

It's show time:
**With style
 and grace
 they shine
 in the
 spotlight**

Story By Mick Dyer

Photos By Butch Ireland

Sunday was a beautiful day. The sun had burned off the last remnants of the hard, steel-grey winter clouds, the crab apple trees were just beginning to bloom and the first faint traces of the apricot and cherry blossoms floated ever so gently on the cool spring breeze. The air was electric, and every breath was like a jolt of new life. Where there was once brown earth and bare trees, there were now green grass, yellow daffodils and tiny buds on every living tree and bush. Everything in sight was changing, transforming, metamorphosing.

Everything.

By 8 p.m., they already had a pretty good jump on the evening. Mercedes, Champagne Lorraine and B.B.Q. stood half-naked in front of the mirrors in the dressing room, putting on pairs of sheer nylon stockings, fixing their hair and applying makeup to their faces. They didn't seem to mind that I was in there with them. After all, they're professionals. Professional female impersonators. That's what they prefer to be called.

"We don't like 'drag queen,'" Mercedes said. "It's a little offensive."

Spirits were high and they talked and joked and teased each other -- pumping themselves up for the show at the Boardwalk, 104 N. 20th St. Tonight was Mercedes' and Champagne's night in the spotlight. Champagne is Miss Beauty and the Beast 1989, an annual city-wide pageant for first-time female impersonators, and Mercedes is Miss City Sweetheart 1990, an annual citywide Valentine's Day female impersonator pageant. This was their victory show for winning their crowns.

By 8:30 p.m., the crowd started to trickle into the auditorium in the next room. The guy at the door came back to the dressing room to ask Mercedes, Champagne and B.B.Q. if there was anybody who should get in free. B.B.Q. gave his lover's name. Since members of both Champagne's and Mercedes' families would be in the audience, they gave their names. The doorman didn't seem to understand

who Champagne's mother was. Champagne said, "she looks like me in drag."

While he was putting on a rather snug blue dress, Mercedes told me that he and his little sister often trade clothes.

"She helps me with my routine," he said. "I buy her rings and things, and she lets me wear them when I perform."

Around 9 p.m., TASHA D'VORE arrived backstage, already partially dressed and made up. The strain began to show on the performers' faces as they picked up the pace, trying to be ready for the show by 9:30, the advertised starting time.

Around 9:30 p.m., friends, family and fans came back to the dressing room to socialize and help with last minute makeup, costume and music details. The air was so thick with hair spray, makeup fumes and tension that the place would have exploded had someone struck a match.

Around 10 p.m., the change was more or less complete. Their faces were ready, the falsies were superglued to their chests, dresses and wigs and hats were on, and everything was in place.

Mercedes was now a thin, drop-dead gorgeous, fair-skinned brunette with long hair and dark eyes.

Champagne was now a dazzling dark-skinned knock-out with thick, beautiful, tightly curled hair and full sensuous lips.

B.B.Q. was now a petite '20s-style flapper with brown eyes behind long, thick lashes and pouty, red lips.

TASHA was now a stunning, tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed Nordic goddess.

If you didn't know these were men, you would think they were very attractive women. They could have been models in any glamour magazine, for all I knew. That's who they looked like anyway. Seriously.

About 10:30 p.m., TASHA went on stage to introduce the show. Only an hour late, but someone at the bar told me that 10:30 is like 9:30 "drag-time."



TASHA D'VORE sings in the spotlight at the Boardwalk.