

The Thousand and Third Night: Alternative Miss World, 'Wild!'

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Sorry Alice I was drunk and I cannot bear to recall all the bad things I did that night

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1. Put your hands together for Miss Used. Her name is her plaything, an eponymic tease: a semantic role-play. It pulls the red carpet from under your feet: a punning trip-up, as burlesque as her outfit. Her nickname is a sheer one (but a veil, still); with a hole down its centre, it is as thrilling as her ripped stockings. A linguistic hide-and-seek, and a perverse masquerade. She is wearing a strapless, leather basque, tarred and oily. Behind closed doors, she has been laced up by the jail-rat, confined in knots of *his* own making. Sartorial violence is dangerous. But The Sadeain Woman will have her revenge. She will reverse the impulse to passivity, and grab hold of perversity. She will slash at the borders of the bedroom, and cut its curtain loose, to dance obscene moves on an open stage. The severity of her blackened silhouette is lightened by her rose blush and raucous laughter. All the best rebels are tricksters, punching holes in society with puns and pleasure. Miss Used is a black cat, a raven, a panther. She throws down her mask that has been gagging her mouth, finds a voice amidst *his* text: the wild side of language. She reaches the end of the plank, and does not jump to her death. She puts her hand on her hip and pivots, prowling to her backstage lair. From prey to predator, to pun: a raw-hide escape route.

2. And now, please welcome Miss World's End in stars and stripes. Her full-skirted flag skirt tails behind her: six metres in length – it is nearly the length of the catwalk! An oversized gold tassel hugs at her waist, making a 50-star blue-and-white ruffle: a celestial print explosion. She glides with arms-race confidence, and space-race poise. She waves her flame around, lighting up the room. Prêt-à-porter pyrotechnics. She is a powerful symbol of her mother country. Stars blanket her breasts and a lone diamond star crowns her forehead, before radiating outwards into five silver daggers. They look like they could put a hole in your heart. The fabric of her dress sculpts her body into the copper statue she is imitating, and her cheekbones are just as grey and classical. Or neo-classical: an iconographic hangover. It's truly an uncanny resemblance. There is power in parody, right? But... WAIT, Miss World's End has dropped her flaming torch! A ball of fire is hurtling towards the audience. Hoist up your hems!

3. Miss Hackney has swum all the way up the Thames from her sea-bed hiding place, escaped from Poseidon's Atlantis, and said goodbye to his three-pronged patriarchy. And look, she's extinguished the fire with those damp scales of hers! Her orange hair cascades like a waterfall down her back and around her chest. Starfish for nipples. She's wearing a pearl halo, scavenged for by Miss Hackney herself: she is a Mother of Pearl. Stranded above water she still smiles, hoping she'll meet her human prince. Look at her dance around the swimming pool without legs! She shuffles with style, slides from left to right. Her silver tail catches the light and throws kaleidoscopic shapes around the room, like a rainbow jellyfish' day-glo neons. It looks like her tail might have been made out of tin foil, as it crinkles into abstract textures, and silver tidal ripples. It looks ready for eating, a

ready-meal; she has turned the domestic into dream. The mythic wreckage is a playground to splash around in, to rewrite rituals in the dark: to dress-up is to be free: the freedom of fakery.

4. Miss Babylon has made a pilgrimage from the East (to the South-East of London), but it looks like she's fallen from outer space. A constellation of pink planets travels outwards from her anonymous face: a cosmic disguise, a galactic sculpture. She wears a black nylon balaclava, making us guess at what lies beneath. A tarmacked face. These gothic lowlights continue as we follow the contours of her body: she is wearing black feather bracelets and a black feathered codpiece, protecting her frontal modesty. But her body is blue, a bruised cornflower blue. Her skin looks like iridescent glass, but this is only her film; her body is as solid as marble. Miss Babylon is an underground Bernini, with only a T-string up her bum-hole. This carving is ready for the club, ready to drink fountains at Kinky Gerlinky.

5. And last but by no means least, please welcome Miss Crepe Suzette. She is a vision in silver lamé, diamonds and pearls. Her red lips are so kissable, her jewels so stealable. She wears a baby bow on her head, which tricks us into thinking she is angelic. Miss Suzette's body is wrapped up in sugary delights, a Shrove Tuesday treat, and an androgynous trick. Her dress has been ripped to her glittery crotch; drops of sparkle ward off onlookers. Her silver stockings are her lucky charm, as her bandy, sparrow legs make a wink at the audience. This starlet is bird-like, with feathers on her chest. She points her fingers towards the crowd with balletic grace, and seductive knowingness. She knows she is sexy. A sweet-shop tease: iced and dusted, ready for serving.

