**Interview with Jenna Cydal**

To cite this interview please use the following:

Diskin, Valla. 2020. Interview with Jenna Cydal. *Sociology of Drag, SIUE.* April 13, 2019.

*Audio available at* <http://www.ezratemko.com/drag/jenna-cydal/>

Interviewer: When did you first hear about drag and what was your initial reaction to it?

Jenna Cydal: The first time I heard about drag was actually the movie, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar.*  I was, like, real young, my mom watched it and we were watching it, I loved it, obviously. So, it was one of my favorite movies growing up and it is still one of my favorite movies now.  I don't know, I was like, oh gosh, that came out in the 90s, or maybe before, I don't remember, I was real young.

Interviewer: I've definitely heard of that movie, but I’ve not seen it.

Jenna Cydal: It's good, you should watch it.

Interviewer: When did you start performing as a drag artist and why did you start performing?

Jenna Cydal: I actually just thought about that so I'm glad I did.  I've been performing for eight years now. I started, the first venue I performed at was with Glitter Bomb, I think now Rydr does the Young and Reckless shows.  I don't remember what the Glitter Bomb show was called when I first did it, oh, Boot Camp, it was called Boot Camp. I did that eight years ago and I did it because all of my friends were performers and my drag mother, I say this with quotes, pushed me to do it and signed me up and I just kinda went with it so I did it.

Interviewer: Alright, so, how did your family, friends, and other loved ones receive you becoming a drag artist?

Jenna Cydal: I don't think it was really a surprise.  I grew up doing theatre, so I was always kind of performing in some sense.  My parents have never been to a show of mine, but they've been to drag shows before.  But they didn't really care or see it as a surprise, I don't think.  There was no real extreme reaction either way, they were just like "okay."

Interviewer: That's good! Alright, so, where does your drag name come from?

Jenna Cydal: My drag mother gave it to me. Her name is Suzy Cydal, she doesn't perform anymore. But they're puns. Hers is a pun on suicide, mine is a pun on genocide, so it's Jenna Cydal.

Interviewer: Oh, wow! Okay, I never… I'm really surprised I never caught that.

Jenna Cydal: Actually, a lot of people don't catch that and I'm kinda surprised, but I think that they're obvious, but I guess now after so many people are like "Oh I never got it" I guess it's like a normal reaction.  But yeah, she's Suzy Cydal, hers is suicide and I'm Jenna Cydal I'm genocide.

Interviewer: Okay! I like it. So, there are a lot of terms for types and styles of drag, so there’s drag queen and drag king, glamour queen, male impersonator, comedy queen, bearded queen, queer artist, bioqueen, and camp queen, among others.  Are there particular labels you would use to characterize your drag?

Jenna Cydal: I'm a drag artist, I guess. Generally, I would say that, I guess now it's not referred to as a bioqueen anymore, they're referred to as AFAB performers which is assigned female at birth, because gender is so fluid, they don't want offend anyone and I guess that seems to be the most neutral way of just describing it. But if I had my option, I would just say that I'm a drag artist because while I generally perform on stage as a queen, however you want to label that because I go on stage as my assigned gender, but I go fluid with it too. We do turnabout shows or if a show calls where I feel like it's more appropriate for me to switch my onstage gender then I will do that even though I'm not somebody to take seriously when I perform as in male form, I look super ridiculous, like an 80s outcast or something, it's bad, it's really bad.  But if I feel like a show is more appropriate for being more gender fluid than me performing as a queen then I'll do it and I've done it several times.  So, drag artist I guess.

Interviewer: So, you do both female and male performances?

Jenna Cydal: Definitely more female, for sure.  Just because I'm more comfortable with it on stage, but if I feel something deserves more of a bend than just being on stage as a queen, then I'll bend it.  I'm not afraid to push a limit or offend people with that, I guess.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the term bioqueen?  Like you yourself?

Jenna Cydal: It doesn't offend me at all. I see why it is offensive, I guess, to some people. But it is not something that offends me because I am and was biologically born female, so it is what I am. But I would prefer not to be called a bioqueen. I'm a drag queen, a drag artist.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense, so, does the type of drag that you do affect your life as a drag artist and if so, how?

Jenna Cydal: You mean like, putting me, er- hindering me in some form or some way?

