

Transvestism— a clothes encounter



ARNOLD BELL

“Clothes maketh the man” — in the case of transvestism, the words take on poignant meaning. Transvestites are men who feel that they are only true to themselves when they wear women’s clothes. Often confused with gays, transexuals and female impersonators, the TVs long for understanding. **Colman Hutchinson** asks when men in women’s clothing can come out of the closet.

difficulties of a TV both privately and publicly.

Mary, the wife of one of the members, told me that when she married the man who is now known as Joan, she had no idea he was a TV. One day she returned home early from a shopping expedition. There at the kitchen table she saw a strange woman. “My first thought was: he must be having an affair,” until suddenly she came face to face with the other woman — her husband. She was devastated. In one moment her whole world seemed to fall apart. It took a long time before she could even bring herself to discuss it with him.

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She felt that he was some sort

of pervert or sex maniac and it was months of fighting and arguing later that she began to understand transvestism is only that — a desire to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex, and not a symptom of other sexual deviations.

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As far as Mary is concerned she would prefer him to be a TV than to be a drunkard or running off with other women. When Mary and Joan finally got to talking about his transvestism she began to realise that it is not something that one chooses to be, but something deeper in the psyche. Joan had told her how he had been dressing in women’s clothes since he was eight years old. He would make excuses not to go on family outings, but instead, would stay at home, alone, and put on his elder sister’s underwear and dresses and just sit in his bedroom. He couldn’t explain why he wanted to do this. He said that he got no

positive sexual thrill from it, it was more like a warm feeling of wellbeing that came over his whole person.

Most of the other members agreed with Joan’s story and eight seemed to be the age at which many first wore female clothes — usually their sister’s. Not all of them were as lucky as Joan, however, to have the support of his wife. Marie was a white collar worker in a semi-state body in his mid-thirties, married with three small children. His wife didn’t know of his transvestism. He told me he had an overwhelming desire to share his secret with her but “I just feel that she would be unable to cope with it. She is a good-living Catholic girl and something like this is just beyond her comprehension.” I left them that time, as deeply touched by their humanity as by their dilemma.

I returned recently for a visit to the club which has since changed its venue to a city centre gay bar. Here, every Thursday evening, men come from all over the country to dress as women and mingle with gays, lesbians and straights alike. Why, I wondered, had they chosen this place for their social evenings. Pauline, as handsome a woman as he must be a man, explained that these were the only people they found to be “non judgemental” — too busy sorting out their own problems to worry about a few guys who liked to wear dresses.

Surely, I thought, the high profile of stars like Boy George and Marilyn — *men* who like to dress as *women* — and who have proved that you can do just that and be articulate and successful at the same time, must have tempered the climated of sexual tolerance for transvestites.

“TVs have been taken far too seriously over the last few years,” said Sandra, one of the principals of the club. For him it is basically a way of relaxing and having fun. Some men relax on the golf course, he relaxes in women’s clothes. Sandra is married with two children and is an engineer. When he is dressed in his blue pinstripes, he is like most other men who spend social evenings with the rest of the boys talking about football, cars and swapping dirty jokes. ▶

Somehow I had imagined that they would look like Danny La-Rues, in sequinned gowns with plunging necklines and slits to the thighs. They were, without exception, decidedly unsexy. They swanned around in crimplene dresses, head scarves and bolster bosoms, which I later discovered were stuffed with nylon tights.

But they seemed to be completely relaxed. They laughed and chatted quite oblivious to the fact that they were wearing wigs, make-up and dresses. Most of them arrived in their male attire with a small bag tucked under their arm. They retired to the lavatory where they changed into their finery. They were as casual about it as if they were arriving for a football match and were heading off to change into the gear.

Knees knocking together, I had climbed the winding stairs to the upstairs lounge of the Parliament Inn, in Dublin’s city centre for my first encounter with Irish transvestites en masse. I was researching the subject for the *Late Late Show* at the time, and had been invited to a weekly gathering. I felt nervous as if I’d been attending a convention of mass murderers.

As I entered the smoky atmosphere, I tried, without success, to keep my cool. A small heavy set person approached. “I’m Claire,” he said. He looked at me penetratingly and guessed how I felt. “There is nothing to be nervous of,” he said. He ordered me a drink and told me to sit and observe a while. Cool was regained with the help of a large gin and tonic.

The club, Claire explained, had changed all their lives. Before it had happened, feelings of isolation, fear and guilt had been their lot. But the club had helped them to come to terms with their obsession and the relief of discovering that there were hundreds of other people exactly like themselves was an enormous consolation. They were anxious to kill the numerous misconceptions about transvestites. For a start, they are not gay; many are married men with families. Some wives were at the club that night with their husbands and their presence and their stories underlined the

◀ When he is dressed as a woman he is free to be himself and discuss the things that really interest him — life, death, religion and so on. He can't really explain why he is unable to do this as a man but it's as if the pinstripe suit shackles one side of his personality and it is only when he dons a pretty dress that this side is freed, so that he can feel a complete person.

