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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

'January 1,' Andrea Modica's new book of photography, takes an unsparring look at an annual Philadelphia tradition: Mummer Wench. Review by Lev Feigin.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

January 1. By Andrea Modica. L'Artiere (Santivoglio BO, Italy), 2018. 64 pages, cardboard binding; \$72 to \$575 for regular and

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ABOUT LEV FEIGIN



Lev Feigin is a Philadelphia writer, flâneur, and, occasionally, photographer. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia (née Leningrad), he received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the CUNY Graduate Center. He writes about the visual arts, books and photography.

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## Andrea Modica's 'January 1' It's a man's world

Lev Feigin

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Whether depicting family life in small-town America or minor-league ballplayers, Philadelphia-based photographer Andrea Modica has long been interested in exploring what she calls the “paradox of inclusion and exclusion.” Her latest book, *January 1*, which looks at the city's controversial New Year's Day tradition — the Mummers Parade — is no exception.



A Wench passes down the tradition. (Photo by Andrea Modica, courtesy of the Print Center.)

For the past 10 years, every New Year's Day, Modica has trained her large-format camera on the Wenchs, a Mummers division known for its freewheeling, anarchic ethos, cross-dressing garb, and occasional blackface. Though that last practice has officially been banned from the parade, it's a reminder of the city's racially intolerant past, which some Wenchs are reluctant to cast off.

Leaning against the walls of South Philly buildings and clutching cans of beer, the all-male, all-white performers reveal themselves to the artist in exquisitely sharp detail. Her 8x10-view camera, a bulky mechanical apparatus, has changed little since the days of Louis Daguerre.

Modica whisks the boozy performers from the crowded streets one by one. For 15 minutes or longer, the masquerading men — cold and soused — stand unblinking in front of her sprawling camera obscura. Meanwhile, Modica hides under the drapery, turns levers, gives instructions, and arranges the composition on the ground-glass viewer, where each man, dressed as a woman, appears upside down.

Oh, dem golden slippers

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### **Oh, dem golden slippers**

“Men act and women appear,” English art critic John Berger famously wrote in *Ways of Seeing*. Modica flips this formula upside down. “They are giving me a certain amount of power,” she says in her office at Drexel University, adding that she is not a “big fan of parades.”

Her boxy, beautifully printed book contains 27 black-and-white portraits of the merrymakers. We enter *January 1* through an epigraph from Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem: “Ring out the old, ring in the new / Ring, happy bells across the snow.” Then comes the first image, a bearded man in a bonnet and wig with blond pigtailed, resting his head against a wall, eyes closed in jovial surrender. We can almost feel him filling his lungs with cold, wintry air.

The men in the pictures — some, still boys — wear full Mummer regalia, sometimes inherited from their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Shod in golden slippers (painted sneakers or work boots), wearing pleated collars and balloon sleeves, they tote parasols but look every inch South Philly.



Modica at work near Two Street. (Photo courtesy of the Print Center.)

Some turn their backs to the camera. Others reveal their profile or face the lens, leaning against the stucco or standing, arms akimbo. Their satin dresses gleam with a scant, icy light that seems to reach us from another time and place.

### **The timeless Wench**

A Brooklynite of Italian extraction, Modica was attracted to the Mummers' sense of unity and hometown pride, a collective bond forged in neighborhoods where four generations of the same family still live on the same block. But the Mummers' blackface and **homophobic behavior** convey the exclusion implicit in their geographic inclusion.

"I am drawn to subjects that are, on the one hand, very appealing, and on the other hand, confusing ... if not off-putting," says Modica. "By photographing, I have always been able to find a common ground."

The search for such common ground transforms those she photographs — familiar Americans doing familiar things — into citizens of a world that is uniquely Modica's own. Made strange by the lens of an outsider, the Wench look as if they've stepped off the streets of another era — a sooty, industrial Philadelphia of horse-drawn cabs, tanneries, gin joints, and locomotive factories.

During the long sessions before the camera, each man — vulnerable, alone, and exposed — casts off his collective identity while the connotations of his dress start to shift. What remains are no longer Mummers, but actors in a morality play set among South Philly's bricks: men standing apart from their time, dislocated by an exacting female gaze ushering them into its own artistic order.

"A bridge is built so I might feel much more in common with something that intimidated me," says Modica.

Her powerful images — made using platinum/palladium contact prints to create warm, luminous, expanded gray tones — allow us to experience every fabric fold and wrinkle of painted skin. Bridges between the self and the other, they transport us into a world where intimacy is synonymous with the act of looking.