Interviewer: It can be that or if it hinders you or makes you feel better.

Jenna Cydal: I'm far more confident on stage than I am in real life. Far more. But, I feel like I do get less recognition because of the type of drag performer that I am. St. Louis has a lot of classic views on drag where they want drag queens, pageant queens, which is why you see bars like Hamburger Mary's do so well because they stick to the classic.  There's nothing wrong with that, I appreciate all different forms of drag, but I wish people were more open-minded because I get booked with the same producers and the same venues because people don't want to branch out and book something that's completely different and I'm different and people think that I'm stepping on toes. I feel like I get held back a little bit, so.

Interviewer: So, who or what has influenced your drag?

Jenna Cydal: I don't necessarily know if it's a who, but I do appreciate comedy forms of drag.  I appreciate horror and creep. I obviously appreciate more of a sexual form of drag. I guess it is like all over, but if I had my choice of it, I would probably go more towards camp and horror, for sure.

Interviewer: Do you consider your drag political? Why or why not?

Jenna Cydal: No. I prefer to stay neutral in my drag. Again, if I get booked in a show where I feel like it's important to portray a certain message and I have been booked in shows where messages are, you have to deliver, but generally speaking my performances in drag are not political.

Interviewer: Can you talk about what your life is like as a drag artist? So, are you part of family, house, or collective and if so, can you tell me about it? You have kinda hit on that so, if you want to expand.

Jenna Cydal: Yeah, a little bit.  So, I had a drag mother, I don't have a drag mother anymore and it's not just because she doesn't perform, but I just don't have a drag mother.  I don't have one family that I belong to, but if I would say that I'm closest to a family that I feel is more accepting of me, it's the House of Controls.  There's a lot of them. I wouldn't say that I'm part of the House of Controls, but I'm more like, like there's like mother, father, son, daughter like family and I guess I'm just the weird aunt that hangs out in the corner and sips some rum and Coke or something.  But yeah, I guess like my obtuse family would be the Controls.

Interviewer: How often do you perform?

Jenna Cydal: A couple times a month.  When I first started doing drag, I did drag and burlesque and I performed all the time and I was able to pay rent and stuff, but real life gets in the way, so you just have to take bookings when you have time.  We have to prioritize. If I could prioritize drag, I 100% would, it's definitely more fun.  On average, I would say four to five times a month.

Interviewer: Where do you usually perform?

Jenna Cydal: Attitudes is where I get booked the most.  I'm sometimes at Rehab, not too often and I will do the college shows.  This is the first year in a while that I'm not at the Webster Drag Ball, but like I said, I get booked at SIUE and I'm doing a college show in St. Charles, I think in a few weeks.

Interviewer: What goes into getting ready for a performance?

Jenna Cydal: A lot.  I guess from like starting you have to, obviously, pick your music.  You have to pay attention to theme and sometimes that takes me a few days, so you have to think about that constantly.  Then, preparation for show day is like two hours worth of makeup, got to pack, then takes time to get into drag and costume so kind of, a lot. But the biggest part of it for me, I guess, would be makeup. While I perform on stage as a female, most people find it surprising, it takes me about two hours to get in drag face.

Interviewer: What are the biggest challenges to doing drag and being a drag artist?

Jenna Cydal: I think for me personally, it's, I guess what’s hard for me, is not being taken seriously or people overlooking what it is that I do because of how I do drag.  I think that's my biggest hurdle I have to conquer and I don't think it's one that I will until people have a different mindset on drag and I feel like it's definitely more open and accepting because when I first started drag there were only two, three bio performers and now there's more so I think the biggest thing for me that holds me back is the way that people view or appreciate my drag which I don't feel like everyone does.

Interviewer: Is there anything unique to the drag scene where you live?  So, like, is there anything unique to like the drag scene in St. Louis compared to other places in the country or the world?

Jenna Cydal: I think St. Louis is highly overlooked in drag. I think it's super versatile. Like I said, you have the classic queens, you have camp queens, you have people that are doing alt drag which is something I would probably put myself in that box. The norm is so accepted and then you have shows, like RuPaul's Drag Race that over-accentuate one certain type of drag which is more of the classic pageantry drag.  But then there's this whole other art form that is so completely overlooked, which I think St. Louis probably has the most of, which maybe is why the queens here are overlooked and aren't on shows like RuPaul's Drag Race because several of them have auditioned and none of them have made it.  The closest we got was Monique Heart in Kansas City, but even that's not St. Louis. I think Kansas City even has a completely different drag scene than we do. Like I said, I feel like the majority of our scene artists here are alternative drag artists and I don't think that it's as appreciated as it should be because there's a lot of talented people here that just, St. Louis doesn't get the recognition it deserves in drag.

