

STYLE & ARTS

INSIDE B

- **Movie review** B-2
- **Television** B-4
- **Comics** B-5
- **Advice** B-7

Editor Bill O'Neill

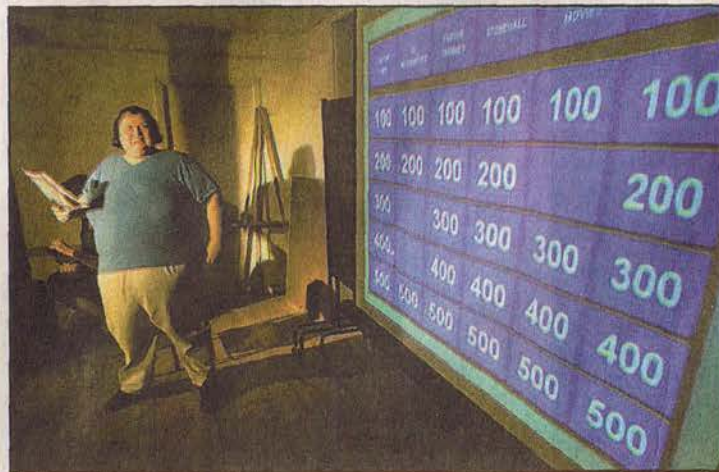
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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1999

Out of the CLOSET — *with style*



Hostess Dallas Denny waits for a contestant to pick a category during a game of Gender Jeopardy, part of the Fantasia Fair in Provincetown.



Brenda Vida, left, and Jayne Robinson, react to a question during Gender Jeopardy.

Cross-dressers find safety, community at Fantasia Fair

By **FELIX CARROLL**
STAFF WRITER

PROVINCETOWN — This is a week in Provincetown filled with a lot of laughs, a lot of learning and a lot of leg.

But for many, there have been huge social, practical and psychological hurdles to overcome in order to get here.

Lisa Mitchell and her husband had been married a little more than a



Fantasia Fair events

TODAY

High tea, concert by Sara Davis Buechner and workshops (topics include "Transgenderism and Gender Diversity in the 21st Century," "The Inner Life," "The Tyranny of Passing" and "Telling Children, Parents and Others")

TOMORROW

Fantasia Fair Follies at Town Hall, Cabaret at the Vixen and workshops (topics include "Sex and Gender in the Postmodern World," "Crossing: Some Episodes from a Memoir" and "The Art of Burlesque Entertainment")

SATURDAY

Gala banquet and dance, and workshops (topics include "Caring for Transgendered Adolescents," "Surgery for Facial Feminization," "Ode to the Couple: Partnering in Genderland" and "The Spirit of Transgender")

SUNDAY

Farewell brunch, church service at the Unitarian-Universalist

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Lisa Mitchell and her husband had been married a little more than a year when she arrived home from work early one afternoon seven years ago and her world suddenly changed.

She opened the door and knew something was amiss.

"When she came in, I tried to jump into the next room and get changed," her husband said. "She was suspicious. She thought I was with another

Please see **FANTASIA /B-3**



Photos by **KEVIN MINGORA**/Cape Cod Times

Miqqi Alicia Gilbert prepares to answer a question during **Gender Jeopardy**. A professor of philosophy at York University in Toronto, Gilbert says the transgender community is only beginning to explore its past. "If you don't have a history," he said, "you don't have an identity."

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For more information, call the Provincetown reservations System at 800-648-0364 or visit the Fantasia Fair Web site at www.fantasiafair.org.

Fantasia: Cross-dressers find

continued from B-1

woman. She looked high and low and didn't find anyone.

"Eventually what I told her was, 'I'm the other woman.'"

Dressed in a dark blouse with a white scarf and some blush and lipstick, "Elise," as the Rhode Island man calls himself when cross-dressing, had his wife Lisa on his arm as the two strolled the streets of Provincetown Monday night.

"You think you really know someone," Lisa said, referring to the day when she discovered "Elise." "Now, sometimes I think I accept it more than Elise does."

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This week, Provincetown is hosting Fantasia Fair, the longest running transgender event in North America. The event, which has drawn about 150 cross-dressers from all over the world, began Sunday and runs through this Sunday. It includes seminars, workshops, entertainment and parties.

And, importantly, it includes men dressing as women - and, to some extent, women dressing as men - and feeling safe about it.

Many of the stories are the same.

"I've been dealing with this since I was 6 or 7," said Elise. "You try on your mom's clothes or your sister's clothes and it goes on from there. And you think you're the only person on the planet that does this."

