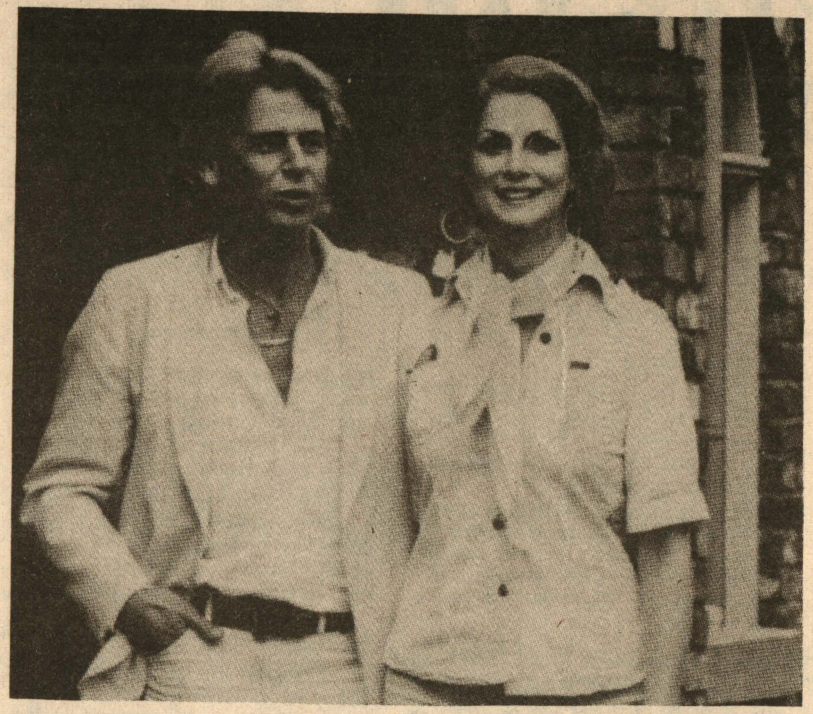
GAY NEWS
Literary Supplement

The star who never was

APRIL ASHLEY'S ODYSSEY – **Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley (Jonathan Cape, £8.50)**



Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley on the set of Coronation St: courtesy Granada Television Ltd

At the beginning of 1973 Peter Madok, then April Ashley's solicitor and a mutual friend (curiously not mentioned in this present volume), telephoned me and asked if I would be interested in assisting April with writing her autobiography. I knew that another friend of mine – the late Robin Maugham – had already relinquished the task after a row with April over a question, asked by Maugham's research assistant Derek Peel ("When you were a boy, April," he had queried, "did you masturbate?"), which Maugham thought vital and April thought an impertinence. The incident rankled on both sides: Maugham's version of the story was highly coloured; April's – in this autobiography – is more discreet (though her comments on Robin are decidedly waspish).

I expressed interest in the project and after initial discussions with both April and Peter, a contract was drawn up. I started a series of interviews with April at her Chelsea flat – but somewhere along the line, I realised, after all, that I was not the right person to co-write the book. April saw her autobiography as bright and glamorous – our working title, I seem to remember, was *April: The Star Who Never Was*; I saw the book as a tragedy enlightened by moments of high comedy – in cinematic terms, a movie by Bergman rather than Lubitsch. I wrote to Peter and April expressing my doubts, returned a suitcase full of research material and considered the project abandoned.

Now, almost a decade later, we have April's story bound between hardcovers; co-written with Duncan Fallowell whose name, interestingly, appears above April's on both the jacket and the title page. With Mr Fallowell, it is patently obviously a case of third time lucky – for *April Ashley's Odyssey* is very much the book April wanted: a glossy Hollywood fairy tale (*Cinderella*, of course) which reads like an extended version of the William Hickey column from the *Daily Express*.

Here is the story of the Liverpool slum boy, be-clogged and hungry, pretty and effeminate, sexually immature and unsure who, after a spell in the Merchant Navy (during which time he had an affair with a friend of mine which – some years later – almost led to Robin Maugham's murder) and two suicide attempts, decided he had to become a woman. April – or George Jamieson, as he then was – decamped first to London and then to Paris, where he became a female impersonator in a drag cabaret. In 1960, April flew to Casablanca for a sex change operation. Before leaving Paris, other performers from the cabaret tried to dissuade April from having the operation.

> "You don't understand. There is no life for me without this. I've only got one life and it's my only chance for happiness. I can't be a freak forever."
> "The operation – *that* will make you a freak for all time".

And this, to my mind is what makes the April Ashley story a tragedy and not a glossy romance littered with well-known but decidedly second-rate names. For, in the years since the operation, notoriety has attached itself to April's name. By no stretch of the imagination could anyone consider that from the point George Jamieson became April Ashley, she has led the life of an ordinary woman. Scandal and disaster have dogged her life – and the reason for this has always to be traced back to Casablanca.

Essentially *April Ashley's Odyssey* – like the appalling Julia Grant's sordid *George & Julia* – is a blown opportunity. Neither book is likely to enlighten the general reader about the situation of the transsexual. In this particular instance, Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley have produced a gossipy read – just about on par with the easy-to-read movie star biographies which churn from the presses.

Most especially, this book will appeal to those of us who lived through the Sixties and early Seventies – who remember the dreadful food and the heavily topped-up bills at AD8 (the restaurant at which April acted as hostess), Kit Lambert, Gerald Hamilton (whom I knew extremely well and who certainly did *not* model for Graham Sutherland when he was painting the famous Churchill portrait, as the authors claim, though he did model for sculptor Oscar Neman when *he* was working on his figure of Churchill), Joan Assheton-Smith and Hermione Baddeley, Lionel Bart and Richard Buckle, Bumble Dawson and Brian Desmond Hurst, Frank Dunlop and Christopher Hunter, the Gasworks restaurant and Eric and Blanche Glass, Elmyr de Hory and Clifford Irving, Kings Road and Carnaby Street.

Readers looking for insights into anything will be sadly disappointed – and perhaps surprised by some of the attitudes (about lesbians and straight women, particularly) which seep through. This is a frivolous and, in many ways, distasteful book by a born survivor whose notoriety is her only claim to fame. Worst of all, the whole tale seems terribly dated. Perhaps Tula's *I Am A Woman* – due in June – will have more to say.

Peter Burton