

MEN IMAGINING WOMEN

by Christopher Busa



Each October for 17 years, a group of men who enjoy dressing as women have appeared in Provincetown. They have come to spend more than a week attending Fantasia Fair, where they are encouraged to explore a need to cross a social boundary, the gender line. One may be a dentist from Virginia, another an airline pilot from Texas. Some arrive with their wives. They stay in a dozen small inns and guest houses scattered within walking distance of the center of town. They attend morning workshops in voice training or cosmetic application. They make many appointments at the beauty salons. After lunch at local restaurants, they listen to guest speakers discoursing on legal, sociological, and psychological aspects of crossdressing. They go whale watching, have pyjama parties, or practice the song or dance they will perform in the Fan Fair Follies, later in the week. They spend hours dressing for dinner. After dinner, they gather again for the evening's major event, such as the Fashion Show staged over the years in various discos or meeting halls, none of which are ever large enough to accommodate the overflowing crowds that come to share in the program, which is appreciated by the people of Provincetown for a theatrical quality that is both hilarious and heartbreaking.

But crossdressing differs crucially from acting. An actor, playing the part of an old man, may appear more convincing if he presents himself paradoxically as an old man who tries to act young. The old do not try to be old. They are old. Rather they will try to appear younger than they are, revealing their true age in their effort to deny it. Another actor, playing the part of a drunk, will likewise be more convincing if he or she attempts to mimic sobriety, trying to walk a straight line and to speak without slurring the words, rather than lurching wildly about and speaking without any effort to be clear. Drunks do not try to be drunk. They are drunk. Instead they reveal their intoxication by their failed attempts to appear sober. In social life, rather than in a play on a public stage, we do not applaud when someone appears as wonderfully other than they are. If the act is effective, we do not notice. In social life the act that passes scrutiny, the very proof of verisimilitude, cannot be praised for its performance, since it is performed invisibly.

According to Ari Kane, a founder of Fantasia Fair and a therapist concerned with transforming gender conflicts into "pathways to gender euphoria," the majority of males who crossdress in this country are extremely

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secretive. They may wear pantyhose under the male clothes they wear to work and they may parade before a mirror at home on the weekend, but they will do so alone, often followed by harsh and self-destructive guilt. Entire wardrobes have been purged, then a week or a year later new clothes are purchased. The group that comes to Provincetown has said "not this week!" Fantasia Fair is the occasion for a release from the enigma of crossdressing, a suspension from the stigma of pathology, and a sharing of secrets within a supportive community. Ari, who prefers to be called by his first name, adopted the term "paraculture" by way of describing a concept of group identity aimed at building pride and self-esteem through achievements within that group. Though few male crossdressers may develop the inwardness of a natural woman, Ari's contribution has been to introduce the concept of the well adjusted crossdresser, urging us to reflect on the fact that "some males cannot be masculine and some females cannot be feminine."

Ari, also known as Ariadne when he is crossdressed, says that he looks best in the colors of winter, and he prefers to wear blacks, grays, and whites, with accents of vivid cranberry or icy violet. He used to wear three-piece suits as Ari and dresses as Ariadne, but now he usually wears a jacket with a turtleneck, loose flowing pants, and low heels or flats. He has discovered for himself that masculinity and femininity are qualities which each sex possesses in different degrees, but not exclusively. "I used to find that when I was in a crossdressed mode, my eating habits would change. I would masticate more. I would take smaller bites. I would eat less. My walk would be different. I don't know why. I used to separate these modes, but now of course I'm blended. Fifteen years ago I couldn't have said that, but I see now that it is the destiny of culture to androgynize itself."

His name is derived from the Greek princess who fell in love with Theseus, the warrior slave prince from Athens who could dance on the horns of the Cretan bulls. Ariadne helped Theseus kill the Minotaur, striking at the source of power of the Minoan civilization, and escape. In the spirit of this enduring myth, Ari conducts his professional practice in Brookline, MA, and Augusta, ME, under the name Theseus Counseling Services.

