

## ***Footballers' Wive\$' Tanya Turner: Bolivian Marching Powder, Booze and Baby Snatching = D.I.V.A.!***

By Michael Angelo Tata

### **Importing/Exporting the Medusa**

On Ann McManus' and Maureen Chadwick's outlandish, opulent and thoroughly outrageous serial *Footballers' Wives* (BBC; 2002-2006), she (Zoe Lucker) weaves in and out of respectability, mistress of all domains impressed by her toxic yet intoxicating presence. Buff, blonde and kissed by a perpetual stream of UV rays, she is fashion plate and sociopath in one killer package. Only briefly occupying the slot of victim, as when in the inaugural episode Club Chairman Frank Laslett (John Foregham) crosses her by signing an Italian newbie who will eclipse the fame of her team-captain husband and her volcanic response is to beat him into a coma, when, in Season Four, the love of her life Conrad (Ben Price) spurns her for his Bollywood princess Amber Gates (Laila Rouass) and the two orchestrate her banishment from the UK, or when, in her final hour, she mistakenly inhales a line of cocaine mixed with strychnine, she is irrepressibly an omnivorous predator with a well-developed taste for blood, semen and all things lab-synthesized.

Even when she loses, she goes out in a blaze of glory, exiting like a true banshee only to return at double the strength. Murderer, she secretly plies her cardiac-challenged husband with Viagra in order to ensure his timely exit after she has milked him for his millions and is ready to move on to the next conquest. Hormones raging, she passes off an Indian child plucked from the uterus of her amorous rival Amber as her own, paying Nurse Dunkley (Julie Legrand) to burn his skin with bleach while she smiles for the paparazzi and puffs her ciggies, long white Bronx fingernails tapping the ashes away. Alcohol hound and drug fiend, she distances herself from the realm of the edible in the never-ending quest for a Prada-worthy body, eschewing calories altogether for the wonders of the Coca leaf and the distilled magic of the potato. In part modeled on Victoria "Posh Spice" Beckham, she graces our television screens for one blissful hour per week to act out our own fantasies of leaving behind our own fleshy torsos and the moral and ethical strings binding them to their respective societies for a super-body ruled

only by chemicals and an all-encompassing mania for international fame. We could never be her: hence, the necessity for her existence as crowning glory of capitalism and postmodernism. She is our worst self, the creature we could never be yet whose existence we ache for in and of her capacity to spice up our own lives ruled by Kantian reason and Rousseauian renunciation. For her, there is no categorical imperative, no social contract, not even the “discontent” that Freud identifies as civilization’s remainder, only a war of all against all which can only be won through violence and vengefulness.

Yet in the zone of her magnificence, other specimens comprising a species emerge from the shadows: they are that impossible, fictive and unstoppable category of XX-chromosome divinities heralded as perhaps the most overworked gay term ever, Divas. “Divas to the Dance Floor, Please!”; “How Do You Spell Diva?”; “Girl, that is so diva...” Related obliquely to both Queens and Fag Hags, the Diva shares the regality and authoritativeness of the absolute despot with historical queens like Elizabeth I or Catherine the Great while also partaking of the Hag’s particular and specific access to the male homosexual, whose desires she colonizes and monopolizes to the point of suffocation—as, for example, Debra Messing’s character Grace on NBC sitcom *Will and Grace* and her effect on the sex life of “main gay” Will Truman, played by Eric McCormack, or the bizarre control exerted by Marie Mencken on her “son” Gerard Malanga in Warhol classic *The Chelsea Girls* (1966).

Transcending the staid social norms imposed upon other docile women, the diva assumes a position of total monstrosity: she rules, and will do anything and everything in her power to ensure that her will achieves perfect expression. Escapee from a Nietzschean fantasy of absolute power and the purity of ego of the sort envisioned by his *Beyond Good & Evil*, she marches over the corpses of those silly enough to imagine they could control or contain her enormous appetites: truly, she transvalues all value, leaving “good” and “evil” behind for matrices in which action and performance are all that count. Performing on a stage which has engulfed the entire world, she never loses sight of her ideal audience, the homosexual male. Forming a dyad, the two roll through the streets with an unstoppable inertia of histrionics and scopophilia: in the real world. In the universe of the soap opera, the homosexual is culled from her fan base, the two united across the thin glass epidermis of the TV screen. He needs her to mortify, scandalize,

wreck, and she could not survive without his rarefied taste for female trouble. She acts out his most morbid and grotesque fantasies, and he catcalls. She sacrifices herself to the eternal flame of addiction, and he makes mental notes for a future eulogy.

