



Born a boy, Barry Cossey (left) became the stunning model Tula (below) who recently caused a stir by announcing her sex-change. Now she has written a book about her life\*. By Irma Kurtz.

# Determined to be

# a woman



Most female impersonators are women. Models, for example, some film stars, cabaret singers, *belle époque* courtesans and more recent gold-diggers, have chosen to paint upon themselves a beauty that is lavish, fabulous, and a fantastic overstatement of the feminine. It is also artificial, specious, as unrelated to the real person as Mae West's cleavage was to her alleged chastity, or Judy Garland's razzmatazz was to her drug addiction.

When men choose to impersonate women in public, they fall generally into three groups: the vulgar send-up seen frequently on British television, the pathetic delusion at some out-of-the-way pub where navvies in Bri-Nylon mime earnestly to Barbra Streisand records, and the absolutely stunning to be seen in the clubs of Paris and Tangiers where, interestingly, they are billed as "travesties". These last are the female impersonators who happen to be male imitating the female impersonators who happen to be female, and for the most part they are as good at the impersonation, often better, but they fail altogether at being female. How could they not fail? What they see, envy, admire or impersonate is the impersonation. These crypto-nymphettes are too glossy to be true: they are plastic, invulnerable, impenetrable, and it is not too much to imagine that they fade away crying for Max Factor and eventually moulder into sequins.

Hormone injections or tablets to swell breasts are par for the "travesties" course and electrolysis means little more than a manicure, but the ultimate in cosmetic surgery and a grant for the charter to switch pronouns from "he" to "she" is the removal of the indisputably male inches of penis and the sculpting out of a cul-de-sac vagina. Most pretty boys masquerading as gorgeous girls are content to keep what nature gave them and to use it one way or another, and as long as these un mutilated "travesties" are young, they have since ancient times been the pampered lap-dogs of the twilight people; but there are a few boys (and older men too) like Tula who submit eagerly to the amputation that makes them less male, even though whether it actually makes them more female than they were, is open to question. When the model, Tula, walks into a room, heads turn and eyes, perhaps more stunned than lustful, follow all six feet and two inches of her glamour; and glamour it is, there's no other word for her dazzling and curiously joyless beauty. She was born Barry Cossey, a boy, in a village near Norfolk.

"I wasn't aware of the 'gay' society and I just didn't know who to talk to," she says in her low-pitched, boyish voice. "I knew my

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# To be a woman

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feelings, but from the first awareness of my sexual desires I couldn't talk to anyone. It was more than just sexual desires. At school I didn't play football and I didn't do all the masculine things. My father thought I was a softie."

Barry played with his sister's dolls. He wore make-up and tried to will his chest to develop like that of his sister, Pam. His first exciting sexual experience was with a man, but all Barry really wanted from it was kissing and cuddling. Meanwhile, Barry dressed and looked increasingly like a girl and later, after he moved to London, he was usually mistaken for a pretty girl. His distress during this period does not seem to have been the existential confusion that a few other trans-sexuals have described, or the bitterness of feeling himself a cosmic freak, but it was, says Tula, with more honesty than imagination, the most basic kind of frustration.

"It was very difficult. Everyone I would go out with after a few meetings would try something on, and I couldn't tell the truth because it would just have meant the finish. I've had a lot of heartbreak." Heartbreak or hairline cracks? Whichever they were, Barry had started to work successfully as a showgirl in London and he had changed his name to Caroline by deed poll. Moreover, thanks to an understanding and munificent Arab he had acquired an expensive and sturdy pair of implants which enabled him to dance topless and thus to earn more money towards what Tula calls her "op". Barry, now Caroline, set off for Paris, which remains the European capital of the demimonde. There, with legs the length of the Eiffel Tower and his amazing good looks, he soon found a job turning and high-kicking for the big spender. Tula is a gentle girl and Barry, whom I have never met, was probably a gentle bloke who got on very well with his fellow performers, but he was not happy for, as

Tula could have said in the style of her autobiography *I am a Woman*, Barry for all his "stunning gowns" was "living a lie".

"As a Paris showgirl you're flooded with flowers and invitations to go out," Tula explains. "Most of the girls take up the invitations and fall out, get married, what have you. I didn't dare do that." Finally, Barry met one person to whom, Tula now says, "it didn't matter"; a rich Arab cruising the continental flesh-pots who whisked him off to a luxurious prison in Kuwait. There, it soon became clear, not only did it not matter, but the Kuwaiti quite liked "it", and he was not going to aid Barry's quest for his "op". Barry fled, worked, saved, submitted to his painful transformation in 1974, and at last threw away the tight, binding G-string that, he complains in his book, made it impossible for him to wear really skimpy bikinis. Did that make Barry a girl? "I felt I'd been born that morning after surgery. I felt 'me' at last. I felt liberated. To go out shopping for clothes, for example, without being that little bit apprehensive about walking into a changing room, a communal one, to try garments on. At last I didn't have to think twice about it."

Caroline, now to the core, threw herself into the gaiety of the jet-set fringe and began to have a super time, finding men and shedding them. Her ambitions enlarged and from having been a stripper, then a go-go girl, she became "Tula", the model, and Page Three of *The Sun*, an exposure which, as she says in her book "is a great help to a model's career". How wonderful to imagine what all those *Sun* lookers-at would say were they to know they were drooling over a model christened Barry! With a few years of modelling, some non-speaking bit roles behind her and a hurtful full-scale "sexpose" in the *News of the World*, Tula felt secure enough to write her own autobiography.

"Now that I've done lots of calendars, lots of centre spreads," she says, "I feel I've proved myself as a woman."

Sadly enough, the single place Tula cannot go openly as a female, is home. When she returns to the village to visit her



*Tula's dazzling six-foot-two-inches of glamour is, ironically, immortalised in the Smirnoff ad: "Well they said anything could happen."*

mother and father, she arrives and leaves in darkness, spending her days inside. In the wide world, however, she moves freely. She has lots of friends, many of them heterosexual women.

"I have no jealousy, no sexual feelings, but a great admiration for beautiful women," says Tula, who is bemused by references to women of lesser physical beauty and greater spiritual or intellectual achievement. "I get hurt for my girlfriends who have been hung-up through guys. I've been through all that myself and know how hurtful it can be."

A few years after her "op", Tula was asked to pose inside a cage full of lionesses and the reason she escaped without harm, Tula says in her book, was that the big cats must have "felt my presence as that of a male . . ." The heterosexual human seems to have something of the same animal perception, and those butch macho types, to whom Tula feels drawn, those dominating Taureans and it is impossible to resist mentioning that Tula's father is a dominating Taurean whom she fancies, are not overjoyed to learn that her sexuality began only with the destruction of a man: Barry Cossey. True love continues to elude Tula, and even though there is not so much as a laugh-wrinkle on her pretty face, age must threaten her more than it does conventional people who have sacrificed less for ephemeral good looks.

Tula can never be her daddy's darling daughter, and she can never be a mother; however, she would like to marry some day and there is no law to prevent that happening, at least in a register office. Her birth certificate, according to British legislation, must always state the truth: that she was born a male. But if a pending appeal to the European courts is successful, then even that last bit of evidence of the existence of Barry Cossey can be shredded. Will that, at last, make Tula a woman?

*Tula: I am a woman, published by Sphere Rumbird, price £2.95*

