

Duckling into swan

APRIL ASHLEY'S ODYSSEY by Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley/Cape £8.50 pp 287 JOHN RYLE

THE ultimate trapeze-wire performance, the apogee of the double life, must surely be the fate of the trans-sexual. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this account of the most celebrated and publicised sex-change of the past few years should read like a Hollywood biography.

There are the mandatory slum beginnings—coal in the bath, father a scoundrel and heavy drinker, mother coarse, tough but with a heart of gold, school a dreary and pointless waste of time. There is the stormy trauma of adolescence as puny George Jamieson, sporting fledgling breasts instead of pectorals, miserably endures the torments and taunts of a seaman's life, culminating in the frustrations and humiliations of conventional psychiatric treatment and the inexorable trip to the

APRIL ASHLEY'S ODYSSEY by April Ashley and Duncan Fallowell. Cape, 287pp, £8.50. ANTHONY CLARE

surgeon's knife at Casablanca and transformation.

And what a swan! It is one of the wonders of trans-sexualism that sex-changes appear inevitably to be intended to turn unpromising Guardsmen into leggy film stars. Photos of April Ashley show her as an apparently ageless sloop-eyed creation, holding carefully sculptured poses which suggest that a shake of the camera and the whole confection might well fall apart. Yet the appearance of fragility is deceptive, for the text testifies to the durability and the remorseless egoism of the woman herself.

Her admirers are meant to see her as frail and feminine, yet intuitive and strong, sensitive and sentimental yet stoical and cool. For are these

not the essential qualities of the true woman? Do we not recognise these virtues as quintessentially those of any romantic heroine?

The very name, April Ashley, is redolent of fluff and frounces, flimsy petticoats and suspender-belts, long legs and low-cut dresses. This is truly the tale of trans-sexualism's Barbara Cartland, and the prose fits like one of Miss Ashley's long, expensively-tailored gloves. The reader is ushered through chapters with titles like "Scandal," "Madness" "To the Wizard of Casablanca," side-stepping sentences like "My heart was full of Edward but I realised life must go on" (April faced with a difficult emotional choice) and glimpsing "an enchanted world of viscounts, maharajahs and

GEORGE Jamieson grew up a boy but he never became a man. Instead he became Toni April, a cabaret artiste of indeterminate gender, and later April Ashley, a transsexual of nationwide renown. A Liverpool slum child who shipped out in the Merchant Navy at the age of 16, his strange voyage took him through the transvestite stage shows of Paris to the operating theatre of a private clinic in Casablanca, where a Moroccan surgeon spatchcocked his genitals: and remade his body in the image of a woman.

He was Dr Burnou's ninth patient; the operation lasted seven hours and involved removal of the testes, surgery on the outer genitalia and the construction of a vagina. These days we can see this kind of thing on television—it is, as April Ashley notes, all very chatty—but in 1960 only one case, that of George (later Christine) Jorgensen had been recorded at all. It was "The Christine Jorgensen Story" found in a Ludlow bookshop that changed the life of Jan Morris, who described—or rather circumscribed—her sex-change at the hands of the same doctor in her book "Conundrum." A decade earlier, Toni April, aged 24, only found out about the wizard of Casablanca from Cocinelle, a fellow performer at the Paris nightclub Le Carrousel, who was herself Morocco-bound.

April Ashley reveals much more about the physical details of the operation than either Jan Morris or Cocinelle did. She is also more candid about the kind of distress that led her to this desperate remedy. It is unusual, since transsexuals have every reason not to dwell on their discarded sexual characteristics—they are too concerned with reinventing themselves as women.

To some extent, though, April Ashley had no choice. In 1963 she married the Hon Arthur Corbett, himself a transvestite and son of the Chief Scout and Governor of Tasmania. Their divorce four years later—where the Judge ruled that marriage

to a transsexual was not valid in law—was a field day for the yellow press. It fitted the spirit of the Sixties exactly; here was something it was still possible to be prurient about, a parvenu freak in the heart of the establishment.

