

NEW YORK POST

July 23rd, 2005



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Entertainment Section cover story

FACADE SQUAD

By STEPHEN KOSLOFF (online edition)

QUIRKY KULT BRINGS BACK THE COSTUME PARTY

July 23, 2005 -- PERFORMANCE artist Gabrielle Penabaz is no stranger to New York parties packed with the beautiful people. And frankly, she's sick of them. "Go to Lotus on a Saturday night," she says. "It's so beige."

At that moment, a guy walked by wearing a green wig, orange face paint and a white jump suit. Penabaz had found the answer to her night-life dilemma: a costume-party circuit where the atmosphere, and the dress code, are far from beige - they're fluorescent.



Christopher Hardwick rings in the fun Kostume Kult's soiree Oompa Loopy.

Penabaz was at Oompa Loopy, the latest shindig organized by the Kostume Kult, a Manhattan club intent on bringing back the joys of grand costume parties. The

Willy Wonka-themed event, held two weeks ago at the Gershwin Hotel, is one of a half-dozen soirees the group has planned this year.

The Kult was founded by Jim Glaser, a 41-year-old executive recruiter whose low-key demeanor seems at odds with his nocturnal activities.

Glaser was inspired three years ago at the Burning Man, the annual five-day art festival and party in the Nevada desert. Glaser and his friends would hand out freaky hats and sunglasses at the festival, until they morphed into a full-blown "camp," giving away thousands of costumes.

This year, Glaser shifted the Costume Kult to New York, and he's thrown three wild costume parties already, including one that was a good-natured sendup of bar mitzvahs featuring a lisping rabbi named Goldthtein.

"Costumes, or just exceptional style, break down barriers between people," Glaser says. "A certain magic occurs when people are in costume. There is this social crutch that helps us get over the shyness and break out a bit.

"I have been photographing costume events for many years now, and you can see it in the eyes of practically every subject - people have more fun in costume."

The parties also generate a magic that's absent from a normal weekend out at the clubs, Glaser says. The anticipation surrounding the Kult's Horned Ball, a celebration of spring, brought to mind famous costume parties such as Truman Capote's Black and White Ball. Four hundred people showed up to the Oompa Loopy.

"People plan, which makes it feel like a special event," Glaser says. "These events just seem to attract more adventuresome people."

Or people who are willing to be made over.

Alan Rosenblatt works for a major financial institution. He walked into Oompa Loopy wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a grumpy demeanor. Eventually, he made his way to a section of the room where Costume Kult was giving away hundreds of bizarre clothing items. Two volunteers grabbed him, and 15 minutes later he had a dainty scarf wrapped around his neck and hair, capped with a sunbonnet.

It may have been womens' clothing but the grin on his face suggested Rosenblatt was a new man.

"It's a break from the every day-ness of our lives," said partygoer Miyong Noh, who works in the theater industry as a fabric dyer.

Nate Thoma, a grad student in psychology, said he was initially nonplussed.

"At first I thought, 'Oh, they're wearing costumes, how clever.' But I'm on my fourth beer now and the shackles are falling from my eyes."

He paused to nod hello to a woman walking by in a green wig. "They're doing important work here," he concluded.

Part of the group's appeal is the strong sense of community. Costume Kult has its own list-serve on Yahoo that it uses to brainstorm and plan its campaigns. Everyone is a producer, or at least a gaffer.

"There is input from the whole group at every step, and having a stake in the event makes people feel more connected to it," Glaser said.

While Costume Kult's parties may be its most high-profile projects, they are only part of the picture. Last year the group organized Leprecon, a St. Paddy's Day pub crawl, with participants dressed as leprechauns. Members participate in public events such as the Mermaid Parade in Coney Island, and other underground oddities like the Idiotarod, a human-powered spoof of the Alaskan sled-dog race.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Glaser's group is merely the most visible node in a quiet groundswell of interest in costume culture. Last month, when the costume store Abracadabra announced it was giving away thousands of costumes, they set off a frenzied round of cellphone calls across the country, and costume lovers drove in from as far away as Detroit.

Glaser got in on the action early, hauling out 200 cubic feet of costumes and bringing them to a costume "chop shop" in Manhattan for sorting.

The cost of the costumes and venues is covered partly by cover charges, but mostly the members of Kult pitch in.

"It's a labor of love, a lot of us throw in money because we like it so much," Glaser says.

Now the group has its eyes on bigger and more ambitious projects.

Glaser is in the process of turning the group into a non-profit called the Costume Cultural Society. He said he's been talking with City Councilman Alan Gerson (D-Manhattan) about an ambitious Halloween festival in his district that Glaser says will be "the wildest Halloween extravaganza in the city," with activities for kids during the day and wacky high jinks for adults at night.

"Having been through several social/party trends, this one by far is the most interesting," Glaser says. "Every time we have on of these parties, it seems that many of us end up seeing the morning light and usually do not feel that tired when we do."



Kult Founder
Jim Glaser

For more information on Costume Kult visit www.kostumekult.com