Interviewer: What is your gender expression like outside of drag?

Jenna Cydal: I live my life as a female.

Interviewer: Is your drag more feminine than your gender expression outside of drag?

Jenna Cydal: I guess, yes and no. I'm not super glammed up right now, but it's my everyday life and I came here from work, so I guess I just express it in a different way. I think if I’m, if me, myself, I'm going out then I do like to dress up, but you can obviously differentiate from me out of drag living how I want to and going out dressed up as opposed to how I dress up in drag. It's definitely over the top.

Interviewer: How has drag influenced how you see your sex and gender identities?

Jenna Cydal: It hasn't. I've always seen myself the way that I do.  Like I said, the only thing that I would see completely different is that I'm more confident in drag, but it's also taught me to be more confident outside of drag, I would say. So I guess in a sense that has helped me because I grew up in a small town where people don't really build you up there, in that sense, so when I left there and came here and people were so interested and people pushed me to get on stage I was just like "oh okay." So, I guess it's taught me to be a bit more confident in myself.

Interviewer: Has drag influenced how you think about gender overall? Not just your own, but just overall?

Jenna Cydal: I guess, yes and no. I've always been super open-minded to how people want to live their life, it's literally none of my business and you should just accept people for who they are and how they want to be. It literally has zero impact on you, none. It takes you zero effort to just let someone be, than opposed to hating on how they are. It's completely ridiculous to me that people view... I don't know that's a whole other subject. But as far as drag influencing my opinions on gender or how I view it, no it maybe has just opened my eyes a little bit more because I'm so involved in the St. Louis drag scene that I guess, it's a constant conversation. I'm just more aware and more active in the conversation than I think I would be outside of drag.

Interviewer: Do you think that your sex and gender identities have influenced your drag at all?

Jenna Cydal: Yeah, since I go on stage as a female, it definitely influences it, but then again, I'm not afraid to push a boundary or flip it or bend it, but as far as my regular life I don't push boundaries or let gender norms, I just kind of live my life the way I want to. I identify as my assigned gender, but I would say in drag then I kind of push it a bit more I would say.

Interviewer: How has drag impacted or changed you? So, you've kind of hit on this, but if you want to expand on it more, you can. So, has drag impacted your confidence as a person when you're out of drag and if so, how has it?

Jenna Cydal: Yeah, like I said, I grew up in a very small town. Very, very small town where people don't uplift anyone, I feel they more focus on bringing a person down.  I know when I lived in my hometown, I had zero confidence and zero self-worth in myself and then I went to The Complex for the first time, I want to say in like 2009 and everybody was so interested and it was just like I don't know a new face or what, but the first time I went there, people were like just coming up to me and I was not a performer and it was the people that I'm friends with now and some that have moved away that were just like so interested and just so welcoming and that was not something that I experienced in my hometown. So, when they pushed me to do drag, I wouldn't say that I thought about it too hard because I was in awe of what they did, the complex is probably the first time I saw it live myself and I think the first show that I went to was a Glitter Bomb show and know that Siren and Lola van Ella were there, she's the big burlesque performer in St. Louis, but she lives in New Orleans now, and they did some Lady Gaga inspired number and I was so like "what the hell is this?" She was doing live vocals. Siren was performing as a drag queen, but they were performing together like so perfectly. I'm just like, "do people rehearse for this? What do they do?"  I was so interested. And then the fact that all of them took some sort of interest in me and then kind of pushed me to be on stage. I don’t know, it just kind of like, my whole mindset kind of changed in that sense. I was just like "I am more than my small town" which is exactly how people drive you to be is like you're nothing more than where you came from and where I came from is not impressive by any means. Once I got on stage, it wasn't something I was unfamiliar with because I had been performing since, like, the first time I was in a play, I think I was like four or five. So, it was something that I had been doing, but I hadn't done in a period of maybe four years. It was something that I felt comfortable with, but as I've been on stage it's helped me. I'm not a nervous person in front of people anymore or as nervous and I can easily go up to a group of people and just talk to them because I kind of have to because drag is a job whether it's a fun one or not, it's still a job. I'm able to engage more. I'm able to see myself differently because I'm more confident and just able to just go up to random groups of people and talk to them.