Tanya Turner is one such diva—in my estimation, the most important recent arrival to cloy contemporary appetites for destruction. Her superiority and brutality stand out, linking her to other generic predecessors such as Joan Collins (Alexis Carrington Colby, *Dynasty*), Donna Mills (Abby Cunningham, *Knots Landing*) or Heather Locklear (Amanda Woodward, *Melrose Place*), while also leaving one hand open to beckon to future manifestations of the wicked impulses she so innocently and selflessly embodies. Like her operatic forbear, the “Diva” diva, she stands at the center of drama and intrigue, all roads leading to and intersecting her chakric network of energy pulses and alkaline pools.

Like opera star Grassini in Thomas de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, her great art is to force hallucinations upon a rapt world—and a rapt queer. Like the parade of opera divas, most of them sopranos, obsessing Wayne Koestenbaum in *Cleavage*—Dawn Upshaw, Elisabeth Shwarzkopf, Angela Gheorgiu—the non-opera diva makes an epic out of the inconsequential. Unlike her contemporaries on American juggernaut *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004—present), she is not so much desperate as the condition of possibility of the desperateness of others. No clumsy Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher), low-level sexpot Edie Britt (Nicolette Sheridan), domestic demon Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross), bourgeois bore Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), or philandering socialite Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria), Tanya Turner lives on no ordinary suburban street and will not be caught dead in Abercrombie. The world her runway, Tanya jets around the Commonwealth and beyond, where her exploits resonate and her gossamer threads ensnare unsuspecting and infinitely less intelligent men who could never for even a moment glimpse her destructive potential because, as correctly assessed by Val Solanas in her *SCUM Manifesto*, the Y chromosome is defective.

In order for Tanya Turner to be appreciated as “Diva” in the first place, the phenomenon of divahood must itself be examined under a queer electron microscope. For if it occurs at the junction of Queen and Hag, it might also pop up on other female cartographies. That Tanya qualifies as some sort of harpy or virago seems evident, yet

even these terms demand a closer reading, given, for example, their extraction from Greek mythology (harpy, siren, Fury) or from the language of sexology (Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* contains its fair share of masculine women treated as psychopaths). True enough, Tanya's wickedness does appear under the guise of masculinity. Not a moral creampuff like Conrad, and not an indiscriminate center of pusillanimity and sexual ravishment like her first husband Jason (Christian Soumeno), she parcels out her cruelty methodically and with painstaking precision. Spiderlike, and every inch a black widow, she reverses the male/female power dynamic governing cross-culturally so much human behavior, dwarfing all men in her life with a testosterone power surge transforming her into a ruthless arch-enemy and precarious lover ever seconds away from a beheading.

Men can only underdetermine her: physically, she is a powerhouse, and psychologically, a thorough menace. Whether or not a dose of strychnine can put out her lights is a question phrased in a vacuum, yet as we wait breathlessly for some future episode to satisfy our curiosity, we are not even remotely convinced that she has come to an end. Transcending the natural limits posed by space and time, the diva prevails, haunting local myth and legend with exploits that future generations might emulate yet never supersede. Larger than life because we need her to be larger than life, a diva like Tanya Turner assumes her place in the vitrine of the feminine as an exotic specimen rivaling El Chupacabras or some other chimaera of cryptozoology, exhibiting herself for our pleasure and, like it or not, education. Sadean heroine, she squashes, smashes, claws and exhausts, turning all rooms into her boudoir and revealing a Darwinian struggle at the core of polite society.

### **Diva Theory**

As with all marvelous creatures, the Diva too must find herself subject to the taxonmizing gaze of the cultural critic, if only so that her rarity and rarefaction might be relationally understood and her aesthetics might be metabolized and savored. Though there is no standard Museum of Divahood, just as there is a Museum of Natural History

or, in New York City, Museum of Sex, there is a grand tradition of the intractable and truculent woman, a phantasmic hominid haunting many cultures in many guises: hence the title of Kylie Minogue's *Impossible Princess* (Mushroom Records, 1997), a catchphrase applying not only to the pop star, but to fellow centers of conflictual orders and contradictory impulses. At times a sexual frightfest whose *vagina dentata* devours pricks, at times a "female Quixote," "Betsey Thoughtless" or "Emma" whose moral bumbling must find itself put in check by the sobering parameters of the novel, the diva appears throughout mythological, literary and "historical" history as transgressive site and fantasy projection.

