

Men Who Dress Like Women...

THE BOYS WHO WANT TO BE GIRLS

They live a closed-in life, keeping to themselves. The only time they're really happy is when they play the female role

by JOANNE PENGLAIE

TEN YEARS ago female impersonation barely existed in America, outside of New York, but things are changing rapidly. In cosmopolitan and sophisticated cities throughout the world, several individual female impersonators make a good living out of playing the club circuit. One of the best-known of these artists is Carlotta.

Five years ago Carlotta changed his name to Charolle Lee, and this is the name his friends know him by though his stage-name is Carlotta.

His real name was Ricky Byron, but he decided that since offstage he lived as a female, it would be better to have a girl's name.

Before taking up female impersonation for a living, Carlotta was a hairdresser.

But he always felt uncomfortable as a man, and people used to say he looked more like a girl than a man. At 17 he decided to do something about it.

He became a female impersonator and was a convincing one just as he looks.

Then he had a series of hormone treatments in Hong Kong, and these made him look even more female. He developed a bust, and now has an enviable 38-24-37 figure which says that way without any more treatment.

Carlotta claims it was all pain or less pain, but stressed that for the treatments to be successful he had to have the right balance of hormones.

A doctor once told him that the balance of his hormones was righted much more to the female than to the male side, so Carlotta had no trouble when he began taking female hormones. It simply carried on the infection of his own physical make-up.

"But if your physical make-up is not suitable, you could become very fat," said Carlotta. "Not every man could have it done."

Carlotta has also had two operations to change his actual physique from male to female, and is considering whether to have a third.

These operations were done in Hong Kong six months ago. Carlotta doesn't know whether such operations are performed in America, but several doctors do them in Hong Kong, and other countries, he said. They have special clinics. Each operation cost around \$2,000.

After the third operation Carlotta will have undergone a complete physical sex-change, though he claims that mentally he regards himself as a woman.

He works, lives and thinks as a female, and is happy that way. He loves his work as a performer, and has been a great success on tours all over the East.

PROUD PARENTS

Carlotta is an only child. What do his parents think about him?

"They're very proud of me," he said. "They've gone into the whole situation with me, and they see my point of view, and accept it. They've really been wonderful."

The most famous place in the world for female impersonators is Les Girls theatre restaurant in Kings Cross, Australia.

"The World-Famous All-Male Revue" is how the billboards put it, and the show is certainly of world standard.

The "girls" play to packed houses every night (400 at one sitting), six nights a week, doing two shows on week nights and three on Saturdays. Three show changes every six weeks, and features nine "girls" except, as often happens, when one or two happen to be touring overseas.

The largest audiences, by far, are women. The night I went to "Les Girls" there were several large parties of office girls and of middle-aged women, as well as lots of conservatively dressed couples.



Female impersonation was a hit from the beginning, but its popularity is now phenomenal. These are the "girls" from Les Girls Revue—(left to right) Carlotta, Debbie, Simone, Iris, Caron, Barbara, Electra and Francine. Audiences for the boys-turned-girls show are largely made up of women. The review is fast and witty.

Between shows, when the "girls" mingle with patrons in the cocktail lounge, they were besieged for autographs.

"It's more of a family show," was how the show's producer-choreographer Miss Sheila Cruze, explained it. "And women can come without an escort."

"A lot of people have to be almost scared here in the first place—they're scared of the idea of a man dressed as a woman. But the next time they bring all their friends, they enjoy it so much."

The performers are all excellent, and the show is fast-moving, witty and imaginatively produced—a big, bold and brassy revue. It consists of an hour and half of dancing, singing, comedy patter, "Laugh-In" type spots, and a few strip numbers.

Every bit of it is very cleverly mimed. Sheila Cruze tapes the whole show, often using the "girls'" own voices for the comedy spots, though in the singing solos the voices of famous Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand are used.

The "girls" are all rather young—from 19 up. Miss Cruze gets requests every week from people who want to join the group (she even had a letter from Germany) but her standards are exacting.

Most important qualities are versatility, a sense of comedy and rhythm and, of course, the ability to look like a female.

On stage, the impersonators—Simone, Carlotta, Shelley, Karen,

Francine, Laura, Electra and Iris—do look like females, the curvaceous, showgirl type.

There were several musical numbers, with the whole company doing routines in feathers and scanty costumes, and several exotic highlights such as Carlotta as Barbarella stripping from a space-suit to boots worn with next-to-nothing.

Electra stripping to a black triangle; and the rather strange spectacle of a man (Karen this time) impersonating a female impersonating a man in top hat and tails.

This was for a mime of Julie Andrews singing "Burlington Bertie." One of the "girls" appeared as a man in several of the numbers, though always with the feminine look which make-up gives.

FEMALE PHYSIQUE

Wigs and make-up and a slender build can do a lot to make a man look feminine. But all the "girls," except one, had breasts and a female rather than a male physique, enhanced by the costumes they wore.

After the show I went backstage and met most of the performers in the tiny dressing-room they share.

They were all very polite and rather quiet, standing around in various stages of undress.

Close up, a lot of the stage illusion disappears. Their faces are a bit grotesque, the effect of thick make-up over

features just a little too heavy to be female. And although they have feminine curves, most of them also have rather heavy legs, square hands and the thick waist that belongs to the male, not to the female physique.

In the cocktail lounge I had a talk with Karen, a smart blonde in a cream suit, and one of the most feminine looking of all the "girls."

What about clothes at home, on the streets; do they dress as males or females?

"Females," said Karen. "When we first started, we used to change into male clothes for the street, but it was all very confusing, everyone having two names, so we prefer to dress as females."

Many female impersonators take female hormones. A lot are born with too many female hormones, anyway, and their impulse is to be feminine. So they follow this up by taking hormones. They live a very closed-in life, keeping to themselves.

They're all rather highly strung and sensitive; they have an artistic streak. Most of them were in the creative line before becoming female impersonators.

According to an eminent specialist who has studied the problems of female impersonators for years, many "drag" artists will go to extraordinary lengths to improve their appearance as women. Hormone treatment is one example. This will give a man a semblance of female breasts, and will alter fat distribution to give a more female appearance.

"Some ask for even more radical operations," said the specialist, "others ask for cosmetic surgery. For example, to alter the nose or jawline to give a more feminine shape."

The desire in a male to dress up as a female the doctor explained as starting from a mix-up in early childhood.

One of the child's most important needs is approval, and if it doesn't get it, it reacts either by aggression—throwing tantrums and suchlike—or by trying to be someone else.

A little boy, for example, feels he may be more approved if he were a girl, and the seed is planted in his mind. It's a matter of role-playing.

The people who grow up from these children escape from real problems in life by trying to play a different role. But it remains a child's idea of the role—they become women simply by dressing as them.

SEX CONFLICTS

As they grow up, their sex role and their actual sex function fail to become integrated, and though some may marry and have children, they still dress up and this leads to great mental conflict.

The doctor added that for many years he had refused to give or to recommend treatments or operations to induce a more feminine appearance, because it merely made the conflicts worse.

Tracey Lee is one of the best internationally known female impersonators.

When I first visited Tracey, I didn't quite know what to expect. The person who met me was a smiling, courteous young man: short, slender, neat, and de-

(Continued on next page)



Carlotta mentally regards himself as a girl. He works, thinks, and lives like a female and is happy that way. His hair is real.

Tracey Lee (left and below) is a clever mimic, particularly of female voices. He's a top star.

