

# Drag DIY

## Missoula's kings, queens and in-betweens talk tips and tricks for being fabulous

by Charley Macorn

In a hallway at the University Center on the University of Montana campus, a group of uniformed ROTC students furiously take notes as an instructor grimly points to a whiteboard. Occasionally, one of the students glances away from the lesson, distracted by the buzz of excitement coming from a neighboring meeting room full of people sporting dyed hair and pride buttons. The enthusiastic crew in the meeting room is part of a bi-weekly workshop called "So You Think You Can Drag" designed for anyone — mostly newbies — to get tips for and guidance in the art of drag.

"I love the clothing," someone says. "I would dress that way every day if I could."

"What's stopping you, other than society?" asks another person.

"Society is a pretty big factor," they answer. "That and money."

Jaz Dierenfield, the workshop's instructor, smiles.

"I'm not sure what we can do about society," Dierenfield says. "But as for money, look at me: I'm a broke college kid and I find a way."

Dierenfield has performed around the world, from London, England, to Portland, Oregon, since taking part in their first drag show while studying at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Dierenfield's drag persona, Aladdin Glambert, is a flashy and dynamic blur of energy that seems completely removed from the soft-spoken physics student teaching the workshop. The idea to teach the workshop sprang from Dierenfield's realization that a lot of people in their personal life were showing an interest in drag, and most of them had no idea where to start. As the student coordinator for the Student Involvement Network and the outreach director for UM Lambda, Dierenfield realized they were in the best position to facilitate it.

"The drag community has been so supportive and encouraging and empowering here in Montana."

Since its founding 30 years ago, the Imperial Sovereign Court of the State of Montana has produced dozens of drag



The monthly ISCSM drag show at the Badlander features personas including Vanilla Wafer.

shows every year throughout the state. "It's a bit of a surprise when people [outside the state] find out about Montana's long history of drag performance," says Johnny Barber, a drag performer and UM history grad student.

Helena, Bozeman and even Great Falls all have thriving drag scenes, but Missoula's stands out with its monthly themed drag shows at the Badlander, tight-knit community of performers and supportive environment. Still, even in a welcoming atmosphere, drag can be an intimidating prospect for newbies. Where do you start in a field known for its use of makeup, costumes and choreography? In an artform dedicated to big characters and big costumes, it can be terrifying for someone wanting to make their break in the world of drag. And that's where the workshop comes in.

Even though some of Missoula's performers have been performing for decades, they all started somewhere, and people like Dierenfield say they are more than willing to share their best tips for starting drag on a budget. What it takes? Attitude, learning from your mistakes and saving a couple of bucks whenever you can.

"Firstly, figure out what kind of queen you want to be," says Matty Oliver, who has been performing as Zara Renea Spritzer for almost nine years.

Just putting on a dress or wig doesn't make you a drag queen, Oliver says. Everything you put on should serve your inner character.

"You can have the best wig and the best makeup and the best dress, but if you don't have the inside figured out, you're in trouble."

When Oliver started in drag, they procured a stash of makeup by stealing their mother's Mary Kay Cosmetics samples. This allowed them to play around to see what worked for them, but they still recommend trying on your makeup a few times before wearing it in public.

"I felt fierce, but I looked busted as fuck when I first went out," Oliver says.

If you don't have any experience with makeup, Oliver recommends checking out YouTube tutorials and, in lieu of stealing makeup from your mom, trying some of the cheaper brands before investing a lot of money. Wigs, commonly associated with drag culture, but by no means a necessity, can also be a daunting undertaking. Oliver currently spends between 40 to 80 hours prepping each wig before a performance in a painstaking process that evolved over the years


through trial and error. For the beginner, however, they recommend purchasing cheap wigs. "Don't just take them out of the bag and put it on your head," Oliver says. "Take it out, brush it out, style it; a little work can go a long way. You learn the most from your failures."

Johnny Spritzer, the drag alter ego of Barber, also knows the importance of learning from mistakes. Early in their career, Barber, like many rookie drag kings, bound their breasts with an Ace bandage. Binding, the process of compressing your breasts to create faux pectoral muscles, has a long tradition in drag culture. But while the bandage effectively compresses breasts, it's also incredibly dangerous. A decade ago, Barber discovered just how dangerous it can be backstage at a show. Moments before Johnny Spritzer was to take the stage to compete for the title of Mr. Gay Missoula, Barber coughed, and immediately heard a loud snap. The compression of the bandage, coupled with the cough, fractured one of their ribs. Barber still took the stage and performed through the pain, even winning that coveted title, but never used an Ace bandage again.

"I got really drunk after that," Barber says. "I want to save other people from that pain. If you're someone with breasts and you want to bind, please, please, please use a binder."