Last year I attended the Fashion Show with a fashion stylist from *Mademoiselle*. Enveloped by booming music pierced by hoots and whistles, through bits of colored light darting from rotating globes overhead, faceted

with many small mirrors, we watched a parade of daywear, evening wear, and executive wear, the most elegant of which was a pinstriped suit from Christian Dior, with a short skirt and high-heeled pumps, a white blouse, wig, and long, shoulder-duster earrings. My companion, who herself enjoyed wearing cowboy boots with high heels or adaptations of sailor's outfits from time to time, appreciated this suit as the show's single expression of masculinity. For the rest, she felt the costumes were oversaturated with femininity. The red red lips of the crossdressers were too red. Their wigs were too wild. They wobbled on heels too high. They wore too many accessories. She pointed out that for the collections she was used to seeing, not haute couture, but Lagerfeld or Jeannie McCade, there is always a mix of the feminine and the masculine, where everything is understated while one element will be very strong. A delicate model with a boyish haircut will wear pants sewn from a flowing feminine fabric.

Is it now fashionable to be masculine, I wondered, just as the crossdressers were adopting the retro styles of their own mothers, so popular during the 50s? I confessed to Ari that I felt today's women seemed far more effective and natural in adopting men's styles than the men were in adopting women's styles. He agreed. "When you see women who are looking like young men, you get sort of visually upended. They are really expressing the masculine part of themselves, but it's them, not some caricature, some facsimile of masculinity.

"Now I maintain that naturalness is coming to males. The males that we are dealing with at this point are still back in the early phase where they are so overwhelmed by the idea that they can go out in public and be the person they've always felt themselves to be. They can't help but be immature, like girls coming out at adolescence. We can say that most crossdressers, particularly the males, are adolescent in their perceptions. Some men have already started this incredible path to personal growth, redefining themselves in images that may reflect old stereotypes, but certainly will have elements of the new. What American culture always overlooks is that women are second class citizens. They can change their style and nobody really cares. Yet when you, Mr. Male, decide to become a look-alike for Marilyn Monroe, or some other feminine symbol, you play into the notion of the female sex object, and that is a no-no for a good number of women today."

When men dress as women, they challenge the basic social rule that says our

appearance should correlate with our private parts. Crossdressing is not illegal. On the contrary, it is true that crossdressers are often reactionary in the style of women's dress they choose to wear, offending natural women who are conscious of the distance they have traveled from their own mothers at the same age. But in returning to the first and fundamental question asked about a new baby—"Is it a boy or a girl?"—crossdressing invites us to examine radically the idea that gender may be independent of our anatomical sex. Crossdressing may not be a measure of femininity, but it is a measure of how much you wish to look, as a male, at the feminine inside you.

The following conversations offer a glimpse into the lives of two people, one a transgenderist who lives full time as a woman without seeking surgery, the other a "new woman" who has had the surgery and is now living full time as a woman. Each has explored in depth her feminine gender preference. I wish to thank them for their courage in speaking openly about their private lives. Those readers seeking further information may contact the organizers of Fantasia Fair at The Human Outreach and Achievement Institute, 405 Western Avenue, Suite 345, South Portland, ME 04106.

Cheryl

"I make a better man as a woman than I did as a man." — *Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie*

Following a late afternoon medical workshop attended by about 25 crossdressers, I sat in the corner of the Flagship restaurant, nursing an Irish whiskey and waiting to talk with Cheryl Thompson. The workshop,



which I had just attended, stressed that, despite theories and studies, we know as little about why a person likes crossdressing as we know why a person likes playing golf. One of the panelists, a psychiatrist from California who was appearing crossdressed in public for only the third time in his life, offered the opinion that the American Psychiatric Association's authoritative diagnostic manual of mental disorders, and especially the pages that deal with the "disorder" of transvestism, "was written by a bunch of psychiatrists drunk at a bar." It was now cocktail hour, and his words came back to me with the memory of many-colored wigs shaking with laughter. Cheryl arrived in a rush, then calmly sat down and ordered white wine for herself.

May I ask a lady her age?

I'm actually 47, but no one can guess. I can win a kewpie doll at any fair where they try to guess your age. I usually come in around 35. That's a trait I inherited from my father. He does not look his age.

When did you start crossdressing?

When I was very young. When I got into my 40s, that was not enough. I finally got to the point where I said I had to stop fooling myself, stop lying to myself, and become a woman.

Are you thinking about surgery?

That's the ultimate. You can transition without sex reassignment surgery. I'm transitioning right now. I have no male clothes. I live as a woman. I am Cheryl on my Social Security card, and my other identification.

Would you like to become pregnant?

I'd love it. One of my fantasies is to have a baby. It's possible to implant an embryo in the stomach wall. Breasts develop with hormones and you can nurse a baby, but still you don't have all the plumbing.

