R.I.P. Heklina, Influential San Francisco Activist Drag Queen

Heklina (aka Stefan Grygelko) “was not afraid to be sober and be frank about her HIV status.”

April 14, 2023 By Trent Straube

Heklina (aka Stefan Grygelko), a larger-than-life drag queen based in San Francisco but whose influence reached across generations and continents, died April 3, 2023, while in London to perform Mommie Queerest. She was found unresponsive by her friend and costar Peaches Christ. The cause of death is unknown, pending an autopsy report, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, but foul play has been ruled out. She was 55.

Just weeks before the London show, Heklina promoted it on Twitter:

> Can’t wait! @sohotheatre @PeachesChrist
>
> https://t.co/68CnuvHle2
>
> — Heklina (@Heklina) March 2, 2023

Heklina was a powerhouse performer and personality in the drag world for several decades. While inspiring new generations of drag queens, she forged safe spaces and creative outlets for LGBTQ folks and outcasts.

“It must have done a lot for young clubgoers to see this established queen, who was not afraid to be sober and be frank about her HIV status,” New York drag legend Lady Bunny told the Chronicle in a profile on Heklina’s legacy. “By talking about her sex life, she was saying, ‘I’m not damaged goods. I’m not done yet.’”

Since news of Heklina’s death spread, drag queens and other performers have been paying tribute to the icon.

Icon! Heklina was punk rock and made drag what it is today. Legend. ❤ pic.twitter.com/a2NY7lvdz1

— Trixie Mattel™ (@trixiemattel) April 3, 2023

Born in Minnesota, Grygelko also lived in Iceland, his mother's homeland—his drag name was inspired by Hekla, one of the island's most active volcanoes. In 1991, after getting sober and conquering addiction, he moved to San Francisco and soon began performing and hosting events that featured drag shows, queer punk and other alternative entertainment. Club nights such as Trannyshack and Mother drew crowds from across the globe, as did theatrical performances such as Mommie Queerest and The Golden Girls: The Christmas Episodes.

Heklina window tribute at Cliff's Variety in Castro. Loving "Windows For @Heklina" - such a great tribute to a legend. Let's see this grow throughout gayborbood. pic.twitter.com/yWBJo1PHI9

— Steven Bracco (@Braccs) April 13, 2023

Heklina's start coincided with the height of the AIDS epidemic—lifesaving medications didn't become available until 1996—and the era's activism influenced Heklina, reports the Chronicle.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Bianca Del Rio (@thebiancadelrio)

We’re heartbroken over the passing of Heklina, a beloved and iconic pioneer in our community and a legend of the San Francisco drag scene.

Our hearts are with her friends, family, and everyone touched by her joyous spirit. ❤ RIP, Heklina pic.twitter.com/pL0Gt5r3nK

— World of Wonder (@WorldOfWonder) April 4, 2023

News of Heklina’s death surfaced on social media as Republican attacks on drag shows have placed the drag and LGBTQ communities not only in national headlines but also in the right wing’s political crosshairs.

In San Francisco, a Drag Up! Fight Back! rally doubled as a tribute to Heklina.

???? Heklina https://t.co/HTzlGgSOb3

— Christopher R. Vasquez (@crv716) April 9, 2023

“Stefan Grygelko, aka Heklina, is drag. Not glossy, viral drag but brass knuckle, survivalist drag. Armor against the closet, cops and AIDS drag. Dive bar neon and off-color jokes, cheap shots and cheap wigs drag. Drag that saves lives,” activist and filmmaker Leo Herrera said in a statement read at the rally, according to the Chronicle. “Her work was a feast for the cultural famine of queers beaten up by the ’80s and ‘90s.... Heklina leaves us when drag is both in peril and too successful, threatened by legislation and in capitalism’s jaws. May Heklina’s name be a reminder of drag’s core. May Heklina’s memory be a link to its true source.”

I’m legitimately SO SORRY for your loss. Heklina was so incredibly kind and warm. Such an incredible supporter of fellow queens, and she made me feel like family anytime I came to Oasis. Sending y’all so much love, and my deepest condolences ????

— Shea Couleé (@SheaCoulee) April 3, 2023

A memorial is being planned for May 23 at the Castro Theatre. According to the Eventbrite page for the event, per Heklina’s wishes, please consider donating to GLBT Historical Society, Palm Springs Animal Shelter and Give Me Shelter Cat Rescue.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/rip-heklina-influential-san-francisco-activist-lgbtq-drag-queen