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And then the curtains close. The past absorbs the performance, only to be revealed again in crêpe-paper, wrinkled fragments: after The Event. These are only snapshots of one night in 1975, relayed: this is all we have left, among the drunken ruins. Everyone remembers the winner: Crepe Suzette, of course, played by Derek Jarman. Miss and Mister: two genders, as interchangeable as King and Queen in a pack of cards. The Alternative Miss World of 1975 (theme: Wild!) was held at Butler's Wharf, a river-reject, a dog-eared edge of London. But rooted a little off-centre, its geographical position was as borderline as its outfits. Finding pleasure in the perverse, like their Surrealist rag-picking forebears, Andrew Logan and his chameleonic tribe of contestants looted jumble sales, and in so doing, loosened the gendered seams.

The material objects that remain, document a revolution in androgyny. In the 1975 invitation, Logan is pictured as a sort of half Pip, half Miss Havisham hybrid: a dialogical collision of penguin suiting, and antique lace; multiplicity made manifest. A two-dimensional Andrew has been split down the middle: half male – tailored and linear, and half female – on the brink of a curtsy. Depicting a performative gender position, the drawing recalls Allen Jones's pop prints for the 1971 edition of Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*, a novel of 'linguistic leprosy', and 'sexual amnesia'. Language and gender are just as mutable in Alternative Miss World: costumes of exploration.

Logan's androgynous template also came two years before Angela Carter's 1977 novel *The Passion of New Eve*, in which a male professor called Evelyn is carved into Eve, a 'lyrical abstraction of femininity' or a 'tinted arrangement of curved line'. (Premeditated artistry.) In Logan's Alternative universe, the mood is just as dualistic: nothing is polarised, and punning names pave the way for paradox. Miss Ogyntist. This is X and Y rebuilding new seams, fooling around, and making a new kind of language: polyphonic and ludic. The ecstasy of drag is to be found in the imagination.

On a summer's night in Paris, June 1911, Paul Poiret threw his notorious masquerade party, 'The Thousand and Second Night'. Sultans skulked around in jewelled velvet slippers, ivory-handled whip in one hand, scimitar in the other. Poiret kept his favourites locked up in a golden cage. Fast-forward six decades, and Logan let his loose in The Gold Room. The Thousand and Third Night is Wild night...

Against a backdrop of polyester satin, and ersatz-gold mineswept walls, the party got primeval. Like real Bakhtinian carnival, it got hot-headed and earthy: a libidinal, uncensored charge of the marginal. Food was all over the floor, chewed up remnants of the feast. There were people having sex in public; blow-jobs at all angles. Logan's younger brother Quentin lost his virginity there too, probably at around midnight. There was a swimming pool around which the contestants shimmied and posed. Logan's co-host, a drunk Mollie Parkin, got thrown in it for calling the former winner a 'tinted person'. 'I thought it was very funny,' she says, 'but people were shocked. I'm Aquarius you see – I do *love* water.'

The water from upstairs started leaking through the floorboards, soaking the contestants in the dressing room a floor below. (Miss Hackney didn't mind, being a mermaid and all.) The cloakroom and toilets were below deck too, and by midnight, the whole of Butler's Wharf went black: the lights fused across the entire building, the men's urinals started overflowing, and the cloakroom staff abandoned ship. Hand-jobs multiplied in number in the darkened anonymity of the scene. A stampede of revellers fought for a quickened exit out of the building, scrambling for their Dior in the dark. The Hollywood star Carroll Baker ('a bit like Pamela Anderson, but without the synthetic tits'), was one of the judges that year, along with Kevin Whitney, Eric Roberts, David Hockney, Robert Medley, Fenella Fielding, Celia Birtwell and Gerlinde Von Regensburg. Baker wore a gold sequined dress and a white fox coat, but the scatological atmosphere soon dirtied her glamour: her hem was stained by primitive piss, and her fur caked in someone else's vomit. She was seen leaving shoeless at the end of the evening.

It's no longer the morning after the night before, but four decades post. Canary Wharf has happened since, and so has cocaine. The drunken high of memory is an act of stumbling narrative: it twists, shuffles and trips, down the stairs and out the door...

A Butler's Wharf Blackout.

Alice Butler

