

The cult icon and straight-talking star of RuPaul's Drag Race is famous for her tough love – when she speaks, we listen. Here, the queen of camp shares her hard-won lessons from a lifetime of drama. No filter necessary

As told to Scarlett Russell
Photograph James Rudland

What would MICHELLE VISAGE do?



“HONEY, LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND SAY, ‘I LOVE YOU!’ There’s no use being hot if you’re just going to let people take advantage of you.” I’m four minutes into a FaceTime interview with Michelle Visage, a woman I’ve waited six years to interview, and already I feel invincible. Part self-help guide, part New Jersey sass, this is just the kind of soundbite you’ll know Visage for if you’ve ever watched her as the “tough love” judge on the reality television series RuPaul’s Drag Race (think Simon Cowell with breasts and black eyeliner); or as co-host of the RuPaul: What’s the Tee? podcast; or during her storming stint on last year’s Strictly Come Dancing, in which she came fifth, and made her mark in the UK as she has been making her mark on queer and popular culture in America for the past 30 years.

Visage is up there with Joan Rivers when it comes to gay icons. “I’ve always wanted to stand out,” she tells me,

as if I didn’t already know. “I was never a great ‘grey area’ person.” Born Michelle Shupack, she became a fixture of the 1980s New York ball scene, where she changed her name to Visage and met the drag queen RuPaul Charles — she has been championing LGBT rights ever since. After stints as a pop star and radio host, Visage, 51, was set to film her own UK talk show, Get off Your Ass, giving straight-talking advice to famous friends, but it has been postponed because of Covid-19. Instead, her Los Angeles home has been decked out in cameras to record How’s Your Head, Hun?, a lockdown show with her family (husband, younger daughter, daughter’s boyfriend). Imagine Keeping Up with the Kardashians but with “grey roots and all the clutter I can’t get rid of. This is not a Real Housewives house,” Visage says. It will be peak lockdown comfort viewing. Here, she shares her trademark wisdom with a side of sass.

Years of therapy. Years

"I've always known I was adopted. Honey, all my problems stem from there. I didn't love myself because my own mother didn't want me, so I always craved attention. That stuck for years. But I love my adoptive parents. My birth mother got pregnant at 18 — the night she lost her virginity — and terminations were illegal in 1968, so she knew she couldn't keep me. [They met when Visage was 25.] Your problems don't just go away, you've gotta work at them. It took me until I was 40 to be kind to myself and realise that this is the way life is. I'm 51 and I don't give a shit what anyone thinks about me any more."

Perfection doesn't exist, people

"Let me tell you something: I don't look in the mirror and love myself. I struggle every day. Body image is my cross to bear. I've battled body dysmorphia and eating disorders since I was 13. I had two C-sections, so I have a plump belly now — get over it. I get really excited when I see pictures of Jennifer Lopez with just a glimpse of cellulite. I think, 'Thank God!'"

Marriage works when you're independent

"I met David [Case, her husband] in Central Park, in 1996 via a mutual friend. We were married nine months later. He was a soap-opera actor, but when our kids [Lillie, 20, and Lola, 18] came along, I worked and he became the world's best stay-at-home dad. We like and respect each other — and we communicate. Don't get me wrong, sometimes I say things to him that aren't nice. Sometimes my trips to the UK are a little long — I was once there for five months — but making time for yourself is important and helpful. Then, when I'm home, we make it romantic. We go for an hour's walk together every day, when we talk about the deep stuff and laugh about everything. I'll also cook and we'll eat together, whereas the kids take their food to their room. Sex is important, but not the most important thing. David would have sex every day, of course."

Never say: 'What have you got to be depressed about?'

"My daughters both struggle with mental health issues. Lillie is gay, but that's not what her issues were. She had an easy transition into coming out because, well, I'm her mother. But she never fitted in and she struggled. She has been in and out of therapy since she was seven and would lie in bed crying, 'I don't know why I'm here.' At first I thought, 'What the hell do you have to be depressed about? You have everything.' That's the worst thing you can say. She's doing OK now; she's away at university and has a great therapist. It doesn't go away magically: she'll call some days in full meltdown, and I tell her that it's OK not to have a good day."

Don't raise spoilt brats

"My parents came from nothing, dirt poor. They both worked full-time. David's mother still works — she's 81. We teach our kids the value of a dollar. Lola has to do chores to get her allowance. We lived in Calabasas [a wealthy part of LA] for a while, but I didn't send my kids to Calabasas High School. BMWs, nose jobs, I didn't want that for them. Lola volunteers. Lillie is into sustainability and she plants all the time."



From left Visage with RuPaul; and her family — daughters Lillie, left, and Lola, and her husband, David

Show me the money

"I worked in radio from 1996 to 2012, and I loved it, but I fought the whole time with bosses and management. I'll tell you why: because I had a vagina. Women don't get the same respect that men do on radio in the States. I was working with a male co-host who was paid double what I was, even though I did more work. But in 2005 I was in LA and the station wanted me back in New York, so I told them I would only go for more money. I stuck to it and they met all my demands. It was the first time I'd got that respect, but I think women are too afraid to ask a lot of the time. I became one of the top-paid, highest-ranking female radio talk-show hosts. They wouldn't have given it to me unless I had asked."

You have to hustle

"In 2010 I left a radio job in Miami because they refused to honour a \$40,000 pay rise that was in my contract. I didn't want to sue and go through all that madness, so I quit and started from scratch. It was a damn shame. We had no money; I had two young kids and was paying my dad's mortgage, and we lost money on our house because the housing market had crashed. Ru told me to come back to LA and, in 2011, I joined Drag Race. But it was still a small show and I needed more money, so I started ringing around the gay clubs, booking myself in to perform, host and judge competitions. David said, 'Don't worry about it. I got this.' He learnt how to plait hair and did everything to be the best dad. I'm grateful for every penny that comes my way, and I'll never stop working for it."

It's OK to cry

"It's about the quality of the time you have for each other and patience with one another. Ru and I have been friends for 30 years. We can look at each other and know what the other is thinking. There will be times where I haven't talked to him for a couple of months, and then it's one of those catch-ups where you can't catch a breath because you have so much to say. When I joined Drag Race, I had a hard time getting an agent — nobody would take a meeting with me even though I was on the show. Ru and I went to lunch and I cried. And I am not a crier. He told me that I was going to land on my feet, that I had what it takes. It's not just about the business, we have a whole friendship behind the scenes, trust me."

Michelle Visage: *How's Your Head, Hun?* is on BBC3 later this month