Largely stilted or laughed at

with impunity, cross-dressers see themselves as possibly the country's most marginalized minority group.

Transgender has come to represent not only heterosexual males, but some gays, lesbians, transsexuals and people in the process of changing from one gender to another.

"We're not hiding anymore," said Pamela Geddes, a father, husband, and professional from Canada, dressed in a red wig, with a blouse and skirt. "We are claiming our rights."

Indeed, many Fantasia Fair participants have begun to actively lobby members of Congress on issues such as employment non-discrimination and inclusion in legislation involving hate crimes and marriage.

Oddly enough, as opposed to drag queens, many cross-dressers say they don't seek attention.

"We really just want to be able to blend in," said "Phyllis," a cross-dresser from the Cape. "The biggest compliment you could give a cross-dresser is to say 'No one noticed you.'"

Reclaiming a history

Miqqi Gilbert, a professor of philosophy at York University in Toronto, is one of the few participants at Fantasia Fair who is "out" in all aspects of his life. He sometimes

dresses as a woman when teaching.

He likens the transgender movement to that of the gay and lesbian movement of a generation ago.

"When the gay rights movement began," Gilbert said, "one of the first things that had to be done was the re-acquisition of one's history. Just as the gay community has done that, we are in the process of doing that."

"If you don't have a history," he said, "you don't have an identity."

Indeed, cross-dressers played a role in the Stonewall riot which helped galvanize the gay rights movement in the late 1960s, fair participants noted.

Throughout history, cultures have had transgender people among them, Gilbert said, and have even placed them into positions of power.

Two examples, said David Prok, a college professor from Cleveland, and a speaker at Fantasia Fair, are witch doctors in Africa and shamans in North America.

Many of the participants in the fair are married with children. Most come from middle America and lead otherwise normal lives.

"I come here with my wife's approval, support and love," Pamela said.

nd sense of belonging at fair

But many, like Pamela and Elise, keep their cross-dressing to themselves and their spouses when back home. That requires leading dual lives for fear of losing their job, friends and family.

That makes Fantasia Fair, now in its 25th year, truly a relaxing getaway.

"We let it out and take it for a walk," said Gilbert.

Participants of the fair also come for one-on-one counseling. For some, the issues can be admittedly large and deep. Some, however, want help merely with things as simple as applying make-up and matching a wardrobe with a given occasion.

A different breed

Provincetown, of course, has its own share of men dressing as women. But the people that attend Fantasia Fair are decidedly a different breed from the drag queens that perform along Commercial Street.

"A drag queen dresses for fun and spoof," said Prok. "A cross dresser does it because it's an intimate part of their essential self for them to assume the mantle of womanhood."

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called it "anima."

"It's part of the subconscious that

responds to the feminine part of every human being," said Ari Kane, founder of the Maine-based Outreach Institute for Gender Studies and a cross-dresser. "This is a matter of males dealing with a part of the psyche that never gets the light of day in this culture."

Most fair participants meet with others like them in their own local areas. Elise, with the help of his wife, managed to find the Tiffany Club, a cross-dresser group, near where they live.

Most transgender events, however, are confined to the closed spaces of hotels and homes.

"But basically, it's just a bigger closet," Elise said. "Provincetown is not a closet at all because basically you can be whoever you are here. You get snickers and the looks, but who cares? You're not a minority here."

High heels and long lines

Monday night at the Unitarian-Universalist Meetinghouse in Provincetown, the fair included Gender Jeopardy, modeled after the TV game show.

Men dressed their age, and the ages ranged from the late 20s to early 80s. From the outside, the event sounded more like an Elks Club

meeting, with deep, guttural, male laughter - until further inspection. Inside the high heels were clicking on linoleum, the purses were dangling, and the line to the men's room was abnormally long and slow.

Some, like Elise, were with their wives.

"I don't deny it can be at times quite difficult," said Susan, a wife of a cross-dresser, also with her husband. Susan asked that her last name not be printed.

From New England, she and her husband "Barbara" have been married 20 years. He told her within two weeks of dating that he was a cross-dresser.

"I had three choices," she said. "I leave him; I accept it and have nothing to do with it; or I could take part in it and share this part of his life."

She's opted to share, and, in fact, has become an active Fantasia Fair organizer.

"I started to hear more and more stories about discrimination and hate crimes," Susan said, "and that really disturbed me, and I started to realize that it was far more important for me to support the rights of cross-dressers to express themselves and to be who they are than to ignore it all."