**Interview with Sabrina White May 10 2019**

**To cite this particular interview, please use the following:**

**Temko, Ezra. 2019. Interview with Sabrina White. *Sociology of Drag, SIUE,* May 10.**

***Transcript*:**

**Interviewer: Okay, so thank you for coming and allowing me to interview you.**

**Sabrina White: My pleasure.**

**Interviewer: So, I’m going to start with, when did you first hear about drag?**

**Sabrina White: I first heard about drag in 1992, I had just left college, Berea College in Kentucky and went to Louisville, KY, my very first gay bar, and I saw all these people onstage and I’m like “Oh, I can do that.” I thought that they were men in dresses, and they were actually lip synching, not singing live. I was like “Oh, cool”. So I did it for Halloween for fun and then I won Most Beautiful at Halloween and then I kept winning pageants after pageant and I’ve been doing it now, 20-almost 30 years now.**

**Interviewer: Wow.**

**Sabrina White: Yeah!**

Interviewer: What would you say was your first reaction to drag was, were you kind of like, surprised were you like?

Sabrina White: I was intrigued, I wanted to be on stage I came from a theater background myself, I’ve been in a lot of the theaters and choirs and stuff so to me being expressive in that way and no one knows who I am is like a bonus.

Interviewer: So, when did you first start performing drag?

Sabrina White: Performing? Probably the year after I first saw a year after I saw my first drag show in 93′ in Louisville Kentucky at the Connection Complex. I did my first amateur night there and I won that.

Interviewer: Really?

Sabrina White: Yeah! My very first one I did Shirley Murdock- In Your Eyes, that was the song I did.

Interviewer: Wow! And you still remember that.

Sabrina White: Yep, I wore a white little chiffon Palazzo pants jump suit. I remember everything. I looked horrible, but I had fun doing it.

Interviewer: You had to start somewhere.

Sabrina White: Exactly but I had fun doing it.

Interviewer: So, why did you start performing?

Sabrina White: It was just the chance to be on stage again because after college I actually had a tonsillectomy I lost my voice so I couldn’t perform any more on stage and sing anymore so…it was a chance for me to be on stage again without having to sing. Plus I was gay and I liked being on stage it was a way to meet boys.

Interviewer: So how did your family and friends accept you getting into drag?

Sabrina White: My family actually disowned me when I was 15 years old, so they have no idea what I do now they had no clue. My friends support me 100 percent though, they’re always right behind me. It’s always good to have good friends behind you.

Interviewer: Do you have a drag name?

Sabrina White: Sabrina White!

Interviewer: And where did that that come from?

Sabrina White: Actually my first drag name was Serena Michael, my first boyfriend was Michael and Serena was from Bewitched, the evil ?, Bewitched. So, I did it for fun for Halloween and the next thing, “Oh I’m gonna get a cat” and I adopted a cat and my cats Serena. Well, I can’t be Serena Serena and I have this cat named Serena so, I’ll be Sabrina then. So I became Sabrina, and the White came, actually from my mentor which was Chastity White he kind of mentored me on makeup skills and helped me improve my craft a little more, so I took his last name of White so he’s my drag mama.

Interviewer: There are different styles of drag there are drag king, drag queen, comedy drag, queer artist, bio-queen, and camp which one would you say you fit into?

Sabrina White: I’m drag queen or as I like to call them female impersonators. Actually, before I’m onstage as a female, I’m full boy nothing is changed or altered about me, so I prefer actually female impersonator because that’s what I competed as. I don’t live my life in drag all the time I don’t walk around the bars in drag I just do it for shows only, onstage.

Interviewer: So, your style of drag, you would say drag queen?

Sabrina White: correct

Interviewer: And your husband, is he in to drag?

Sabrina White: He does not do drag. Well for Halloween, I’ll allow it for Halloween, that’s all he gets to do. He wants to do more, he thinks, but I won’t allow him, he’s not pretty.

Interviewer: How does drag right now affect your life as an artist?