The desperation that propelled a pretty, effeminate working-class boy to crash the barriers of both sex and class created in the end a figure of public amusement. She was acceptable only as theatre. She responds by treating life as a soap opera, wandering tipsily from farce into tragedy as her friends become casualties of the tidal wave of the Sixties and she, the lone survivor, is washed up on the coast of Chelsea Bohemia. It is funny, sentimental, moving and unbalanced, sometimes tacky and sometimes rather grand, accurately personifying the strange cultural transformations of that era.

Tootsie good-bye?

IN VICTOR / VICTORIA, Julie Andrews plays a girl

masquerading as a boy who is a female impersonator. Now Hollywood transsexualism has been taken a step further.

In Tootsie, the diminutive Dustin Hoffman plays an out-of-work actor who dresses up as a girl in order to get a lead part in a daily TV serial.

Predictable complications ensue: Dustin falls in love with leading lady, and director falls in love with Dustin.

Where will it all end?

THERE WILL, I suspect, be a lot of rueful expressions around when April Ashley's autobiography finally reaches the bookstalls tomorrow. Miss Ashley, who is

apparently the "most fascinating" person Elizabeth Taylor has met over here, spares few details of her past life and a bewildering cross-section of the rich and famous, the young and beautiful appear to have fallen victim to her charms.

To name but a tiny percentage, these range from Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif (one night of shame) the late Timothy Willoughby D'Evesby, Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that ilk, the Hon. Arthur Corbett who she married, and Count Adam Zamoyski.

drug fiends crossing green lawns in silver boots, drawn by the hiss of champagne" (April reflecting on high living).

Every now and again, the narrative pauses to catch its breath, and Miss Ashley muses on the audacity of her achievement in not merely changing her sex but in shaking off her proletarian roots and marrying into the peerage. Here and there in April Ashley's Odyssey one detects a profound melancholy at the base of the frenetic energy, but very quickly we are back to salons and suitors, and the odyssey ends with our heroine off to a hunt ball, dressed appropriately as Artemis of Ephesus and positively radiating pep. Only now and then does one glimpse the price paid for the high-wire trick, but the act hardly falters, and I doubt there is a reader who would grudge her the applause.



George Jamieson, aged 15

VICTOR / VICTORIA FILM

SUNDAY MIRROR 21/3/82

JULIE ANDREWS learned a bizarre lesson in life when she made her latest film.

She came to the conclusion that it's easier to be a man than a woman.

In Victor/Victoria, which opens in London next month, she plays a Paris nightclub singer (Victoria), who pretends to be a man (Victor) and becomes the toast of the town as a female impersonator (Victoria again).

To prepare for the part Julie spent weeks observing men ("which was very pleasant"), spent hours in front of a mirror trying different poses and even got a few tips from Danny La Rue.

From MIKE KERRIGAN in New York

assurance that you have as a man. It is difficult to explain, but I know that when I was dressed up as the guy and I lined myself up alongside my co-stars, James Garner and Robert Preston I thought to myself: 'Jesus, it really is a whole other world.'

"It was the most challenging thing I've done," she said. "There were all the shifts in what I was

trying to get across versus what I was actually feeling.

"In other words I had to look like a man but try to convey that I was thinking like a woman. There were so many combinations on the theme that to try to figure some of them out got me very confused at times.

High kicks

"On the other hand, the dancing sequences were easy, because they were

designed for me as a drag queen.

"Female impersonators don't actually dance as somebody like me or, say, Juliet Prowse would, with lots of high kicks and energy.

"Instead, they let other people dance around them. It's the chorus line that does all the work."

To complete the tale of sexual tangle in 1930s Paris, Victor/Victoria falls in love — or rather lust — with a visiting Chicago nightclub owner, played by James Garner.

New world

She said: "While thinking about it a great deal and observing and acting the role I realised—and excuse me for saying this—that ladies still have a long way to go. Men have it made, or at least it seems that way. "There is a certain