

Making for Strange Bedfellows

Drag Performer Joan JettBlakk Hits the 1992 Presidential Campaign Trail—in Heels

BY ROBERT FORD

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ould you vote for an articulate muscular black pagan radical faerie in his 30s with a penchant for Pucci prints

and heels? Terence Smith, whose drag persona Joan JettBlakk is running as Queer Nation's candidate for president, could become the first elected official to fill the roles of both chief executive and first lady while wearing a single pair of simple pumps. "It's about time we had some duality in the Lavender House," quips Smith in his best JettBlakk voice.

Smith moved to Chicago in 1977 from Detroit and later became involved with the direct-action groups the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation. It was out of an April 1990 ACT UP demonstration at Chicago's notoriously inadequate Cook County Hospital that JettBlakk was born. Smith participated in the rally's drag performance as JettBlakk, and the character quickly became a local celebrity—"the benefit queen of the universe"—making public appearances at any gay and lesbian function that would have her. Wherever a tape deck and audience could be found, there was JettBlakk.

Those appearances led local Queer Nationals to nominate JettBlakk as a write-in candidate for Chicago's 1990 mayoral election. "Because the election was so boring," JettBlakk explains, "Queer Nation decided they should have a candidate." Their slogan: IT'S ABOUT TIME CHICAGO HAD A QUEEN. With only three weeks between the start of her write-in campaign and the election, JettBlakk and Queer Nation amassed an impressive and unprecedented amount of support and publicity.

Between pressing flesh and kissing babies

on Chicago's fashionable Michigan Avenue shopping strip, JettBlakk was also being embraced by much of the city's media, from a brief mention in the *Chicago Tribune* to a cover feature in the weekly *NewCity*. Her success on the local level encouraged JettBlakk and her queer constituents to stage a national presidential campaign. As JettBlakk sees it, "Every young man in America should be able to run for president—it doesn't matter if he's wearing a dress or not."

On what platform does JettBlakk stand? "Shoes," she squarely states. "Platform shoes." And on other issues, say, lesbian and gay rights for instance? "Gay rights?" she says questionably. "The moment I'm sworn in, that will cease to be an issue. It's only an issue now because there aren't any gay people in power in the White House. It's a given that the first thing that would happen in my administration is across-the-board gay rights in every meaning of the term." On abortion the presidential hopeful believes, "It's not my body, it's her body. Let her decide." JettBlakk would halt all defense expenditures and reroute them toward AIDS research as well as legalize marijuana, using the new tax revenue to fund a national health care package.

And what does the candidate have to say about the recent Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill sexual-harassment hearings? "I think it's really terrifying that people supported him the way they did," shudders JettBlakk. "It's very scary. The polls showed that 70% of the blacks supported Thomas. Huh? I don't know any blacks who supported him. I'd love to know where they found them.

"It's hard to make that issue funny because I know too many women who have to go through that every day," says JettBlakk, pausing for a serious moment. "As gay people, we discuss sex much more openly than straight people do. We don't take it as a power trip. But straight men deal with sex

as power, especially the way they talk about women who refuse their advances. Gay people are more likely to turn rejection into a positive thing and use it as a way of looking at ourselves.

"On the other hand, people are so fed up with the way the whole Thomas thing was handled, it could create a major backlash. The Republicans were downright vicious. I should be so dirty. They were worse than a bunch of bitchy queens. And it's obvious that the Democrats aren't going to do anything—they're 'Republicans' now. Our only hope is to elect a drag queen as president. Miss President Thing Girl."

Under President JettBlakk, the White House would become "the Lavender House—lavender and chintz," she tastefully explains. "You think Jackie had it looking good—I'll have fags in there, and in no time that place will look fabulous." And unlike former first lady Nancy Reagan, JettBlakk does not plan to rely on simply one fashion designer: "I'll go to Paris," she vows, "and pick a different designer for each season." Other plans include moving the seat of power to a more interesting location (Palm Springs, Calif., is at the top of her list) and giving Kennebunkport, Me., back to Native Americans. In short, JettBlakk says she would do "everything differently than George Bush, clean house. Except the limo. I'd keep the limo."

At the same time, JettBlakk is careful not to use this as *her* campaign but rather Queer Nation's. Letters and press kits promoting national support for the candidate have gone out to the group's chapters across the country, though as of yet, the Salt Lake City chapter has been the only one to endorse the campaign. "Queer Nation isn't a political party," she explains, "so some will ask how we can have a spokesperson. That's why I call myself a spokesmodel. I don't intend to speak for all Queer Nations."

But JettBlakk's voice is already being

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Presidential hopeful Joan JettBlakk, Queer Nation's ticket to Capitol Hill

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heard in opponent camps. According to the candidate, "We've sent letters to Rev. Lou Sheldon, Rev. Donald Wildmon, and Sen. Jesse Helms, saying, 'We want you to vote for Joan JettBlakk for president. Please give this letter to all of your constituents who are still in the closet.' But we haven't heard from them yet." There are also plans for a queer party convention and a Queer Nation presence at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

While the chances of JettBlakk's being sworn into office are slimmer than those of Pat Paulsen, the bottom line of the campaign is to create visibility for queer Americans and to make the concept of an openly gay or

lesbian candidate less foreign to the general public. "You can watch the news and never hear the word 'gay' mentioned," JettBlakk says. "That just unnerves me. But with this campaign, they'll have to say the word; I'll make them. I would love to hear Tom Brokaw say, 'Joan JettBlakk, the queer candidate for president.' That would be great. It needs to be said."

JettBlakk has little patience for gays and lesbians who feel that a visible drag presence is counterproductive to the agenda of queer equality, quickly pointing to the fact that drag queens were at the forefront of the 1969 Stonewall riots. "We're not gonna get anywhere by assimilating," she says. "One of the beauties of being queer is that

we're not like everybody else. We are different, and that difference does not make us bad. I'm not trying to be a girl, but I do like the in-your-faceness of being a man in a dress, stomping on that line between male and female and erasing it."

Using humor as a tool to change society's attitudes is an important strategy for JettBlakk. "We wanted to do something funny with this campaign," she says. "So often activism is angry—you take over a building or have a 'die-in.' That's necessary, but I wanted to use satire and to have people laugh with me. I don't know if anyone will say, 'You know, those gay people made me laugh. They're all right,' but at least they'll see us." ▼

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