Sabrina White: Well right now it is my life. I’m doing drag almost four or five days a week here. Performing, so it actually is my life it helps make my money pay my bills off right now.

Interviewer: So, are you just doing drag right now or are you doing other things?

Sabrina White: Right now, I’m cooking in a kitchen like a couple days a week for extra spending money. Keeps me out of the house, keeps me out of trouble. It’s just my fun money, as I call it my “vacation fund”.

Interviewer: I know you mentioned a boyfriend and a teacher who like kind of influenced you and helped and guide you, who would you say influenced your drag?

Sabrina White: probably my first show that I saw in Louisville Kentucky at Connection Complex that whole cast there was like four or five girls on the cast. They were all different styles and they were all glamorous and beautiful, and they just inspired me to be the best me that I can be. When I first started drag in 92’, 93′ they were all behind me and pushing me and helping me out. Giving me a little piece of hair, giving me a little piece of jewelry, a little dress here, you know, trying to push me and encourage me to be a better Sabrina White.

Interviewer: Would you say, from then to now, did your drag change at all?

Sabrina White: Oh, it changed, it changed a lot, yeah. I’ve mastered my craft, I guess you could say. I learned how to do make up now I teach people how to do makeup, I teach others now. I’ve gone from the student the mentor now. I have actually, two drag daughters that I mentor a lot. One right now is Miss Gay America, she has won that title, and another one won All American Goddess At Large a couple years back. So, they’re both national title holders as well.

Interviewer: And they’re under you so ?

Sabrina White: Exactly, you gotta pay it forward.

Interviewer: So, would you say that through the years, as you progressed and get better, was there any other influence, like down the line?

Sabrina White: Just kind of watching T.V., being really involved in like fashion shows, watching ?, all the big designers and stuff. Watching their fashion shows in New York all the time. I grew up, I actually left Louisville in ’95 and moved to Baltimore, MD, which is like two hours from New York, and I would go up there all the time and watch all the fashion shows and stuff to see as much as I can.

Interviewer: Okay, good, now, would you consider your drag political? Why or Why not?

Sabrina White: Political, no mines, mine is like fun drag it’s a chance to escape reality for a moment, to come onstage, to be able to perform for people. To allow them to escape reality forget about their worries and troubles for a couple of hours, to have fun and just sit back and relax. I do it for pure entertainment.

Interviewer: Now we are going to talk a little bit about your life as a drag artist. Are you a part of a drag family?

Sabrina White: Well counting, yeah, well this right here, the cast here is like my sisters at Hamburger Mary’s. My family is my drag mother and I do have a drag step mother in Baltimore, Joanna Bloom [?], and Margaret Davis is like my drag mom in Louisville who got me started. Right now, I have two drag kids and they have drag kids of their own so I’m like the mother to most the drag queens in the Baltimore, MD area and DC. Or grandmother or what we like to be called the “glam-ma”. The glamourous grandma, it’s the glam-ma.

Interviewer: So, you perform here [at Hamburger Mary’s], do you perform anywhere else?

Sabrina White: I travel all over the country a lot, actually I was just in Las Vegas last weekend performing. I get to travel a lot. You know, former Miss Gay America opened up a lot of doors for me, I used to do the whole country. I have been to almost every state except for four states in the United States traveling as an artist.

Interviewer: Where haven’t you been?

Sabrina White: Where haven’t I been? I have not been to Nevada, oh well I’ve been there now. Denver, New Hampshire, Washington State and Colorado.

Interviewer: Man, I bet Washington, I can’t imagine that.

Sabrina White: Yeah.

Interviewer: How often do you perform, like how many nights do you perform here?

Sabrina White: I perform Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. I have my own show Sunday nights twice a month and then we have two shows, three shows on Saturday so. Like, almost 8 shows in about four or five days.

Interviewer: Wow! Busy!

Sabrina White: Yeah!

Interviewer: And how many girls are here?

Sabrina White: We have five girls, six girls on cast here now.

Interviewer: And this place hasn’t been here that long.

