talks about his involvement in the theatre—in Johannesburg, where he grew up, helping out in wardrobe departments during school vacations, and then in London, where he worked at Covent Garden and did costumes for Michael Clarke, Matthew Hawkins, and other dancers, and now, since last summer, in New York, where he is attracting new commissions. He thinks that theatrical dance has got "a bit dull" since the all-purpose Spandex unitard entered the repertory. "What's important for me is to be stimulated visually," he explains. He likes to look at fashion magazines to see what people are doing, he says, but he has no interest in making clothes that could be presented in a fashion show, or in having his name on a label that people could sell in a shop. All the pieces he makes for Bartsch are one of a kind. Most of them, he says, take corsetry as their point of departure. "First and foremost, it's attack the waistline," Pearl explains, "and get that right down to as far as she's prepared to go, which is eighteen inches." The first outfit he made for her was what he calls "a dildo corset"—with a huge appliquéd penis, the head embroidered in fake rubies, with two large crystal stones for testicles, and a spray of wired pearls ("for a necklace look") emerging from the top. For New Year's Eve, he made her a sheer-mesh unitard that laced up the legs in back and was covered in swirl-shaped gold pigskin appliqués and encrusted with pearls—"so that when she wears it she looks nude and the appliqués look like tattoos," he explains. Once, on a trip to Paris, Bartsch went to Pigalle and bought a pair of S & M boots, which she brought back to Pearl as the basis for what she describes as "a saloon look." He did some research in fetish magazines from the twenties and thirties, and combined ideas he found there —"which were really beautiful," he says—with a circus-pony headpiece: a spike sprouting pink feathers. Pearl readily admits that these garments "are not (a) comfortable, or (b) meant for riding around in taxis," and he adds, "I do sometimes feel sorry for the people who have to wear them. But I think a costume is something one learns to work with."

Gina Germaine arrives wearing high heels, jeans, and a lacy black bra that puckers slightly across the cups, the way a young girl's does when she doesn't quite fill it out. "Cowabunga, dudes," she greets the guys working on the lights. She insists on being identified as "New York's Most Popular Party Girl." "Write it down," she tells me, in a breathy contralto. I ask her where she's from. New York, she says, but originally Alabama. I tell her I don't hear an accent. "It's in there," she assures me. Her show clothes are designed by her dressmaker, Dorinne Corey, who lives in Harlem; every-

thing else she buys off the rack. She works all over—in the Poconos, in Richmond, as well as at the Copa. "Mostly, I just walk around and look beautiful and let everybody else dance," she says. She has brought six changes of costume for tonight, and when she's asked to describe the look she has been doing lately she answers, "Suzanne Somers in Las Vegas—healthy, substantial, powerful, aggressive."

Baroness Ostentasia Vulgari—called Baroness for short, with the accent on the "-ess"—travels with a thirty-six-inch Pullman on wheels, a wig case, and a monogrammed Louis Vuitton train case to carry her jewels. She began working Bartsch's parties a year ago, when she turned up at the Copa wearing a look Bartsch liked, and was hired. What was the look? "Very high-fashion glamour, yet trashy," she explains. On the strength of her reputation in the clubs in Manhattan, she is in the process of launching a store downtown. It will sell what she calls "club clothes," and feature some East Village designers and also Anthony Wong, who makes Baroness's own wardrobe. Baroness as a character—and Baroness *is* a character, complete with a European past, a trail of ex-husbands (some dead, some divorced), scandalous rumors that continue to follow her, and an extensive collection of jewels that are her trophies—was born one night two years ago, when her alter ego, otherwise known as Joseph, decided to go to a club in drag for the first time. "I was with a friend," she explains, "and when we got there I said to him, 'Look at the line outside this club. I'm too old to wait on line—I did that years ago. Let's go home.' He said, 'No, no, no, get out of the cab and see what happens.' I got out of the cab. The doorperson parted the crowd and opened up those velvet ropes. And I have to tell you this: every time those velvet ropes open up for me, it's still a thrill, no matter how many times it happens."

