

Loosely About Transvestites

BY SOREL DAVID

Went to GAA's transvestite forum last night—it was a real drag—as they say, as Billie said, actually. I was really quite annoyed, after rushing out of the house without dinner in order to get there on time, to find the discussion so pathetically lacking in interest. So far as I can see, transvestites, at least the ones who turn out for these movement forums and things, haven't got a damn thing to say for themselves beyond their interminable whine about being so much more oppressed than the rest of us. Moderator Arthur Bell's condescending manner and seeming need to dominate the whole affair didn't much

help matters either. Bell seemed to think it was up to him to decide just who was to speak and for how long, practically ripping the microphone from a panel member's hand, at one point, when he thought she'd said enough. He further irritated me by blatantly ignoring raised hands in the audience, much of the time, in favor of his own pointedly dull questions. Well, but after all, Mr. Bell is a man with a message. He had to make sure, personally, that all us "straight" homosexuals confronted our fear of and aversion to transvestites, thereby managing to pick up a few points for himself in the more radical than thou department.

Now that I've said all that, let me just

add, in the interests of fairness, that this is hardly to be considered an unbiased view. Anyone who has read my column in the past knows I have a thing about Arthur Bell—mainly I can't stand him. I don't know why exactly—but for some reason it just tickles me to take a swipe at him in print whenever I can. Maybe someday GAA can have a forum on the subject so that I and others like me can confront our fear of and aversion to Arthur Bell.

I went to the transvestite thing because I thought it might shed some light on something I've been thinking about lately—namely the question of self-image and style. Lately I've been thinking a lot about how we see ourselves, about the

sort of things that influence or determine what we judge to be attractive, what we judge to be masculine or feminine and how we decide what we want to look like. It seems to me that the issue of transvestites, men who want to think of themselves as women, or feminine, anyway, persons who rely heavily on style—clothes and make-up—to express and define their existence, recreating themselves stylistically in their own image, is what it amounts to, really, neatly crosses all parts of this style-image question. I naively supposed that those participating in the forum would talk about some of these things, maybe say something about what they think a woman is supposed to be or



Who says gay fibers are squares? Dig these West Coast leaders: Jim Kepner, President of One, Inc., the Reverend Troy Perry, Los Angeles' Morris Kight, and Gerald Strickland and Dick Winters of Pat Rocco's fan club, SPREE. (Photo by Pat Rocco)

look like. But instead we got the same tired old harangue about who is the most oppressed of all.

And then, as if this contest between "straight" homos and cross-dressers wasn't enough, some idiot in the back had to bring the subject of street people into the fray. Did street transvestites have a harder time than other transvestites, he asked Lee Brewster, the most affluent-looking and, I might add, the only half-way intelligent sounding member of the panel. Naturally everyone's for the underdog these days, so with the moderator and most of the audience empathizing like mad with the unfortunate downtrodden street folk, poor Lee was forced to explain the obvious, that yes, street trans-

vestites do have it tougher because, after all, people do respect and fear money in this culture. Hearing this word respect, Arthur Bell's probing and incisive *Village Voice* investigating ears perked up. Anxious to show himself totally radical and pro-street people and managing to miss the point of Lee's remark completely, Bell grabbed the mike from panel member Sylvia Rivera, who was by this time starting a long, positively fourth street rap about the streets and making it on her own, to launch into Lee with, "Why do you want respect? Why is respect so important to you, Lee?"

So much for the forum. It was a waste of time and an insult to the intelligence of all those attending. But meanwhile,

where does that leave me—still wandering around wondering about style and self-image? A friend of mine remarked recently that while gay men generally dress better than straight men, the thought gay women, as a rule, didn't dress as well as straight women. Well, gay men have always been more aware of their bodies than straights. That much seems fairly clear and straightforward. The question of gay women seems more problematical, possibly because I am, understandably, more involved with it. First of all, I'm not sure I want to admit to the truth of the statement. There is my gay pride, after all. But assuming that there's something to it, the thing that lies behind the phenomenon is our old friend sexism. Women

have always been defined by their ability to attract men. A good-looking woman, therefore, is one who appeals to straight males. Lesbians, having no interest in men, are, understandably, not comfortable in this role and therefore reject the straight ideal of feminine or womanly style and beauty. Our problem is, then, who or what do we, as gay women, want to look like? What models do we want to pattern ourselves after?

The question is very complex and to me an extremely interesting one. But for the present, I have neither the time, space nor energy to go into it properly. I'll continue the discussion in my next column. Tune in then to find out what Sylvia thinks she looks like.