Sabrina White: A year and a half, it opened in January of last year, 2018.

Interviewer: So, what does getting ready for a performance kind of look like?

Sabrina White: Hours behind the makeup! No, we actually are very blessed to- we have a backstage assistant that helps us get our shoes on, he gets us dressed up, unzips our costumes and helps us put our costumes on. Of course, we do all our hair and all our makeup and stuff, but he’s there to help us get ready and go onstage real quick. We’re lucky, we have a five-girl cast here, a lot of shows have like three girls so there’s a lot more rush backstage to get ready real quick. Like ten minutes and take one character off, I do a lot of character work as well like Cher and Reba and stuff so its hard to get out of that character and get the makeup on and get the new wig on and get the costume all on and stuff.

Interviewer: And you’re not having to like, go offstage and come right back there’s like someone.

Sabrina White: Oh no we have like five girls between numbers. So yeah there’s a good 20 minutes between so we get plenty of time back here.

Interviewer: How does the crowd usually look? Is it pretty packed here?

Sabrina White: Its pretty packed, especially Saturdays. Saturday nights is like our busiest day, we have two shows Saturday, 6-8:30 and it’s like 200 people usually here. It’s a very diverse crowd, we have old, white, all colors, everything’s here. Sometimes we have kids here at brunch shows and stuff too. Yeah, it’s like a Disney brunch, it’s actually coming up at the end of the month, once a year, we do it in May as like a Disney brunch. We have the Disney characters running around we all do Disney songs, lots of kids are here. We usually bring them on stage for a sing along from Frozen or something. It’s a lot of fun.

Interviewer: That’s neat, what would you say is your biggest challenge of doing drag and being a drag queen.

Sabrina White: My biggest challenge with doing drag and having to be onstage and having to MC because I talk really fast so it’s hard for people to understand what I’m saying most of the time so the chance…[?]

Interviewer: But if that’s your only challenge…

Sabrina White: That’s it, I’ve got everything else mastered yeah!

Interviewer: So, is there anything unique to the drag scene?

Sabrina White: Anything unique? It’s all been done, everybody’s copied everyone else now. Theres very few people who are actually unique and creative in the artform now.

Interviewer: Like compared to other cities or countries?

Sabrina White: Other cities? Well, here we’re more of a seasoned staff er, cast here. We’re all in our 40s here, we’ve been in drag for like 20 plus years, all of us, so we’ve been around for a while. A lot of the cities like Tennessee and Louisville, they’re all a little bit of the younger crowd, they’re a little more energetic and more creative, I guess, maybe. But we’re more seasoned here. We’re professional here. We’re professional divas here.

Interviewer: So, no drama here?

Sabrina White: No drama here, never. Of course not, there’s always drama, no matter where you go, especially in drag.

Interviewer: How do you identify as far as sex, gender identity?

Sabrina White: I’m a dude in a dress, I’m a 100 percent boy.

Interviewer: So, when people approach you while you’re in drag would you prefer them to say, what would you prefer them to say?

Sabrina White: Sabrina. Because I’m actually impersonating a woman so I’m in character

Interviewer: So, while in drag that’s okay.

Sabrina White: Correct.

Interviewer: But out of drag…

Sabrina White: No, I’m Russel.

Interviewer: So, the next question is what pronouns do you use out of drag, so ‘He’

Sabrina White: He.

Interviewer: So, has drag influenced your sex and gender identity?

Sabrina White: No, not really.

Interviewer: How has drag influenced you to think about gender?

Sabrina White: Not really anything, not at all.

Interviewer: So, nothing’s changed.

Sabrina White: Nothing’s changed, at all no.

Interviewer: So even from when you first like was introduced to it.

Sabrina White: Well it was a little confusing to me at first, when I first started, because some of the girls [?]…and there was these little, sort of boys, like they had a penis still. Yeah it was confusing then when I first learned about the different types but now it’s like. I’ve seen it all now.

Interviewer: So, you were introduced to drag at a pretty early age, you said like 15?