Matthew Andersen, who goes by the name of Plague ("as in bubonic," he volunteers), is a makeup artist and hairdresser for fashion sittings. "I'm a drag queen, but I don't try to look like a woman, because I'm a six-foot man with a man's face," he explains. "So I don't wear fake breasts or do horrendous things to my genitals to get them out of the way. I'm more of a creature, really." Andersen, who was born and brought up in Australia and moved to New York three years ago, is half of a double act with his friend Zaldy, a delicate young man with exotic Filipino features and silky black hair down to his waist. In drag, they dress alike. A recent graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, Zaldy is, for the time being, happy doing what he calls "custom stuff," like the Lady Miss Kier's costumes for Deee-Lite's next video. Of the designers working today, he admires Thierry Mugler in particular. Mugler knows Bartsch: he's been to the Copa, and many people have suggested that the clothes he's been designing lately follow her example. "Oh, yeah," Zaldy says, "Susanne has definitely inspired him in a big way. His clothes are getting nastier and scantier, and it's really from her parties."

George Nuñez, who, along with his mother and his brother, Leo, owns and runs Warsaw, arrives at the club late in the afternoon. He surveys the decorations: a giant arch of balloons center stage and bright crêpe-paper streamers hung on the wall as a backdrop; a long fringe of streamers above the bar; more streamers hanging in a halo around the tops of two mirrored columns that border the dance floor like two disco palm trees. The effect is festive, tropical. Nuñez says that what's amazing about Bartsch is the level of energy she brings to a club and then manages to sustain for five hours. Warsaw has been in business a little over a year and a half now, and on an average night it pulls in a few local drag queens, but, he says, they're not as outrageous as Bartsch's, not as stimulating to the club's metabolism. "Because Susanne's drag queens are basically entertainers, and the drag queens we get are full-time—I mean, for them it's a way of life," he explains. "You never see them during the day—or see very few of them. They're night people. Interesting breed." Nuñez pauses for a moment, watching Bartsch and her team tacking balloons to the ceiling. "I don't understand drag queens," he admits. "I mean, if you are gay and you like men, why would you screw a man who looks like a woman?"

At nine-thirty, Madame comes to the door of her suite in her bathrobe, pours us both a peach schnapps, and suggests that I leaf through her enormous album of press clippings while she finishes applying her makeup in the bathroom. Soon she emerges wearing a long Chinese-style sheath, of black velvet and white satin, with black medium-heeled pumps, long white satin gloves, pearl-drop earrings, and a pearl headdress. "Pardon me while I get a fan," she says in a vaguely Russian-accented falsetto. I tell her that I understand she is planning to return to the stage. "I have never stopped performing," she says testily. I ask her about the calendar-girl contest that Bartsch runs here in Miami, as a way of encouraging the local drag queens to turn out. "Ooh," she says, shuddering. "Change the subject on that, darling. That's so *feeble*." I say that I understand she spent the afternoon sewing. "I was hoping that we could talk about something a little more serious," she snaps, "but I guess it's not possible."

"Of course it's possible," I assure her.

"Well," she replies indignantly, "I don't know why I don't get any serious questions."

The doorbell rings. Baroness enters, wearing a strawberry-pink wig and walking friskily in gold lamé spike heels: she has come for help with her dress—a short gold stretch affair with big, square paillettes, the hemline creeping above the tops of her purple stockings, which are hoisted by a garter belt. "*Pardon*," Madame says, in French. "We go in the dressing room."

After Baroness leaves, I ask Madame about the tradition of drag in America. "You know, drag is a very derogatory word in America," she says. "So I always say one shouldn't even mention it." After a moment's consideration, she adds, "I can say I've seen drag for over thirty years in every form, and I think right now it's at the worst it can get. Years ago, when people dragged up, they sat down and designed the dress, went to look for the fabric and the bones and the stays and then for the corset that would work underneath the dress, and they'd have it all made—have the nylons made and have the shoes created and dyed to match the whole. There's no one who does that anymore, except maybe myself. No one. In my time, all of us did it. All of us. Now they're happy to slap on two little lashes and a pot of rouge and wrap half a yard of fabric around themselves, and then they can sing along with anyone they want

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to on the records, and goodbye. Bah to them! What is drag? It means so much to so many people. Most people who find it offensive are homophobic. That's another element of it—you have to broach it, whether you want to deal with it or not."