Still, how far back to trace a wonder like Tanya Turner is a less important or interesting question than what it is about her surfaces which can inspire the frenzied consumption of the fan and the close attention of the philosopher. Excessive women are a dime a dozen in European and American cultures. They murder their children (Greece: Medea), sell their men down the river (The Aztec Empire: Malinche), mercilessly manipulate the lives of puppet underlings (France: Laclos' Mme de Merteuil), and set fire to the psychoanalyst's sofa (Austria: Freud's Dora). Ultimately, gay, straight and bisexual men all need her, yet for different reasons. For straight and bisexual men, she is the object of conquest, a pinnacle of morality to be taken down from her pedestal and dragged through the mud, as with Mme de Tourvel of Pierre de Laclos' *Liaisons Dangereuses* or Clarissa of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. For these men, she may also be the wild shrew demanding cauterization, a terror whose wings must be clipped. She may finally manifest as the trophy wife, a designer femme fatale slung across his arm as an exotic treasure vouchsafing his sexual virility and masculine charm, as with the supremely morbid case of Anna Nicole Smith and J. Howard Marshall. For the gay man, she is sexually neuter, yet aesthetically ripe.

Like Elizabeth Taylor's character Catherine Holly in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* (Mankiewicz, 1959), her only hope is to become a magnet for his future tricks. While she so many times takes him as sexual object, initiating a doomed love affair ending only in gay divorce, she quickly learns that her role is to ensure a constant stream of glittering surfaces taking the form of high drama. This drama raises the *miniscule* to the *majuscule*, recasting even the most ordinary of lives as a

melodramatic smorgasbord of acerbic wit, physical violence and the power of unbridled consumption.

Voracious, the Diva lives each second on the brink of overdoing it. Inhabiting a strange region bordered on one side by anorexia and on the other by supermorbidity, she enters life as one who consumes to the point of absurdity. In her anorexic form, as with a diva like Warhol Superstar Edie Sedgwick or, today, freak child stars Lindsay Lohan or Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen, she sews her mouth shut and opens every other orifice. “Lollipop” and “bobblehead,” she concentrates her bodily mass into the zone of her head, then graces it with oversized sunglasses which threaten to topple her forward and parades around town lording her emaciation over those human enough to eat. Anything which numbs her appetite works, all for the gleeful appreciation of a gay audience well accustomed to the beauty of self-destructive behavior and the pleasures of courting death.

Dubbed “Scary Thin” by tabloids like *Star Magazine* and *The National Enquirer*, the career anorexic slides her bones into a pink Lara Flynn Boyle tutu and shows her fans the spectacle of renunciation: they use their incisors to tear the flesh from animal bones while she espouses the ultrasimple diet of the Breatharians. Clearing the table of food, she makes way for rivers of vodka, crops of tobacco, and every drug under the sun. Half-dead, she is a corpse bride married to her queer constituency, whom she viciously guards and insulates from other female centers (one fag hag per square mile, or some such ratio). Well on her way to sainthood, she is a Teresa of Avila who starves not to achieve union with a mortified divine presence, but rather to transform into an Arcade mannequin. Neither she nor the fatty can stand one another—an understandable conflict, given their respective takes on uses of the body and the value of the organic. While she moves toward a two-dimensional existence, her overweight sister blossoms and balloons, attracting an orbiting entourage of fags enamored by her many lusts. As remarked by the Duc de Blangis in the Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*, those who cannot eat cannot screw: this bit of wisdom the eater comprehends with all her being, her racing libido making the unfortunate détour through the gay ghetto, where her sexual desires will reconstitute as an appetite for fame among the fags—i.e., as a metamorphosis from consumer to comestible, from devouring to devoured. In short, she becomes their food,

and they grow fat on her excesses. Taking them as her love object, she distances herself from those venues where she might actually meet the man of her dreams in favor of a gay theaterscape where sex is replaced entirely by notoriety: “Oh, no, she did-n’t!!!” Yes, she actually did, and all so that you might feel cinematic and alive. Martha Wash’s video for *Give It to You* (RCA, 1993) visually represents her epitome: engorged queen to a room of monogamous muscleboys, she sucks them into an anthill interior where her charms will nourish them and obviate the need for any other uterus.