Sabrina White: No, it was like 30 years ago when I was like 20, 21. I’m old, I’m almost 50 years old now.

Interviewer: You’re not old!

Interviewer: So how has drag impacted you and change you?

Sabrina White: How has it impacted me and changed me? I don’t think it changed me at all. Its bettered my life a little bit, the money is so good. Here especially. It gives me a chance to travel the country and have fun and meet people all the time. Its kind of bettered my life a little bit, I think.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you more outgoing?

Sabrina White: Oh yeah, definitely, when I’m in drag yes! As Russel no. I like to sit by the pool read a book sit at home and cook something.

Interviewer: So, it’s kind of like an on/off switch, like “alright let’s go”

Sabrina White: Lets go! Here she is boys, lets go, come on. Shake ya titties.

Interviewer: So yeah, the next question, has drag impacted your confidence as a person when you’re out of drag?

Sabrina White: Not really, I mean it’s help me a little bit, become more of a people person like I said I was kicked out of the house at a very young age so I’ve kind of stuck to myself, try not to be that…

Interviewer: So, if you could go back in time what advice would you give the old you?

Sabrina White: Don’t do it. No, um, I would say go balls to the wall. Enjoy every minute of it. Do it as much as you can while you can because life goes by so fast that I would never not do anything. There’s lots of stuff I wish I did that I didn’t do, lots of pageants that I should have ran for that I didn’t run for.

Interviewer: What advice would you give someone else that was interested in drag but kind of skeptical, what advice would you give them?

Sabrina White: I would go for it. Do it. Enjoy your life. It’s not cheap, it’s expensive. I’ve got a lot of good, good drag isn’t cheap but cheap drag isn’t good.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about RuPaul and the drag show?

Sabrina White: I think she opened up for a lot for, especially here at Mary’s, a lot of mainstream, she’s become a lot more mainstream, more commercial sometimes in more of the straight people, the straight community. What she’s done bad for the gay community though is made it so that people don’t come to our bars anymore and watch our shows at the gay bars and all the gay bars are kind of shut down now because drag is so mainstream now, it’s okay to do these things. Like Hamburger Mary’s is surviving because it’s more of a straight crowd that comes here, like 80% of the people that come here wanna come see the freaks basically. But that’s what Ru Paul did for us, as far as the gay bars, it kind of hurt them a lot, a lot of them are shutting down, especially in the East Coast.

Interviewer: So, I want you to share one or more of your social identies. Race, class, age, religion, size, sexuality. How does that change drag for you? As far as like your race, was it difficult for you, or your age. Was it difficult for you getting older now, not that you’re old?

Sabrina White: I admit it, I am old. It’s, I’m not as much of a dancer anymore, I used to be a much bigger dancer, backflips and splits and all that stuff. Now I get all winded after 30 seconds of dancing and I’m like okay that’s enough I’ll walk around now. Take a breath. Other than that, not much really has changed.

Interviewer: Nothing really held you back from anything? Kind of stopped you from opportunities?

Sabrina White: No.

Interviewer: Well that’s good to hear.

Sabrina White: I’ve been very blessed.

Interviewer: Have you ran in to people now or in the past that have had problems because of their religion or their…

Sabrina White: Well my parents were very religious, the Baptists, my father was a preacher so, yeah. It was kind of a problem to come out of the closet for them to accept me. But other than that, there’s been a couple of pageants that people like come on and like the Westboro Church will be up there picketing the pageant like [mocking noises] all that stuff. That’s about it though really. It hasn’t really impacted my life.

Interviewer: How do you define drag?

Sabrina White: My definition? I don’ t even know what my definitions of it is anymore, it’s changed so much from when I first started. It’s all inclusive, anyone that wants to put on a wig and entertain can do it. I mean it’s just basically entertaining for the crowd. To me personally, a drag queen…to me a cross dresser is someone that just puts on girls’ clothes and just walks around a bar setting type thing, a drag queen is someone that actual gets dressed up in women’s clothes that are costumes and actually performs for a crowd. That’s the definition. Anyone.