Binders go for around \$20 online, and it's easy to find cheap clothing and other accessories on the internet, too. Locally, clothing can be picked up on the cheap from Missoula's plethora of thrift stores, or at the drag performer favorite, Ross Dress for Less. "I've gotten some of my favorite pieces for five or six dollars at Ross Crossdress for Less," says Oliver, laughing.

At the workshop, Dierenfield leads the enthusiastic attendees through the schedule for the bi-weekly workshop and gives some final advice.

"Be a part of the community. Drag is great for personal expression and challenging gender norms, but it's also a great opportunity to make connections with people." 

arts@missoulaneews.com

# Bootstrap heroes

## The downmarket superpowers of *M Squad*

by Charley Macorn



*M Squad* features, from left, Jordan Demander, Kyle McAfee and Ian St. Onge.

A masked man in blue coveralls flies through the sky and drops a cellphone into a volcano, laughing at the man he stole it from. A shirtless man slings laser bolts from his hands in order to cheat at arm wrestling. A psychic harnesses his mental powers to open a jar of mayonnaise just so he can dig his fingers in and have a snack. These characters make up the cast of *M Squad*, an original new live-action web series created by local filmmakers/actors Jordan Demander, Austin Valley, Kyle McAfee and Ian St. Onge. Clearly, these aren't your typical save-the-world superheroes.

"I wouldn't call them that," Demander says. "They'd probably call themselves that, but I wouldn't."

*M Squad*—short for "Murder Squad"—originated during Missoula Community Access Television's 2015 "Do It In 72" film contest. The annual competition requires participating teams to write, shoot and edit a short film in only three days. Demander, along with his partners, settled on a superhero film due to the easy availability of props.

"I had an old wheelchair and Kyle had this mask, so we figured, 'Let's make something kinda like the X-Men,'" Demander says. The result is an amalgam of mid-'90s comic books and late-night television.

Demander says reaction to the first *M Squad* screening was mixed. That episode featured the crew battling Captain Miserable and his universe-ripping space bass. The bulk of the competition audience was composed of hypercritical filmmakers, and few of them laughed. Even so, *M Squad* ended up winning the \$500 first prize. The filmmakers took their prize money and raised an additional \$600 by screening a collection of their previous short films at the Roxy. They invested the cash into making the dozen episodes that constitute *M Squad*'s first season.

*M Squad*'s episodic adventures include battles with pirates, cyborg environmental lawyers and local police, who have some pressing questions about two dozen or so unsolved murders. (Note: *M Squad* is in no way related to the moralistic 1957 television

drama series of the same name about a special unit of the Chicago police department.)

The filmmakers create each episode in a garage studio on Missoula's Northside, completely on green screen, the purchase of which was their fundraising's primary target. It's allowed them to place their characters on sailing ships and in outer space without the use of elaborate sets. "It's really a cost-saver," Valley says. "This way we don't have to worry about shooting on location or ambient sound. There isn't an indie film shot in Missoula that you can't hear train sounds in the background."

St. Onge, McAfee and Demander play the *M Squad* characters, and Valley stars as various goons who usually end up getting murdered. With a shoestring budget, all four filmmakers wear multiple hats on set.

"Ian runs sound, Austin does the bulk of the technical work and Jordan is our practical special-effects wizard," McAfee says. Jokes and story ideas often develop through improvisation. "When I wrote my episodes I just tried to be funny and leave room for stuff to happen on set," McAfee says.

A rotating stable of local performers rounds out the remaining cast of side characters and extras. "Missoula has this great community of talented people," St. Onge says. "It does take more time to film an episode with more people. You're on set, but you have to stop for smoke breaks and bullshitting. It's a lot of fun, but it does lead to late nights."

And while it can't compete with Hollywood's barrage of superhero films, *M Squad* makes up for its CGI shortcomings with DIY charm and camaraderie.

With four episodes released online and another eight in production, reaction to *M Squad* continues to be mixed.

"Some people find it very funny," Valley says. "Some people really don't like it. But that's fine. We're not for everyone. We're really a beer and bowls show." 🍺

# Perfectly bad

## Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* and the importance of being earnest

by Charley Macorn

There is a bounty of perplexing weirdness in 2003's *The Room*, an independent film produced by the eccentric and mysterious Tommy Wiseau. Wiseau, who also wrote, directed and starred in the film, is responsible for every single one of them. Characters yell things like "Leave your stupid comments in your pocket!" before storming out of a scene. Groups of men wearing tuxedos toss around a football next to a roadway. A murderous drug dealer shows up briefly, is dragged off and then is never mentioned again. But it's the part where one character orders a "half Canadian bacon with pineapple, half artichoke with pesto and light on the cheese" pizza that really drives home just how legendarily bad the movie is. Not only is that just a really weird pizza topping to order, but, when it finally arrives, it's just a plain cheese pizza. If the characters are upset, or, in fact, care that their complex, three-topping, two-sauce order was wrong, they don't mention it.

