

# WHEN HUSBANDS *wear the* PANTIES *transsexual tales*

**How would you react if you discovered that the woman standing beside you at the cosmetics counter was really a man dressed to look like a woman? Would you be fascinated? Repelled? Amused? And what if he wasn't a stranger to you at all, but a member of your own family? ANDREW DONALDSON speaks to some transsexuals and their partners**

**A** WELL-KNOWN Cape Town artist recently threw a swap-sex farewell party before leaving for England for several months.

Guests were asked to cross-dress: men as women and women as men. While the women managed to do so with some flair and ease (trousers have, after all, been an accepted part of their wardrobes for most of the 20th century), the men were grotesque – myself included.

I squeezed into a cream wedding dress, the back having been let out to accommodate my bulk which I disguised by wearing a leather jacket over the dress. Chest hair poured out from a plunging neckline and my unshaven jowls were caked with makeup. The earrings dangling from my lobes looked cheap and glittered like those mirrored balls in nightclubs. Pumps or stilettos were out of the question – I wore black running shoes.

In short, I was an abomination.

I lasted about 40 minutes before, overcome with awkwardness, I decided to leave. Driving home, I stuck to back-roads, away from street

lights and busy intersections for fear of being spotted. I also kept my speed down, as I was particularly worried that I would somehow lose control of the car and crash into a pole or something. Paramedics would arrive and collapse with laughter instead of attending to my wounds. My mother would suffer a nervous breakdown upon learning that her son had been admitted to hospital wearing a wedding dress.

In fact, I was so anxious about my costume that I stopped the car in a dark street and changed into a pair of jeans and a sweater in case neighbours spotted me trying to sneak back into the block of flats where I live.

My anxieties, however, are paltry compared to Vera's.

"Vera" is a cross-dresser. On the surface he's a model citizen – late 50s, happily married, proud grandfather, prominent in public and community affairs, and successful in business. But he's unhappy. "I am a woman trapped inside the body of a man," he says. "I'm technically what is known as a transgenderist, that is, a person whose 32 >

PHOTOGRAPH: JUAN ESPINOZA. STYLING: JUAN ESPINOZA. HAIR: CRAIG GEATER. EVENING DRESS: BEROL ARENDZ. GLOVES: DICKY LONGHURST. COUCH: UPHOLSTER ALL-CARE TOWN

<30 sex is indisputably one thing, but whose gender is totally the opposite."

Vera claims to have known this virtually his whole life. "After more than 50 years spent agonising over my outlook, there are many times when I want to burst into tears out of sheer loneliness. People such as I are loners because, in my case, in conversation I can find little in common with men and the conversations I would like to hold with women are taboo. For example, I'd like nothing better than to discuss clothes, makeup, family and babies. But if I tried, I'd be laughed right out of court."

He manages to relieve this anxiety to a degree by appearing in public as the middle-aged woman he claims to be. "About once a month the mental pressures on me are so great that, for two days, I dress as a woman, go shopping in supermarkets, browse through the shops looking at clothes and generally blend into society as a middle-aged housewife. It's tremendously satisfying and fulfills my basic need to be accepted by society as the woman I know myself to be." Vera claims that very few people ever give him a second glance: he *can* pass as a woman. He's spent considerable time and money perfecting his feminine appearance. It's certainly not over the top - it's that of a 50-ish woman with greying hair, reasonably well-dressed, with makeup and jewellery, medium heels and a handbag. Just like my mother. As he puts it, "The average person will only look twice (at a woman) if she is incredibly beautiful (which, unfortunately, I am not) or grotesquely ugly (which, fortunately, I am not!)"

Vera is quite typical of other transgenderists. One American psychologist, writing in a magazine called *Transvestia*, has formulated a description of those like him after interviewing 262 others: "He is probably married (about two-thirds are). If he is married he probably has children (about two-thirds do). Almost all of these said they were exclusively heterosexual . . . Transvestic behaviour generally consists of privately dressing in women's clothing, at home, in secret . . . The transvestite seldom runs into trouble with the law, and his cross-dressing causes difficulties for very few people besides himself and his wife."

It should also be pointed out that although the cross-dressers interviewed remain heterosexual and continue to have sex with their wives, some perceive themselves as "gay women" trapped inside men's bodies, even calling themselves "male lesbians".

**L**IKE MANY CROSS-DRESSERS in South Africa, Vera has joined the Phoenix Society, a nationwide organisation which promotes and counsels transgendered people. Membership is open to cross-dressers, transsexuals, transvestites and transgenderists.

I was unable to determine how many members the society has, but one source told me it's not a large organisation. Its constitution, for example, states that only three "cross-dressers" are needed in a region to establish a branch. One woman, whose husband is involved with the society, confirms that the organisation "doesn't have very many members" but "that membership goes right across the board and members come from all walks of life".

It's not too difficult, then, to fathom exactly why Vera - like so many others - feels an intense loneliness. It's difficult to get to meet other like-minded people.

**T**RANSVESTISM IS BROADLY defined by James C Coleman, author of *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (Scott, Forsman and Company) as the achievement of sexual excitation by dressing as a member of the opposite sex. He lists four categories which are closely related, but there are some distinctions.

Most easily identified is the "drag queen" who dresses as a woman as part of his homosexual activity. Then there's the heterosexual male who is sexually excited by wearing women's clothes. Thirdly there's the heterosexual woman who enjoys dressing as a man. Lastly there's someone like Vera, who has feelings of being trapped in the body of the opposite sex.

This latter type, says Dr Coleman, contradicts the loose definition of transvestism and merges into transsexualism, since these people usually feel *relaxed*, even relieved, rather than sexually aroused, when dressed in the clothes of the opposite gender. Sometimes they may seek a surgical sex change and a complete life as a member of the opposite sex.