When you form a romantic relationship, is it with another woman?

Could be. It could be a man. I'm kind of in relationships with both at this time.

Is this typical?

It's not unusual for someone who goes all the way to sexual reassignment to fall into the gay women's community. Some of my woman friends who have known me before find it strange that I would consider a

woman as a companion, after I had been a male, and now was a woman. Why would I now look still at women? Why wouldn't I automatically flip over and look at men?

That's a good question. Why?

If you are brought up with women as partners, that doesn't automatically change just because you decided to change your gender. Once they've had surgery, some transsexuals get married to men. Others fall into the lesbian community. The bisexuals dabble on either side.

Are you close to the gay community?

Four years ago I wouldn't have associated with a homosexual. I didn't consider myself a homosexual and I was afraid. Then I came here. I discovered they are people too, like me. The guest house owners are really lovely about this. There are a lot of similarities between homosexuals and crossdressers in that both have struggled so tremendously to endure. We're here for the freedom. The Fair started primarily because the community here allowed us freedom of expression. The gay bars are obvious choices for the crossdressers because they are considered safe havens.

Have you lost your homophobia?

I still would not have a male to male relationship. I want to be a woman. I did not want a homosexual relationship. I still don't. I wouldn't go to bed with a man to have a homosexual relationship. He has to treat me as a woman, or we won't go to bed.

You don't think of that as a homosexual relationship?

No, for me that is not a homosexual relationship.

Biologically, it's two men together.

If he were manipulating my genitals as a man would a man, I would be naive. I really have no idea of how men treat men. But I wouldn't allow him to touch me between my legs, to be frank about it.

Does this frustrate you?

I was involved with another person whom I really loved. Although we treated each other as women, we came to a confusion about whether what we were doing was homosexual or not. We both went in opposite directions to talk to people whom we

thought would help us understand. She went to her psychiatrist. I happened to be here in Provincetown on a negotiation trip for the Fair and I went to one of the guest house owners whom I knew well. I said, "You're gay, and I've never been. I have no idea what it's like." He told me that we were only confused about what label to put on it. We decided we didn't need a label. There probably wasn't a label. Although I don't think I demand any more than another woman does, I always have this little hangup, which I could dwell on.

What is that?

It's Cheryl handling a partner's genitals while being biologically a man. That's always at the back of my mind. It's inhibiting. Maybe I would like to take it further, but I know I can't. I am afraid that fondling will create a homosexual desire, so I absolutely refrain.

There seems to be a lot of self-sacrifice in your transition.

Tremendous self-sacrifice. Immense. ■

Gwyn

"Marilyn Monroe was a female impersonator. We all trained to be female impersonators."
— Gloria Steinem

On a sunny morning, Gwyneth Hannaford, recovering from recent sex reassignment surgery, met me in an interior garden of a Carver Street guest house where several other girls from the Fair were milling about.



She led me up a narrow staircase to a pleasant white room. We sat on pillows at opposite ends of the bed, sipping water while talking.

You're post-operative. What term shall we use?

The new term is new woman. It can apply to anyone living full time as a woman. We used to separate ourselves: transvestites, transgenderists who were sitting on a fence while they refrained from surgery, transsexuals like myself. It's been 10 weeks since my surgery. It still gets a little sore on some of the hard chairs around here.

It's the chance of a lifetime to pick your own name. How did you chose Gwyn?

I read it in a book about a Celtic woman who sprang from a village closed off to normal human penetration. It means the woman from nowhere.

Where do you live?

In a small town in Maine. I grew up in the same town where I now work.

What is your job?

I'm a nuclear engineer at a ship yard.

Please tell me how you broke the news at work.

Word spread like wildfire at the office. My hair was growing longer. I had it permed. At Christmastime I had my ears pierced. I had a lot of facial hair, horrible and black and hard to cover, even now with lots of electrolysis. I'm going to have more, and get my voice done. Once the word leaked out, it seemed everybody knew the same day.

They mulled it over for a few weeks, then asked me what my plans were. I said I would dress like all the other woman engineers in the office, in jeans and blouses, no skirts: clothing that lets you climb aboard a nuclear-powered naval vessel. I was doing more ship work then, I'm now doing more work in the office.

Are you a feminist?

I've always been for women's rights, though all the other women at work want to be like the guys. They are not good role models for me.

Sexually, do you prefer men or women?