*The Room's* nonsensical plot, baffling dialogue and anatomically questionable sex scenes are among the worst ever put to film. And since its release, *The Room* quickly and deservedly rose through the ranks (or dropped into the toilet, depending on how you look at it) to take its throne as the best worst movie ever made. Adult Swim once ran the film in its entirety instead of its regularly scheduled programming as an April Fools joke. This year's *The Disaster Artist*, which stars

James Franco and was adapted from a memoir about the making of *The Room*, written by Wiseau's costar, Greg Sestero, is getting serious Oscar buzz.

But at the center of it all is a bad movie that has something going for it a lot of other films don't. The best thing about *The Room* is its earnestness. It is, in fact, impossible to make a movie this bad on purpose. And many filmmakers have tried. Hollywood and its bargain basement cousins have been using bad actors and questionable plots for years in an attempt to tap into the cult fervor that films like *The Room* generate. The Syfy Channel has trotted out at least one new movie in the faux-bad *Sharknado* series every year since 2013. *Sharknado*, produced by the Asylum, a studio famous for its mockbuster cash-ins like *Transmorphers* and *Atlantic Rim*, is the antithesis of movies like *The Room*. Wiseau cast working actors looking for their big break. The *Sharknado* franchise features the likes of Jerry Springer and disgraced former congressman Anthony Weiner. It was always supposed to be a joke. But *The Room* was supposed to be a real movie; Wiseau aspired to be the next James Dean. You can't recreate that kind of misguided drive, no matter how many ironic cameos you cram into your movie.

After *The Room* became the bad movie, Wiseau started leaning into it. He popped up in 2015 as the villain in *Samurai Cop 2: Deadly Vengeance*, a self-aware



No words can accurately describe how baffling this scene is. *The Room* screens at the Roxy Sat., Dec. 16, at 8 PM.

sequel to *Samurai Cop*, which was an actual so-bad-it's-good movie. Another project, *The Neighbors*, is a sitcom released on Hulu in 2015 that, on paper, should have been identical to *The Room*. It was written and directed by Wiseau, and he stars in it as two different characters. It's full of bad actors bumbling around, speaking nonsense inside an impenetrable plot. But Wiseau is in on the joke now, and the elements that make *The Room* so entertain-

ing to watch when they're meant to be taken seriously are just annoying and boring when they're bad on purpose. Wiseau and Greg Sestero are teaming up again for a new movie featuring comedian Paul Scheer. He's a big *Sharknado* fan.

We aren't likely to have another movie of *The Room's* same distinct essence again, at least not from Wiseau. And that's, in a way, what makes it such a gem. It's the strange energy he brought

to every bewildering frame that gives the movie its power. *The Room* isn't a cult classic because of all its crazy parts. As misguided as it was, its appeal comes down to sincerity. Wiseau reached for the stars and failed spectacularly. There's something to be celebrated there. **U**

*The Room* screens at the Roxy Sat., Dec. 16, at 8 PM.

[calendar@missoulaneews.com](mailto:calendar@missoulaneews.com)

### Looking for some new blood for your bad movie night? Check out this list of movies that are truly so bad they're good.

**Birdemic:** The first half of this movie is a bland romantic comedy about a generic business man and a Victoria's Secret lingerie model falling in love. The second half of the movie is about poorly animated clip-art birds attempting to destroy civilization. **Best of the Worst:** The scene where the main characters talk about how much they all love Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

**Fateful Findings:** Director Neil Breen stars as a vigilante hacker who is the only person who can save the world from the evils of big business and the government. **Best of the Worst:** The grand fi-



Samurai Cop

nale where dozens of senators and bankers hilariously kill themselves after being exposed by super-hacker Breen.

**Samurai Cop:** He's a samurai, he's a cop, he's battling concrete-chinned Robert Z'Dar. **Best of the Worst:** Star Matt Hannon cut his long luxurious hair after principal shooting wrapped, but was brought back to do extensive reshoots in the fakest wig production could find.

**Troll 2:** There's not a single troll to be found in this movie. Instead, a city of vegetarian goblins

start turning poor tourists into plants so they can devour them. **Best of the Worst:** How do you stop your family from eating a tainted dinner that will turn them all into shrubbery? Peeing on it of course.

**Nothing But Trouble:** Dan Aykroyd wasn't allowed to direct any more movies after turning in this gross, unsettling movie that might as well just be *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for Yuppies. **Best of the Worst:** Dan Aykroyd's penis-nosed judge is joined by the Digital Underground, including Tupac Shakur, for a musical number. **U**