

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Courtesy of Sasha Velour

A Chair is Not a Chair in The Big Reveal Live

By Ella-Gabriel Mason

A series of parody commercials and documentaries features Sasha and a range of Velour branded products. A stagehand sets a cartoonishly overstuffed blue armchair onstage at the Perelman Theater alongside a small coffee table, and propped on a small easel is Sasha Velour's book, [The Big Reveal: An Illustrated Manifesto of Drag](#), whose release occasions this performance. When the show finally begins, I am more than ready.

The video fades out from the big back screen. Music begins to play and a spotlight pans across the stage lingering briefly in each wing. Has Velour missed her cue? I shift a little in my seat feeling both impatience and an absurd delight at this moment-gone-wrong. And then the stagehand strides purposefully back onstage to the chair and snatches away a crocheted blanket revealing Velour's lip-syncing face in a hole in the cutout chair. As Velour stands the chair unfolds around her body into a blue brocade gown with cushions forming long dramatic sleeves. Upholstery tassels become earrings as she takes us through a medley of chair-themed songs.

The night proceeds as a series of reveals, both the cheeky costume transformations made famous by Velour in her iconic winning lip sync to [So Emotional](#) on the finale of [RuPaul's Drag Race](#) in season 13, but also through the bits of history and vulnerability shared by Sasha and her surprise guest, queer icon and comic, [Murray Hill](#).

Velour describes “The Big Reveal” as a drag history and manifesto, and throughout the evening she shares bits of her own history with drag. She cites her grandmothers as lighting the flame of gender-bending possibility, encouraging her to dress up for fashion shows and self-produced backyard plays. In one particularly endearing moment, she shares a home video in which nine year-old Velour enacts the death of Thisbe, from the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Little Velour has placed two balloons in the front of her shirt and marches out in front of a wooden play structure, voluminous breasts bouncing. Speaking some tragic line she takes a plastic sword and awkwardly presses into one balloon and then the other, popping each breast in her death scene before slumping over into the grass.

In this child’s performance I can see the seed of the icon on stage before me now — the same mix of exaggeration, earnestness, and humor. Like the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe nestled within Shakespeare’s comedy, watching Velour’s drag is like opening a series of nesting dolls. Queer failure cracks open laughter, leaning into camp opens a tenderness, each laying bare the vulnerability inherent in performance. Will you, the audience, accept me? More than that, will you listen? Will you lift me up? Will you trust me to surprise you?

In conversation with Murray Hill, Velour shares that she doesn’t dance because she was born with clubfeet, making walking difficult and limiting her sense of comfort in movement. But in the duo lip-sync that follows I find myself wanting to argue with her self-assessment. While her footwork is limited to quick little steps and simple pivot-turns about the stage, Velour fully embodies the emotions of each lyric with virtuosic facial expressions punctuated by articulated fingers and moments of contraction and release through her torso. Without letting out a sound I see the breath of the song move through her. Meanwhile, Murray Hill is a good sport, doing his best to catch a lyric and exaggerating his own sense of embodied awkwardness, jumping up on a chair and bouncing, wiping his brow with vaudevillian drama.

While I have neither the space nor the inclination to spoil every one of Velour’s reveals, I will disclose that the theme that closed the night was “home.” The multiple modes of performance presented by Sasha throughout the night – lipsync, archival presentation, interview, video – left me considering all the varied strategies by which we construct homes within ourselves. The documentation of memory. The performance of gender, talent, and beauty. The risk-taking of opening up to another person. And the profound generosity of opening ourselves to a whole community through performance.

[The Big Reveal Live Show](#), Sasha Velour, Perelman Theater, Kimmel Cultural Campus, May 18.

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