Interviewer: If you could go back in time, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Jenna Cydal: Like how far back are we talkin’?

Interviewer: As far as you want to go, honestly. You could do like four or five or you could do like teenage years, whatever like you want to talk about.

Jenna Cydal: Probably teenage years. None of what I was worried about matters, literally nothing. High school doesn't matter. Your friends then, some of them I'm still friends with, but the way people view you do not matter because I literally don't care how any of them see me now. They have much more of an interest in my life now that I've moved and they see me on all of these flyers and they see photo shoots and my name somewhere and now they have an interest in what I do because I did break away from my hometown norms, which is just to get married, have kids, and then stay where you are and I left and there's few people that did leave and they always seem to have some kind of interest. It was hard when I left for a while because people did start rumors. My mom would go to the gas station and people would make some kind of remark about me being gay or a homewrecker or something, it got really crazy I tell you, but that did upset me because these were people, and I hadn't been gone for very long, that I still viewed as friends and then I realized that it just didn't really matter what they thought. My mom didn't care and she knew better, so she didn't care and because she didn't care, I started to just pretty much just say "fuck it" I don't really care what you guys think of me, how you see me, you have an interest in me because I'm doing something completely different than any of you have even heard of. So, just that none of it mattered before I left, really.

Interviewer: How has drag impacted your social identities and/or how has your social identities impacted your drag?  So, these social identities can be anything from gender, race, class, age, geography, religion, size, sexuality, disabilities etc.

Jenna Cydal: I would say that drag has moreso affected my personal life than my personal life affecting drag. Two things that you mentioned there were race or ethnicity and then sexual identity.  I would say that drag has pushed me to be more accepting to fact that I'm Hispanic. Even though I look predominantly white, I'm still half Hispanic and there is not a lot of representation in St. Louis drag for that. It's something that I'm pushing myself more to just bring forward more so in drag because there is not Hispanic representation. For my sexual lifestyle, I was in a relationship for five years that I got out of a year and a half ago and when I started dating again, I had to actually realize that I needed to change my name on the dating sites because people would recognize me on the dating apps. More so people that were like bi or pansexual that were open to dating everyone would be like "Oh my god, you're Jenna Cydal" and I would have my personal information on there, so I had to realize that maybe wait and not put so much out there right at the beginning of that and it's still something that I have to hide on dating apps because I do see people on those apps that I see at shows and I don't want to necessarily mix my two lives. I'm pretty open in my personal life that I do drag, it's not something I hide, I'm really proud of it and it's a lot of fun, but I don't want random people from shows knowing everything about me. Definitely drag has affected my personal life more than my personal life ever affecting drag.

Interviewer: So, just a little bit about your ideas about drag. So, how do you define drag?

Jenna Cydal: Expression, art, self-awareness really. It's all open to me which is why I wish people had more of an open mind because.. so, my drag name in general, I feel like people here are very close-minded or take it too seriously or too literally. I know that the word "genocide" is associated with a mass murder of one group of people. However, that's not it's defining definition. This is just one example of the close-mindedness that I feel like St. Louis has. People thought that I hated a certain group of people or that my name was insensitive to certain group of people, which I get why, but it's not what I portray on stage. I've never done anything on stage that has hinted to me ever associating my name with what people associate it with. I feel like I've done a fairly good job, so I thought, of associating it with the fact that I just want to kill it on stage and kill it for a crowd and not one set of people. That's an example of the close-mindedness I feel like St. Louis has towards that and that comes from people even inside the community just being so close-minded to it or taking art so seriously when it's always been subjective. You might not like what I do, or you might not like what somebody else does, but that doesn't mean what they're doing isn't drag or it isn't art, so it's all about self-expression and whatever you feel like it is.