Whatever her bodily disposition, the diva is primarily a weaver of trances, as it is through her inebriating presence that all men are robbed of their manhood. For straights and bisexuals, she offers baby substitutions, false pregnancy tests, altered lineages and skewed primogeniture, while for homosexual men she extends the opportunity to hoot, holler and carry on. Exemplary Siren extracted from an Odyssean present, her voice is enough to inspire transport, loss of identity, and blind obedience. Enunciating each syllable which passes through her lips with clarity and perfection à la Liza Minnelli, she makes sure that her words resonate in the empty minds of her marks. As with any good Shakesperean she-devil (a Regan, a Goneril, a Queen Tamora), she manipulates the sensual details of the world in order to hoodwink its interpreters into apprehending an order that, as her prized handiwork, bears an inverted relation to things as they really are. Most successful at restaging reality such that it bears the imprint of her will, she is a worldmaker in the extreme. In her novelistic and soap-operaly form, the diva runs the show.

Setting up a variety of potentials between truth and falsity, she manufactures energy deposits which will fuel countless pages and/or episodes. Text and TV show are her batteries. In them she stores gradients, as, for example, when a pilfered identity takes years to resolve. Without her, there would be no desperation, and, hence, no beauty; as with any good aesthetics, hers is rooted in a human capacity for survival gone haywire. Acting in the heat of a moment threatening to annihilate her, she thinks quickly, proving to be an opportunist making even Oscar Wilde blush. Operatically, she does not so much concoct chaos as inspire and preside over it. Whether she is de Quincey’s Grassini belting out an aria or Donna Summer blasting a Bocelli remix across the plains of the discothèque, her voice is the outcast’s ether. The rich and robust splendor of her spacious

voice seems to promise a revision to ideal gas law. Opening an expanse, she leads the way to a new order where the pariah, be he a drug fiend (de Quincey) or gay man (Donna Summner's ideal audiencegoer), discovers the proper soil for his flowering. Swelling with hope, an eminent Warhol homo like Ondine finds his existence passing into electric dimensions where his own Popedom can flower in an ecclesiastical Cuckooland of his own design.

When her victims sober up, all hell will most certainly break loose, yet she will not be around to pick up the pieces. On *Footballers' Wives*, when Tanya's plot to switch hers and Frank's baby with Amber's and Conrad's unravels and, for once, the truth has won out, the story demands that Tanya be shuttled to the airport via helicopter while dressed to kill in a canary business suit which can barely contain her breasts. Exiled to Rio by Amber and Conrad, she flies the coop after directing one or two vicious barbs toward the happy couple and their newly found son, ready to undertake fresh mayhem. In other places, the diva similarly vanishes once her work has been uncovered, at times finding herself the object of terrible vindication, yet for the most part safely absconding to an alternate geography where her wiles will once again prevail.

Even with Tanya, only the space of a few minutes separates the scene of her banishment from one of her working the beaches of Brazil for a new sugar daddy, proving to us that she is once aagain on the ascent. If the diva dies, she dies extravagantly, puncturing a hole in space and time as she departs for places unknown. Even when she is gone, we know in our heart of hearts that she might reappear in a revived form, leaping from the bathtub like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987). In all earnestness, she never commits any crime, even when dismembered limbs litter her flagstones, since she operates well above local law and custom, wielding a sovereignty making even the most austere 18<sup>th</sup>-century *philosophe* reconsider the origins of civil order. Comprehending that rules are for the weak, she invents her own morality as she goes along, pragmatic to a fault. While others might consent to a *contrat social*, she is never foolish enough to relinquish even one drop of her personal freedom, putting her venom in the service of corroding any chains which threaten to tie her down and compromise her mobility. "Society reinvents itself with each individual," she seems to whisper, "if only one is brave enough to accept the challenge."

Though it might sound odd at first, in truth men of all ilks need her to be powerful, voracious and unflinching in the execution of her desires. A paradigmatic example of her necessity as erotic prop would be the text of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, specifically Wanda von Dunajew's continual resistance to transforming into what Gilles Deleuze labeled the "cloacal mother," a center of chaos. Ultimately, Severin wills Venus into existence, sculpting an unwilling Wanda into this icy white witch all for his own sexual pleasure and sensual fulfillment. Only able to experience the heights of fetishistic joy when under the absolute command of a female despot, Severin forces Wanda to assume a role that, in the end, she masters. Like Severin, men of all sexual orientations come together to erect the diva, who supports perverse aims and involuted libidos with her claims of omnipotence and omniscience. She is willed into existence by men sexually attracted to the impossible princess, as well as by men who identify with her horrors.

