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Whirlwind reign so far for SF drag laureate Drollinger

by Matthew S. Bajko, Assistant Editor | Tuesday June 20, 2023

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It has already been a whirlwind reign for San Francisco's inaugural drag laureate, D'Arcy Drollinger. Since being announced on May 18 as the first person to hold the position, she has raised the rainbow flag at San Francisco City Hall for Pride Month and threw out the first pitch at the San Francisco Giants' Pride-themed baseball game on June 10.

She has hosted environmental activist and award-winning actress Jane Fonda at her nightclub, Oasis, and helped say goodbye to her dear friend and fellow drag queen Heklina, who died suddenly in April, at a memorial celebration held at the Castro Theatre. Billboards around town feature her on one of the city's historic cable cars wishing everyone a "Happy Pride From Your New Drag Laureate."

Meanwhile, Drollinger was in rehearsals to reprise her role as Samantha Jones in "Sex and the City LIVE!," the drag parody of the hit HBO series that began a limited run at Oasis on June 15. She is performing at the Pride kickoff party Friday, June 23, for Frameline, the city's international LGBTQ film festival, and also the following night at Princess Pride, the disco dance party and drag speculator being held at Oasis.

On Pride Sunday look for Drollinger's contingent in the parade.

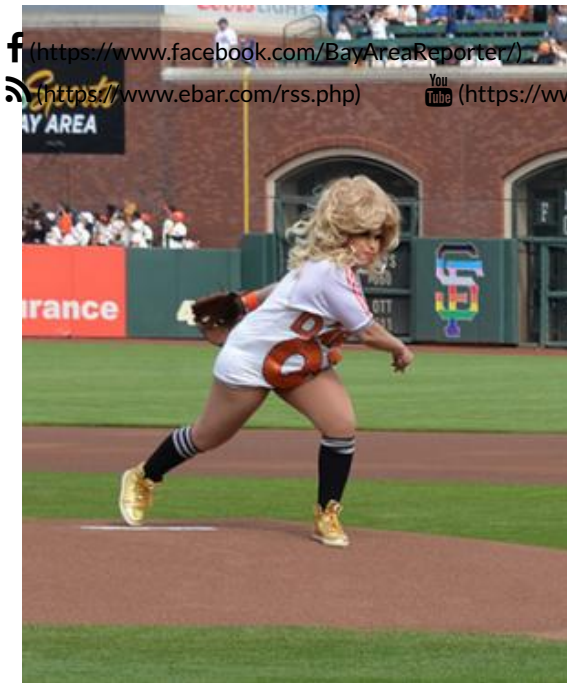
"As the first drag laureate I am dedicated to continuing my mission to uplift my fellow members of the LGBTQIA+ community and spread joy throughout the city," promised Drollinger. "This role builds bridges and creates partnerships while elevating and celebrating the art of drag. I am looking forward to the positive effects this will have on the community, on San Francisco, and the world at large."

As an ambassador for the drag community and LGBTQ nightlife, Drollinger, 54, will serve for the next 18 months. She will receive a \$55,000 honorarium to help cover the costs of her duties in the position, which is modeled after the city's poet laureate role.

"D'Arcy has been a community activist, a business owner, a true artist and a leader in this community for many, many years," noted Mayor London Breed in introducing Drollinger last month as her selection for the first-in-the-world position.

Drollinger was "the perfect person" to serve in the role, noted Breed, "because even though the job description starts with 'be fabulous all the time,' it also is an important part of representing San Francisco. Representing San Francisco and our values for inclusion, making sure people know that no matter who you are, or where you come from, or who you love, you have someone who has a voice that will always represent you and speak on your behalf."

Bobby Friday, the drag persona of Bobby Rivera, told the Bay Area Reporter that the first word to come to mind was "grateful" when asked about seeing the city establish the drag laureate position. It is especially important considering the laws banning drag shows and targeting drag performers that are being passed in other states, noted Friday.



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San Francisco drag laureate D'Arcy Drollinger throws out the first pitch at the San Francisco Giants' Pride Night June 10. Photo: Bill Wilson

"I am super grateful to live in a place where I am appreciated and celebrated," said Friday, hired to help co-produce a series of drag shows during June for the Downtown SF Partnership, a nonprofit that promotes businesses and provides services in the city's Financial District and Jackson Square Historic District areas. "I couldn't imagine living in a place like Tennessee and fearing I could get arrested for doing what I do. I love San Francisco and am super grateful for the Downtown SF Partnership for inviting me to do this activation."