Interviewer: How do you think drag has evolved since you started, what’s different about it?

Sabrina White: It’s evolved because there are like women doing drag who there’s guys with sex changes, there’s drag kings now, back in the day it was just like drag queen only. Now we wear hip pads, it wasn’t as detailed as it was back then. It was basically just put on a dress and some lipstick and a wig and you’re good to go. Now we’re you gotta wear hip pads, you gotta wear the right bra, you gotta wear the right costume and sequins and feathers and go, like, off the wall and just go crazy on it now.

Interviewer: So, I’m curious, how expensive does it get to be a drag queen?

Sabrina White: it gets pretty expensive, like right now I’m competing in a pageant in the end of June. I just bought two evening gowns, they were like $4,000 a piece, just for two dresses. So, $8,000 for two dresses.

Interviewer: And that’s just the dresses?

Sabrina White: That’s just the dresses, not the shoes, the earrings, the jewelry. For the earrings, the bracelet and rings, about $300. The shoes, about $100 for custom shoes to be made, my wig I’m gonna wear for my hairpiece will be about $250. So, one gown, one look is going to be close to, like, almost $5,000 for one look, one night.

Interviewer: Do you make your own hairpieces

Sabrina White: I do that, yeah, I make a lot of my stuff for like, shows and stuff. For a pageant I prefer for it to be done professionally so, I’d rather look perfect. Like for shows I’ve been making my own costumes here, making my own show dresses and stuff, I can do that for about $150.

Interviewer: So, you sew?

Sabrina White: Yes, I do sew. I taught myself at a very young age when I was poor and I couldn’t afford new stuff, I got myself some cheap sewing machine from Wal-Mart and some dollar a yard fabric from Wal-Mart and started practicing. I was getting fabric and cutting it out and sewing it together like “Ta-da! It fits magically, now”

Interviewer: What do you think is the purpose of drag?

Sabrina White: To escape reality or to entertain a crowd and allow them to escape their own reality for an hour or two, just to have fun and just let go and just escape our delusion of entertainment.

Interviewer: Do you think drag is sexual? Why or why not?

Sabrina White: I don’t think its sexual at all, no, it’s like going to a Broadway show and watching Lion King, you might get turned on by their costumes or their nakedness but it’s not sexual at all I don’t think.

Interviewer: So, I asked this question already, how do you feel about Ru Paul’s Drag race, did you watch the show at all?

Sabrina White: I watched it here and there, I watched the first two seasons. I am RuPauls Drag Race right here, we do it on a living basis. So, to me it’s nothing new.

Interviewer: Now this is a personal question, no personal but it’s not on the list. Would you ever try out for the show? Or something similar like that?

Sabrina White: I’ve thought about doing it last year, but I didn’t because I’m doing a pageant this year. Actually, a lot of my friends are on there. My drag daughter, er my drag granddaughter India Ferrah is on the show, she was a couple of seasons ago, she was season three or four, I think. Coco Montrese was [?] Miss Gay America so I also know them. Like I know a lot of the girls on the show, plus the pageant girls and if I wanted to apply for the show, I could just say give them a call and get put right through to the auditions. Because there’s like the audition, there’s also a video you send in to them, there’s a phone call audition, there’s like you send in pictures and they send like action shots of you performing onstage in the third part and the fourth part actually, you come there, they fly you in and watch your process and stuff and you talk them through it what you’re doing in drag and how your life is, and while you get in drag they kind of interview you get kind of used to that and they come watch you perform, they watch you in your home bar.

Interviewer: So, what life changes do you think will like…partake when…

Sabrina White: If you audition next year and do it next year, I’ll probably get a chance to see the whole world instead of just the country. Put all the girls like Asia O’Hara, one of my baby girls too, she’s right now in the United Kingdom and she’s been to Australia, traveling the whole world right now and making a lot of money. That would be exciting I think, all the travel.

Interviewer: And all the money

Sabrina White: Yeah, the money’s incredible. She’s also spent like, money on her costumes, she’s putting money back in to that.