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

Jenna Cydal: Self-expression, getting your art out there, being who you want to be. I mean, I feel like I'm very much myself on stage with certain shows that allow me to be that way. The general pop shows I don't or the general Friday night, Saturday night shows, you're there to entertain, you are doing a job.  People pay to see a show, so you have to give them one. So, sometimes you have to do stuff that you wouldn't necessarily want to. If I had any given chance to do Top 40 Pop or do some obscure Euro Pop song, I would choose the Euro Pop song over the Top 40 Pop any day, but that doesn't work all the time. It's just about, you just have to compromise both ways, I guess.

Interviewer: So, you kind of hit on this earlier too, but do you think drag is sexual?  Why or why not?

Jenna Cydal: It can be and if you want it to be, it should be. But if you don't want it to be, then it doesn't have to be.  Like I said, if I could do the horror and the camp all the time, I think it's more fun for me to be entertaining in a character sense because that is exactly what you're doing. As far as pulling a sexual side into it, absolutely, I have before and I will continue to do so. If it's what I'm feeling that night then I'm going to perform more sexually than I would say like at a Halloween show. I think it's whatever you want it to be. I don't think it should or shouldn't be either way.

Interviewer: How do you feel about RuPaul's Drag Race?

Jenna Cydal: So, I have a lot of strong feelings about RuPaul's Drag Race. I am a fan of the show and I am a fan of the queens that are on the show and I've performed with the queens that are on the show and they're great people and in no way does this reflect anything of them, but I feel like because it's become so mainstream people have such a stupid idea of what drag is and what it should be that they don't appreciate what is literally right in front of them. When I first started drag, the appreciation for it was completely different than it is now. Not that I feel like people should give money, but it was so much easier for people to feel comfortable tipping a queen doing, I don't want to say an easy number, but something more so emotional than high energy. So, I think it has warped the view of what drag actually is or what it can be. I feel like people think that they're experts on it now and if you're not doing what RuPaul's doing, then you're not doing drag and that is just total bullshit. So, I respect the queens, I respect the show, I respect what they're doing, but I hate how it has made mainstream view drag because that's just not realistic.

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

Jenna Cydal: Probably the way people view obscure forms of drag or different forms of drag. That it's not just classic queens that rule it. There's drag kings that I feel like that are completely under-appreciated that I would say are in the same box that I am, where you're held back and people don't take what you're doing seriously because they don't view it as drag, but what you're doing is drag. It's all subjective, it's all an art form, it's all a performance. We all spend two hours to get into face and get ready. I know drag kings that spend more time painting their face than a drag queen and take more effort and more time into their costuming than queens do, but they get by on a pass because what they're doing is what people know what drag is and that has to do with part of what RuPaul is putting out there, but I feel like if people just opened their eyes to what is in front of them and what kind of different forms there are, it's all still drag, it's just different. So just be more open-minded.

Interviewer: What do you think are misconceptions people have about drag and where do you think these misconceptions come from?

Jenna Cydal: Probably somewhat in the sexual orientation that everyone's like super promiscuous or... I think that's probably a big one.  Or…that everyone is just promiscuous. Yeah, I guess promiscuous is probably the biggest one and I think it has to do with people don't know how to differentiate the person or the person that they are on stage. Because a lot of people in drag are sexual in nature. A lot of them are promiscuous in their personal lives, but that's their personal life. I feel like people think that like, I hate using words like sluts and whores now, but I feel that's what a lot of people view drag as, coming from an outside view. That was the biggest thing I had with the people from my hometown thinking that I was like this terrible, basically harlot of a person. So, I think that that's a big misconception. People don't know what they're talking about. They think that they see one thing and they have no idea who the person behind all the makeup is.

Interviewer: What do you think would help change those misconceptions?

Jenna Cydal: Getting to learn even what drag even is before forming an opinion about it. A lot of people just see something at face value and take it for what it is, but they have no idea who any of us are.

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

Jenna Cydal: That it's for everyone and don't let anyone tell you that it's not. That as long as you have some kind of presence on stage, obviously you have to have some kind of natural talent on stage or some kind of ability to form into that talent, but it's still for everyone whether your performance form is interpretive dance, which there are drag artists that do that, or singing live on stage, which again, there are drag artists that do that. It's very different, but as long as you stay within a certain guideline, I guess, I hate saying that because I feel like it's against self-expression, but there's still basic terminology to drag. So as long as you stick to it, it is for everyone and I don't think anyone should tell you that you shouldn't do it.