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## God Save the Queen

*Get Real* recalls the  
fabulousness of Sylvester;  
*Private Eyes* turns infidelity  
into a public spectacle

**Max Sparber**

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Taking up the torch song: Djola Branner as drag legend Sylvester

The policemen storming onscreen wear riot gear, and they beat out a martial cadence on their shields with black

batons as they descend on a group of disorderly drag queens. The image flickering across the back wall at Intermedia Arts is from Nigel Finch's 1995 film *Stonewall*, and it acts as a menacing accompaniment to the new drama *Mighty Real*. Twenty-one years after the uprising that inspired the film, if you see a drag queen near the old Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Manhattan, she is likely to have a cell phone in one hand and her agent on her arm--as Michael Musto opined in a recent column. And the police presence is limited to a few off-duty cops hired to act as bodyguards. If anybody deserves credit for this transformation in social values, it might be

1970s disco icon Sylvester.

Sylvester himself once snapped at Joan Rivers "Honey, I am not a drag queen. I am Sylvester!" But the singer's roots in drag ran deep. By the time Sylvester reached mainstream popularity, he may have abandoned wearing dresses and belting out torch songs, but he retained a sense of fabulousness and outrageousness (as well as a taste for enormous wigs) up until his death from AIDS in 1988. He was publicly, and flamboyantly, gay. No doubt this helped feed a growing backlash against the music, which brought blasts of Fire Island and the Castro into wary mainstream American homes. Sylvester's legacy is all but forgotten outside the gay community in the United States (although European DJs still spin his recordings, with their funky synthesizer arrangements from Patrick Cowley; in Europe, the beat is king, whatever its source), but cultural movements that are driven underground have a habit of coming back years later, semi-mad and armed. Think of the Weather Underground--hell, think of the Weather Girls, Sylvester's former backup singers, whose deliriously infectious song "It's Raining Men" can be seen as a warning shot from the Branch Sylvesterian compound. Even more recently, Jimmy Sommerville's remake of "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" stormed the dance charts--another shot fired, another warning that Sylvester's legacy is growing madder and more dangerous.

With *Mighty Real*, that legacy has emerged from the underground in all its wild-eyed glory, even bearing its own revolutionary slogan: "Mushrooms, glitter, and pot, Lucretia--mushrooms, glitter, and pot." While playwright/actor Djola Branner plays Sylvester with a somber, comically put-upon quality, the character is the calm eye in a swirling storm of giggling twin girls, video images, furious telephone



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calls, disembodied heads, amyl nitrate, and propulsive dance music. Branner's script follows the arc of a television biography, including a common framing device (an interview), but this is merely the broadest gesture toward a narrative. Once the gesture has been made, it is immediately abandoned: The play's detailing of Sylvester's life seems disorderly, as though it were the gauzy hallucination of a man with a high fever.

Come to think of it, that is exactly what the play is supposed to be. Some details stand out clearly, such as an interview that quickly becomes a sort of compulsive confession, with Sylvester discussing his childhood molestation, his spell as a male prostitute, and his use of female hormones. Other scenes are distorted and dreamlike: One of the characters will pick up a telephone (the stage is littered with them) and begin speaking, and then simply drop the telephone and continue with the conversation.

Branner did an enormous amount of research for this play, flying to Los Angeles and California to conduct interviews with Sylvester's friends and family, patching together a life that has not previously been well documented. Consequently, his writing often seems to consist of what journalists call "emptying out the notebook"--forcing every fact, no matter how trivial, into a story. *Mighty Real* fairly bursts at its seams with information, including 10 songs and 31 characters. It is not a small group of militants that has emerged from Sylvester's compound; it is an army, mostly played by four actors. They bring astonishing verve to their performances (as egged on by director Laurie Carlos)--notably, Aimee K. Bryant and Brian Goranson, whose combined energy could power a small city.

At the end of the play's two-hours-plus, intermissionless performance, I was so dizzy from trying to keep track of it all, and so drained from the fervor of the production, that I wanted to go off on my own and collapse. After a revolution of mushrooms, glitter, and pot, I was finally coming down.

Playwright Steven Dietz has also abandoned traditional narrative structure with his play *Private Eyes*, produced by Synapse Theatre and currently showing at the Phoenix Playhouse. But Dietz's play is a more mannered affair, detailing a rather tawdry affair, and then repeatedly stepping back from the tryst to reveal that what we are watching is, in fact, a play. (So *that's* why I'm sitting in a dark room with a program on my lap!) Dietz keeps his audience guessing throughout, refusing to declare for certain whether any of the events have happened, whether the characters are real or are playing roles, and whether what we see is fiction, a distorted memory, or fact.

In the end, we do not care. Dietz's characters all talk exactly like one another, yammering away in long, self-indulgent monologues about the nature of romance until somebody from offstage calls "Cut!" The actors are certainly game enough, particularly Steven Kath as a flustered English director, but no amount of mugging can transmute this unfunny dialogue into comedy. And at times the play's twisted structure is alienating, as though it were a poorly thought-out prank. My exhaustion at the end of *Private Eyes* was no hangover; this painful mystery was a bad trip from start to finish.