Interviewer: If you could change one thing about drag, the drag scene or the drag community what would it be and why?

Sabrina White: I don’t think we have to change anything because we are all doing it for fun it’s our money and we are investing a lot of money into it now and it evolved so much that we are all different in a way, no one is the exact same. What I do wish people would do more of is use their voice as drag queens to give back to the community more and raise money for organizations. I’ve been to a couple of shows here in Saint Louis, I was very involved in Baltimore, we gave a lot of money to charity and stuff, but here have been working with Doorways and I’ve been doing shows here with them to give them like ? my tip money would go to them each night like $100, $150 bucks a week to raising money for that.

Interviewer: What do you are some misconceptions that you think people have about drag?

Sabrina White: That we enjoy wearing woman’s clothing. It’s so uncomfortable, it is not pleasant at all. People think that we have fun walking around, they think we sit at home in our panties and bras and watch TV and clean our house. We don’t do that at all, that’s a misconception. For onstage only, onstage viewing that’s about it.

Interviewer: Do you get questions about it?

Sabrina White: Oh yeah, people will come by like “Hey do you wanna come by my house with your panties and your bra?” Nope. I don’t wanna do it. “Wanna come bring your high heels to my house and go on a date?” Nope. Not my cup of tea, I’m married.

Interviewer: So, I’m sure you’re used to stuff like that now.

Sabrina White: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Comments, positive and negative.

Sabrina White: Very much, yes.

Interviewer: Do you get compliments or…

Sabrina White: Mostly compliments now, now that it’s more mainstream, especially here. Back then straight guys would go to the bars and they would try to be like, hit on the drag queens. Nowadays it’s so mainstream straight guys will be like “Hey, cool, what’s going on, what’s up bro” and I’m like “Hey bro, what’s going on man”. Y’know, full drag.

Interviewer: So where do you think that comes from, that misconception like “Oh do you wanna…” you know

Sabrina White: I don’t know, I guess because we’re men in dresses they figure that we’re freaks and that’s how we get our rocks off, I guess.

Interviewer: What do you think would help people change their mind about that, their mindset about it

Sabrina White: Having RuPaul helped a lot because especially they see them come to the workroom as boys and they get in drag, they don’t arrive in full drag already for each challenge. They come to the thing as boys. It’s how we live our life, as boys walking in the workroom each week is like “Hey, guess what, we’ve been on break for a week, we’re back, we’re living our lives as boys and here we are coming in to the workroom and getting ready.”

Interviewer: If you could choose one thing you want people to know or learn about drag what would it be?

Sabrina White: That it is a lot of hard work, it’s very hard work, what we do onstage isn’t easy, to some people it comes easier than others but it’s still a lot of work we do, and it is a job. We spend a lot of money on what we do, so yeah.

Interviewer: So, you said you were Miss Gay America?

Sabrina White: Miss Gay America, 2002

Interviewer: Any other pageants or anything you’ve won?

Sabrina White: Right now, I’m, I’ve won numerous titles, bar titles and state titles and stuff. At Miss Gay America I’ve won six titles, state and regional titles, go to Miss Gay America. Right now, I’m Indiana All American Goddess, I’m competing for All American Goddess Pageant at the end of June in Daytona Beach, FL and I’m one of the favorites to win, so that’s exciting.

Interviewer: Does your husband go with you?

Sabrina White: He will this time, yes. I spent almost 30 grand to win 6 grand.

Interviewer: Do you usually go by yourself?

Sabrina White: No, no. I come with my dresser, somebody who helps me get dressed, zip my dress up for me, makes sure the back of my hair looks perfect where I can’t see and my blind spots. They kind of help me out with that. And we have eight professional dancers that go down, and hotel rooms and to get them in the bar each night and provide them food for the weekend and transportation. It adds up quick, yeah. Like the prize money for Miss All American Goddess right now is $6,000, so I’m spending four times that much just to win that title, just to represent that title for a year. Yeah

Interviewer: Sounds good! Sounds Great!