Unlikely stories about fancy dress parties ("I want to go as a woman of my own age") and giant girlfriends, have to be manufactured, probably deluding nobody.

All quite ponderous and philosophical. The reality of being a TV is entirely mundane. Sandra told me of some of the difficulties a 6' 3" transvestite encounters, the main one being to find clothes that will fit. It is obviously impossible to try them on in busy communal dressing rooms where the fairer sex are likely to be shocked by hairy legs and knobby knees, but some TVs do manage to try things on in small shops, some of them in country towns. Unlikely stories about fancy dress parties ("I want to go as a woman of my own age") and giant girlfriends, have to be manufactured, probably deluding nobody — but it seems that, in a quiet country shop, a lone female assistant is generally tolerant and helpful, turning a blind eye to tights already *in situ*, and advising, instead, on flattering colours and accessories.

Hairy faces are another continuous problem, as it is inclined to spoil the charade when dark stubble starts to emerge from

under your Boots No. 7 foundation. There is also the dilemma of which WC to use in the club bar. They usually try to hold off from using either and sit, legs crossed fiercely, until it's time to go home.

They all had a fund of stories about difficult situations they had been in. Michelle related how one afternoon, he and a friend, both dolled up to the nines, were pulled in for speeding. What were they to do? Give their real names or lie? If they lied, they would be sure to be found out when the car reg. was checked out. They opted for the truth, terrified of what the Garda's reaction would be. Much to their amazement, he didn't bat an eyelid, and acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world to encounter two strange looking women called Dick and Joe.

On another occasion Claire and a friend, both dressed as women, were walking along a quiet street in London one evening. They noticed a few kids following them and studying them very closely and then suddenly one of the kids shouted, "Hey, you're a fella." Claire immediately rushed to his companion's side and replied, "Oh no HE's not."

But there is a darker side to transvestism — a tale of total loneliness and isolation. Some transvestites have no stories to tell about tricky situations because they never summon the courage to appear in women's clothes outside their own homes. They are solitary bachelors with a secret they dare not share — men who come in from work, bolt the door and spend the evening on their own, in make-up and women's clothes. Most of them will pay remarkable attention to detail, wearing carefully chosen tights, bras, panties, slip

(underwear for TVs is exciting and important), but they will probably do without a wig, an expensive finishing touch that nobody will see.

Here in the club, every Thursday evening, men come from all over the country to dress as women and mingle with gays, lesbians and straights alike.

Married transvestites may suffer — and cause — misery too. One wife, Angela, who lives in a small midland town, has been married for ten years and has three small children. The man she married was a fine upstanding member of the community. Everybody told her how lucky she was to be married to Michael and indeed she felt lucky until one day she came home unexpectedly and discovered her husband dressed in women's clothes. She had never even heard of transvestism and was totally confused by her husband's action. He assured her it wouldn't happen again. It did, many times.

She went to the priest and told him her problem. He told her not to worry about it, and wasn't she lucky to have a beautiful home and lovely children. She didn't feel lucky. After a television programme on the subject she asked some of her friends what they thought and they said how thankful they should be that no such disgusting perverts lived in their part of the country.

Angela felt isolated, unable to discuss her nightmare with anybody, and eventually suicidal. She still loves the man she married ten years ago but she doesn't love the other person,

and more and more he wants to be that other person. She still makes love to him when the picture of him as a woman fades from her mind. But when, as often happens, she sees a trace of make-up on him or gets a whiff of his perfume, she feels as if she is in bed with a total stranger.

For the past few weeks, Angela has been travelling to Dublin every week to the club, in an effort to understand him. So far she feels she does understand him better, 'though she doesn't feel she likes it any better.

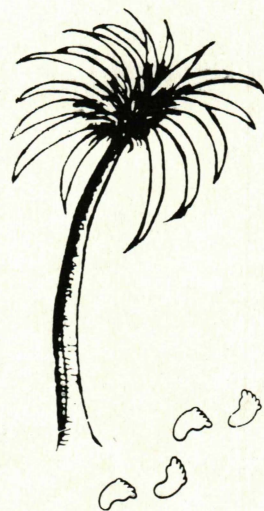
Optimism seems to be the prerequisite for survival among transvestites and those close to them. Collectively, the club members are optimistic that men in women's clothing will soon be acceptable in society. After all, they point out, women in men's clothing is the norm and nobody thinks anything of it. It's hard to imagine the skirt taking on the same symbolic importance for men that trousers did for women. Because in this instance, the real question for society is one of tolerance, rather than liberation. ♦

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