The power she wields might never find itself concentrated into a single body, as it does in a music video, novel, opera or soap opera, and so men from all backgrounds demand the miracle of her appearance. She might dominate a sexual scenario or take over a gay nightclub, yet in each situation it is her body from which all rays emanate and in which all points converge. As she materializes, bizarre demands follow, most in violation of logic's Law of Contradiction. A turbine for double binds, she is the birthplace of schizophrenia, a behemoth speaking in tongues which can only be mistranslated. Whether we follow her commands to the letter or veer off on another path, we act in error. In *Either/Or*, Søren Kierkegaard develops a sanity-saving formula: You are always in the wrong against God. And so it is with the Diva: any and all action on the part of her men is sinful. Whether she mounts them or causes a public commotion, whether she steals a sample of his hair to alter a DNA test or belts out "Oops...I Did It Again," all that is permitted is the perpetual acknowledgment of her radical freedom and sovereignty. She may only be appreciated, never interpreted.

### **Vicarious Exorbitance from across the Pond**

Back on *Footballers' Wives*, Tanya Turner continues to wreak havoc on anyone pitiable enough to occlude her path. As with the production, marketing and sale of the diva as prime commodity, there is always the problem of differentiation. What will separate one fictitious mega-bitch from her grandiose predecessor? How can she survive in a medium already saturated with toxic progesterone? Will she have anything at all to do with a real-world Nastya on whom she might in no small part be modeled? On a show with no truly hateful male vixen of the sort made famous by Larry Hagman's character JR Ewing, the Divo incarnate, on *Dallas*, a power vacuum forms making way for a super-lethal Jezebel to take over. Without the extremes she both provides and inspires, there would be no menace, no fire, no motivation for anybody else to behave abominably. Dialectically, she is a revved-up Hegelian antithesis, whose passions and perversions fuel social chain reactions, making Chernobyl and Three Mile Island appear quaint and lovely. Her fury violates the Enlightenment thesis that reality is primarily rational in nature, her presence an atavistic return to a world ruled by violent inhuman forces placing emergent *Homo sapiens* in peril. Consequently, we need to see her punished, since her success might undermine centuries of domestication.

Hence, despite the great pains she takes to manipulate her environment to her advantage, Tanya Turner suffers exquisitely. Her tears fall the hardest, as when Jason Turner humiliates her by sleeping with Jackie Webb (Gillian Taylforth) and fathering an intersexual child, or when Conrad nearly strangles her to death for arranging for Nurse Dunkley to perform a fetal switcheroo. Furthermore, her physique more than anybody's experiences anguish, as best demonstrated by the bodily spasms that rock her after the Viagra she slips her husband Frank does the trick and his heart gives out. Removing his hand from the telephone and staring him dead in the eye with a look of hate and vehemence, she drinks in every aspect of his death throes, her quivering fingernails closing his eyes as her shaky lip stabilizes itself in preparation for the necessary hospital call. When, later in the season, Frank's lawyer gives her a videotape in which Frank explains that, during their intense sexual encounters, he used only condoms poked through with holes, leaving Tanya to conclude that her pregnancy is not the result of an Edenic romp with Conrad, but rather the product of repulsive intercourse with a man she

detested, she once again goes visceral. Tearing open a condom and filling it with water, she watches aghast as tube turns into sieve. Furious, she hurls the condom at her TV set and screams to full capacity while the sticky plastic love glove adheres to Frank's pixelized countenance. Unlike diva predecessors within her genre, Tanya leaves the circumference of language, returning to a time when onomatopoeia and the grunt ruled.

All in all, Tanya Turner arrives in America at a time when the popularity of the Diva has waned. Her carnivorous tendencies, coupled with an adherence to the sartorial principles of *haute couture*, reveal a decadence out of tune with wartime values and post-911 anxieties. An overt dependence on alcohol and drugs makes matters only worse for a public more interested in a goody-goody like Teri Hatcher. When even Madonna tames down her act and takes to the writing of children's literature and comprehension of cabalistic truths, claiming to have dissolved her overdeveloped ego in favor of an agapic world-soul, there is little hope for the success of the superbitch. Reminding us of how things once were and how they one day will be again, Tanya drives through town in a bulldozer, sacrificing everything in the name of carnal lust. Without her, there is only Wisteria Lane and the *Da Vinci Code*, bland bourgeois Levittowns where the present is so boring that we must reinvent the past. With Tanya, there is hope for the return of ego and its glamorous workings. Revivifying Hobbesian speculations about a primal bellicosity buried deep within the social organon, as well as Shakesperian phantasmagorias of incredible brutality (*Titus Andronicus*), she is a bat out of hell come to haunt our dull start of a new millennium with vistas of more wicked days to come. No sleepy suburbanite bumbling about the business of her life clad in Banana Republic or American Apparel, Tanya is a royal reincarnate whose autarchic tendencies promise ruination for anybody retro enough to think democratically.

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