JUST after midnight, Jacobs, Fritz, and I set out for Warsaw and run into Plague and Zaldy, dressed as twin ostriches and heading back to the hotel for a costume change. A line winds around one side of the club. On the lookout at the door is Ty, wearing a long platinum wig, white platform sandals, a white Playtex-style bra, and a long-line girdle. "That's love," Fritz says.

Inside, Sister Dimension is manning the d.j. booth in Martian drag, wearing an Azzedine Alaia-style acid-green stretch halter bodysuit, which clings to the contours of a fake rear end, and huge arched eyelashes, pointy ears, and antennas that bob in time to the music. Baroness has changed wigs: now she's wearing a silver tinsel China chop. Upstairs, Alexis del Lago is holding court in a navy-and-white silk-charmeuse sailor top and palazzo pants, with a matching beret. The crowd is disproportionately male and bare-chested. There are, however, plenty of local contestants for the Miss January pageant, which is finally won by a queen in housewife drag, who is wearing a shapeless dress and, as a headpiece, a high tower of bright-pink plastic curlers and is carrying a bag of Doritos and a can of Diet Pepsi. The dance floor is variously populated by a cowgirl shooting her pistols; a square-jawed lifeguard type in black-and-white striped trunks and a jester's cap; a bathing beauty wearing a hot-pink tank suit and a ribbon, bandolier-style, that reads "Miss Nicaragua," and carrying roses; and one lost soul in khaki pants and an argyle vest. Pearl, dressed as an orchid, hovers shyly at the edge of the stage. Front and center is Bartsch herself, dancing to her heart's content, in a Brazilian Mardi Gras getup—a "cape" of white maribou over a white bra and white draped bikini briefs, and a white sequin skullcap topped with gigantic white ostrich plumes.

A man sidles up to where I'm standing on the sidelines and offers to buy me a drink. I ask him if he's come to Bartsch's nights before. This is the first time, he replies, but he's been to Warsaw on two other occasions—always at the insistence of his roommate, he hastily explains, who is gay. I understand, I tell him. A silence falls between us as our attention settles on a completely bald man, familiar as a model for Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, wearing a crinoline and dancing on top of a nearby go-go box. "Sad, isn't it?" my neighbor says.

"What's sad?" I ask.

"All these misfits wishing they were something they're not. There are a lot of tragic people in this room." Well, I thought to myself, they certainly don't *look* sad. I remembered something Jacobs had said to me that afternoon: that Bartsch's parties always make him think of kids who weren't accepted by their peers, because they were too effeminate, or too short, or too wide, or too whatever. And now all those outcasts have come together in this disco *Salon des refusés* that Bartsch is running, and together they have found their revenge: while their persecutors have grown up to live life by the book, upholding the conventions by which they are deemed attractive or important or successful, the so-called freaks are revelling in their freakishness, and having such great fun doing it that they've turned the tables—now it's the so-called normal people who are the outsiders, looking in.

By four o'clock, the crowd has begun to thin. The queens, with one or two diehard exceptions, abdicate the stage. The streamers have all been pulled down, but the balloons are intact, like fruit on trees that have lost their foliage. Around four-thirty, Bartsch, still in costume, and Bassett, who has changed back into his street clothes, leave the club.

Back in their penthouse at the hotel, the fatigue all around is catatonic. Jacobs and Fritz stop by. Bartsch is crouched on the floor picking up little white beads that spilled on the carpet, and muttering something about being "such a Wirgo." Baroness sticks her head in, to announce that the queens are all meeting for breakfast at Denny's, across the street. Bartsch declines; she is staying behind to call the airlines and try to get the members of her party who were booked to fly home on Eastern, which has just gone out of business, onto other flights. Jacobs and Fritz decide to call it a night. "Thanks for coming, girlfriends!" Bartsch calls after them. "Did you have a good time?"

—Holly Brubach