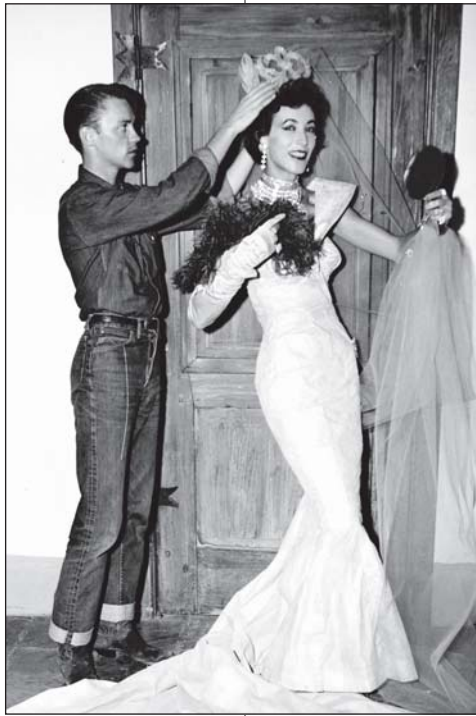


debutantes in highly ornate gowns and trains as duchesses who attend the newly crowned queen. With merry courts like the Court of Broken Traditions and the Court of Cosmetic Subterfuge, the satire spoofed the pomp and circumstance of the coronation. The Court of the Glorified Barnyard is an excellent example of a style of satire used in Cornyation. The Prologue of the Glorified Barnyard noted in the program that, “As the strains of the great orchestra fade, the LORD HIGH AGRARIAN magnanimously summons the SHARE CROPPERS to render homage to royalty.” King Anchovy arrived on “Ye Old Irrigation Ditch,” and the duchesses included four “Country Duchesses” followed by four “In-Town Queens.” The finale was “her horrendous highness, vice-empress of scarecrows and guardian of the throne and yards,” and of course “her corn-fed imperial majesty.” The term “corn-fed” signified both being plump and being provincial or unsophisticated.

This theme was a not-so-gentle mocking of royalty that contrasted high society with the sharecroppers and stressed the poverty and rural nature of the “little people.” This contrast between the Lord High Agrarian (the master of ceremonies, who symbolizes elite culture) and the sharecroppers (the performers and audience) emphasized the race and class hierarchies between San Antonio Anglo elites and the rest of the city.

Cornyation was the brainchild of artistic gay men at the center of the art and theater world in the early 1950s. Although its directors, designers, and duchesses were not exclusively gay men and lesbians, most designers and directors, along with a few scriptwriters and female duchesses, were. Men involved in traditionally gay occupations, such as window dressers and hair-



Unknown designer, 1954.

dressers, designed many of the Cornyation costumes. They used gay humor or a “campy” style to design the costumes and the show. Scripts from this time demonstrate the frequent use of double entendre and obscure theater references that may have been coded language for gay and lesbian observers in the know. The show worked in references to gay culture through nods to divas, Greek culture, and Alfred Kinsey. In 1954 one of the duchesses wore an outfit that was split between a woman’s dress and a man’s suit, representing the “big switch”—an allusion to Christine Jorgensen, whose sex change was in the news. This campy style was part of a growing gay visibility in San Antonio during the Cold War. The show became even more overtly gay in the early 1960s as a younger group of gay designers began working on it.

Drag, camp, and cross-dressing operated as the most identifiable and

widely used signifiers of homosexuality during the Cold War period, particularly in the South. Camp is a contradictory art form: sophisticated in its use of double entendre and coded language but also common and vulgar. Gay designers and scriptwriters could simultaneously satirize politics with this low humor while relying upon the audience’s appreciation for their sophisticated artistry. Camp allowed Cornyation’s designers to criticize elite culture and city politics while avoiding public censure and censorship.

One of their key contributions was the use of aesthetic and humorous campy costuming for the young women who performed in the show. Although drag became an important part of the show during its revival in the 1990s, the Cornyation duchesses were always women, not cross-dressing men. Male designers dressed women up like drag queens in order to mock high-society debutantes. Camp “came out” in these scenes by imitating the “coming out” of debutantes. The gowns were often created at the last minute and made out of everyday objects. For the Court of Allergies, the empress’ train was “embellished with coffee cans, carrots, and an allergy cookbook, was bordered with peanuts in the shell, which members of her entourage cracked and ate during the performance.” Pictures of duchesses from the 1953 Court of Cosmetic Subterfuge show that many outfits were comical and hastily put together out of random items, such as buckets, cardboard, cotton balls, and tinfoil. Edith Speert, the Duchess of Kissproof Lipstick, wore a tinfoil hat that resembled the tip of a lipstick. Nancy Hendrix, the Queen of Mascara, carried a large broom with “Maybelline” written on it. Empress Anne Thompson was described in a 1953 newspaper item as wearing “an ensemble of trailing yellow tarleton [fabric] and cellophane, and her ... skirt held a built-in dressing table with jars and bottles balanced on top. She applied makeup as she advanced down the aisle.”

In the early 1960s Cornyation was at the height of its popularity, with more than 7,000 people attending the shows each year.

The Nightly News

For people who know each other only
By their dogs’ names and
For those who read a

Scent-based alphabet
The rusting corner lamppost is
Where and how both groups catch up

Madison’s dad is getting divorced
Due (in part) to his affair with Harley’s person
Mazurka ate the tutu

Her guys thought would be
Such fun for Halloween
And everyone hates the Shar Pei

JAMES W. GAYNOR