My preference is still women. That confuses a lot of people who ask why I changed sex to go out with a woman. Lately I've been looking at all those hunks that walk by and wondering what it feels like with a man.

I sense your urges are nebulous but strong.

It's inside and very hard to describe and get hold of. But it's there. I'm mechanically oriented, unfortunately. Inside me there is a hard wire that connected me to Woman. You mess your life up to fight it. Psychotherapy hasn't been successful. We couldn't cure homosexuality, and we can't cure this. A lot of this shows up in your teens when you become self-aware. We don't know what causes it. For me, it wasn't sexual.

Do people say to you, "You're so brave."

It is hard to sort that out. There was passion of real need. My physical body that came to me from the outside world was matched by all that cultural Man Stuff I had previously picked up. I had to swim across that river of necessity.

Are you familiar with the reverse operation, female to male?

When I was in Brussels for my own operation, I met one going the other way. A French boy. He came in for complete breast removal. To go further is a much more difficult procedure. For my surgery, male to female, you have some penile tissue to build a vagina. But going the other way, there is no erectile tissue to build from, there is no urethra to extend. If you're lucky, after surgery, you can stand up and urinate. That's considered successful. There are many experimental procedures, implanting little balloons and pumps, which of course require more surgery. On the other hand, go

ing female to male, they get better results from drugs and hormones. Their facial hair grows, hair grows on their chest, their muscles bulk up. Their voice drops. These things are easier up front, but the final part, that's much more difficult.

It would be wonderful if they could do organ transplants.

It would. It would.

You could have donated yours.

We talked about that at the office. With transplants you have to take a tabletop of drugs to compensate for the rejection. The ovarian tissue is so tender. You might be able to keep a uterus, but you lose fallopian tubes, both ovaries. All the sensitive stuff would be damaged either by rejection or the drugs you have to take against rejection.

Do you live alone?

My family lives near me, but my life is alone. I'm 38. I have a single person house. Before, I would go out and project this person from outside, the woman they were expecting, through makeup and other assistance, which didn't match what was underneath. I found that dishonest, a deep lie.

Many of the crossdressers are quite attractive.

Absolutely.

They say no crossdresser can pass in Provincetown. But I've been fooled. Nothing is more shocking than for a heterosexual male to realize he's been titillated by another male. What is one way a crossdresser might show compassion for someone like me?

If you're in a funny mood, you might drop your voice. That'll take care of a lot of situations.

Of course our culture does not accept facial hair on women, does it?

That's why we make good clients for electrolysis. When you get your face done, you can move to other parts that are still fuzzy. Between waxing and estrogen, my hands have gotten better. My stomach hair has shut down, but the older hairs further up the chest have not shut down.

Do you go to the beach?

I'm closer to going.

That must make you feel good.

Oh, it does. My first trip here I had everything covered: skirts down to my ankles, boots up to my knees, long sleeved shirts no matter how hot it was. Now, on a hot day, I wear tank tops. What a relief.

I notice you're swallowing. Is that from another operation?

Yes. I've been using my surgically corrected voice all week, and it's starting to wear out. I sip a lot of water because it gets raspy and tight, especially when I'm excited. My voice was so low, I could not train it. That deep male rumble that starts inside, that came out, and now it's gone. There are no more questions over the phone about miss or mister. The classic male fear of losing your voice along with your testicles is wrong. At puberty your voice drops, and once it drops, that's it. Estrogen doesn't touch the voice.

Do you have a womanly desire to have children?

If you talk to a woman who has had a child, they tell you it was the most awful thing. But I would love to become pregnant. Maybe I am carrying over a male mysticism, which is one of the things I get accused of by other women. Some women tell me that I haven't paid my monthly dues. Menstruation is a big thing to them. But they don't dump on women who are through menopause. I've paid other dues, mental and physical pain and a miserable life up till now.

If you are to have a child, you'll have to use some frozen sperm from the past. Do you have any of that?

No, I don't. I thought about doing it, I really did.

Will you share with us your perspective on the difference between a man and a woman?

You are a man or woman in your head, and you may adjust your body to match that image in your head. That's what I've done. It's like having your hand rebuilt that was born deformed. You know you are a human being whether or not your hand was complete. ■

Photographs by Mariette Pathy Allen, who has been involved with the gender community for over 13 years as a photographer, interviewer, spokesperson, and friend. Her book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them* (E. P. Dutton), presents crossdressers and their families and friends in the daylight of everyday life.