San Francisco was the second city in California to initiate having an official drag ambassador. In 2020, West Hollywood was the first known city anywhere in the world to approve the creation of a drag laureate but its rollout of the post was delayed in order for the Southern California city to increase its budget for it. Efforts to create a drag laureate for New York City, so far, remain in limbo.

In May, West Hollywood's Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission voted to recommend that the city councilmembers name singer and comedian Pickle, aka Joseph Marcellus Faragher, a Los Angeles native, as its inaugural drag laureate. The City Council is set to vote on doing so when it meets Monday, June 26.

If approved, Pickle will serve from July 1 through June 30, 2025, in the post. It now comes with an annual honorarium of \$15,000 for appearances and a yearly event the drag laureate will be expected to host during their two-year tenure.

In a May 26 Instagram post, Pickle thanked the arts panel for selecting her and noted, if confirmed by the City Council, she would follow in the footsteps of the "phenomenal" Drollinger as the second drag laureate in U.S. history.

"Pending @wehocity city council's approval I will assume this role. I would like to acknowledge the other fantasti



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applicants who would have done an amazing job in this position. I look forward to serving the city and the drag community," wrote Pickle (https://www.facebook.com/BayAreaReporter/) (https://www.twitter.com/ebarnews/) (https://www.ebar.com/rss.php) (https://www.youtube.com/c/BayAreaReporterSF)

Drollinger had told the B.A.R. that she would like to collaborate with her Southern California counterpart on an event they could co-host. Though at her official introduction last month as drag laureate, Drollinger couldn't help but take a victory lap at being the first such person to hold the position anywhere in the world.

"I am sorry L.A. and New York, but we beat you to it!" said Drollinger.

Her drag name is the name she was given by her parents. Since D'Arcy works as a gender-neutral name, she decided to use it personally and professionally, though she acknowledges her doing so "gets a little bit confusing."



San Francisco drag laureate D'Arcy Drollinger, flanked by state Senator Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco), left, and Mayor London Breed, made remarks at the mayor's City Hall Pride flag raising ceremony June 2. Photo: Jane Philomen Cleland

Background

Born in San Francisco, Drollinger's first time dressing up in drag came when she was 3 and donned an outfit similar to the one worn by the beloved nanny character Mary Poppins. When she was 7, her family moved to Stockton, California. They then relocated to Apia, the capital city of Samoa, due to her mother, who was an anthropologist, being hired for a job in the Polynesian island country.

In 1980, at age 17, Drollinger moved again to Nevada City, California, where her parents taught at a Quaker boarding school. By the early 1990s, she was living back in San Francisco, working at the nightclub 1015 Folsom.

It was there, when RuPaul came to perform her dance hit "Super Model," that Drollinger first dressed up as a drag queen in honor of the special guest. While her look was more that of a club kid, recalled Drollinger, she had "such a good time" she kept dressing up in drag.

She wrote and produced her own four musicals in San Francisco. Wanting to have a career on Broadway, Drollinger moved to New York City in 1998.

She landed a job with the production company behind "Hairspray" and worked on the out-of-town tryouts in Seattle. After it opened on Broadway, Drollinger landed a job assisting the production team behind the musical

"The Producers."

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Through mutual friends RuPaul hired Drollinger to choreograph her Diva's 2000 concert at Madison Square Garden. Drollinger's last Broadway job was working for costume designer William Ivey Long.

"That was my stint on Broadway. It was exciting and very eye-opening," recalled Drollinger, who moved back to San Francisco in 2011.

Heklina, the drag persona of Stefan Grygelko, and Drollinger became co-owners of Oasis (<https://www.sfoasis.com/>), which opened on New Year's Eve in 2014 at the corner of Folsom and 11th streets in a historic LGBTQ venue that was once home to a bar with an in-ground pool called The Plunge. Their doing so rejuvenated the city's LGBTQ nightlife scene, particularly in the SOMA neighborhood.

"I saw a need for the community and lifting other community members up while doing my art," recalled Drollinger. "It felt like the next step in this trajectory was the drag laureate program."

Her tenure as drag laureate coincides with Drollinger working to open a film production studio in the city where she plans to shoot her new feature motion picture. Drollinger, via her nonprofit Oasis Arts, is renovating a large commercial space in the South of Market neighborhood on Fourth Street at Bryant.

It will have a 5,000 square foot sound stage that local queer filmmakers will be able to use. It is where Drollinger plans to shoot the sequel to her 2020 film "Shit & Champagne" starring her stripper character Champagne Horowitz Jones Dickerson White. Construction on the space should be completed in July.

"We are creating a fully functional film production studio," said Drollinger.

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