Further interviews with psychologists also confirmed

## ● All I want is to have society accept me occasionally as the woman I know I am ●

Dr Coleman's opinion: that problems of gender identity (ie an inability to identify in certain respects with peers of the same sex) begin in childhood and continue into adulthood.

"I often used to cry myself to sleep," Vera recalls, "because I couldn't wear pretty clothes like my sister. There was always the terror of being discovered and ridiculed."

This problem of gender identity is dealt with (albeit rather simplistically) in *The Transgender Phenomenon* (subtitled *You and Your Dual Gender*), an information booklet published by the Phoenix Society. The authors, Joy and Marlene (both men), stress the desirability of wanting to be a woman, but their gender-identification problems become all too apparent as their argument develops. What emerges is a distorted image of women.

In their view, South African society traditionally emphasises strong gender identification: men go for sport, sex, drink and fast cars, while women are "expected to be only interested in babies, cake recipes and gossip, leaving nothing in common between the two". Yet it's precisely these "women's interests" that seem attractive to transgenderists. Joy and Marlene suspect that "many men would rather like to be included in female gossip, talking about the latest fashions, but they don't dare."

They go on to argue that the feminist revolution has catapulted women into areas previously considered masculine domain: "So many job categories have been taken over completely by women these days." They cite public relations as an example. "Who wants a drab, balding man in a grey suit, when they can have an attractive, smartly dressed woman with beautifully styled hair? A woman who talks nicely and is pleasing to the eye and ear."

They also argue that men are put down in the media - especially in TV advertising where the man is often portrayed as a buffoon, while the woman is beautiful and well groomed.

The upshot of all this, they claim, is confusion for a little boy: he wants to model himself on the parent he most admires and the role that, to him, seems to hold the most social promise - often that of the mother.

**A**ND SO THE SEX/GENDER conflict begins. The boy can either accept this "indoctrination" or fight it. If he fights it, he could become a homosexual because, as Joy and Marlene put it, "he fears female domination". Or he can join the ranks of women as a transgenderist. The latter option, according to Joy and Marlene, usually means the boy will eventually become one of the following: a fetishist (one who is attracted to female underwear, shoes, stockings), a transvestite, a transgenderist (like Vera) or a transsexual, who will undergo a sex-change operation.

One of the most celebrated sex changes is the American travel writer, Jan Morris. One woman who knew Morris first as a man (James) and then later as a woman told me how the writer temporarily stopped hormone treatment after the death of his 138 >

## WHEN HUSBANDS WEAR THE PANTIES

---

< 32 son so that he could give his wife another child. After his wife conceived, he continued with the treatment and eventually changed his sex.

But where does this leave Vera and others like him, who have no desire to go for radical surgery?

In my research, I could find only one case where a transgenderist was "cured": in 1961 a man sought help with his cross-dressing behaviour in order to save his marriage. Treatment consisted of aversion therapy – the administering of an emetic that made him violently ill while watching pictures taken of himself dressing up, and listening to a recording of his comments as he dressed. Eventually he came to associate cross-dressing with nausea and vomiting, and discontinued cross-dressing. At least, we know he stopped for six months, after which follow-up interviews ceased . . .

One woman I spoke to told me of her relationship with a cross-dresser. Again, he seems typical of the phenomenon and much of what I learnt from her tallied with what I learnt from Vera. He is intelligent, successful, highly respected in his field and seems to cross-dress for "relief". Similar to women involved with alcoholic men, she says, she was supportive of his habit. In the end, though, she decided she'd had enough and told him to stop. "He was starting to look dreadful," she says. "Like a Tupperware queen. 'It's me or her,' I eventually demanded. And he stopped."

A clinical psychologist told me that if the comparison with the wives of alcoholic men is valid, then it would appear that the wives of cross-dressers are also, then, part of the problem. "I'm not saying they're responsible, but they can help."

Susan, the wife of a cross-dresser in Johannesburg, agrees. "First of all, they need love and understanding. To be able 140 >

## WHEN HUSBANDS WEAR THE PANTIES

< 138 to understand them is to be able to forgive them – if they need forgiveness. And they need an audience when they dress.” She says that her husband couldn’t sleep at night without wearing a nightie, so acute was his need to cross-dress. And yet, according to Susan, he is in no way effeminate or gay. “In fact, sex is better with him than it was with any previous lover. You know, you do get eggs with double yolks, so the overall effect really *is* of a woman trapped inside a man’s body. It really does boggle one’s imagination.”

She also points out that there were once primitive cultures which worshipped cross-dressers. Vera, on the other hand, doesn’t need to be worshipped – just accepted. And he firmly believes that current attitudes in society form part of the problem. Look, for example, at the bad press cross-dressers have suffered. If they’re not exhibitionist “drag queens”, such as the Miss Gay SA pageant contestants, then their behaviour is indicative of something far darker. Consider how in one recent report about paedophile Gert van Rooyen and his alleged abduction of six girls, *The Argus* revealed that he’d been fond of cross-dressing.

Why, Vera asks, should he feel condemned by society for cross-dressing? “Do I do any harm to anyone? No! Do I offend anyone? Well, the fact that society has seen and accepted me as a middle-aged woman indicates that I give no offence to anyone. People like me are neither homosexual nor perverted. We don’t try to sway others to emulate us. We’re definitely not exhibitionists. All we want is to blend into society, not stand out and, in my case, to have society accept me occasionally as the woman I know that I am.”

It’s a genuine and heart-felt plea. The sympathy it will receive, however, is another matter. □

***For more information,  
contact: The Phoenix  
Society, PO Box 375,  
Parow, 7500.***