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# FRONTIERS OF GENDER

Ten thousand Americans have changed sex since Christine Jorgensen underwent the pioneering operation in 1952. But as the recent case of schoolteacher Steve Dain demonstrates, it is not easy for society to accept the reality of trans-sexualism - even on the liberal West Coast. WILLIAM SCOBIE reports.

A sex-change, that 'miracle' of modern surgery, is becoming ever more popular in the United States. Thanks to a Californian court ruling, Americans should soon be able to have one on their version of the 'National Health', Medicaid. Welfare (otherwise known as the taxpayer) will pay, and doctors predict a dramatic rise in the number of such operations.

Already there are more than 40 medical centres in the US which handle 'sexual reassignment' cases. Ten thousand Americans - men and women - have taken the perilous step across the frontiers of gender since Christine Jorgensen pioneered the trip in 1952. Last year alone 400 operations were performed - twice the number five years ago, says Dr Robert Granato - and the figure rises annually. Dr Granato has done 300 himself in the past nine years, including the surgical feat which changed ophthalmologist Dr Richard Raskin into tennis ace Renée Richards.

Most psychologists accept Dr Granato's opinion that surgery is 'the only cure' for trans-sexuals - people who, while born with physical attributes of one sex, identify emotionally and psychologically with the other. The doctor goes further, angrily condemning the treatment meted out to them, by public and officials, as 'a national disgrace'.

Christine Jorgensen became a part of American folklore 25 years ago when she knocked the Korean war off the front pages by revealing that, thanks to the ministrations of Danish doctors, and with the blessings of her mother and father, she was no longer ex-GI George Jorgensen. She is 51 this year, and lives in Orange County, home of Disneyland and the first drive-in church. A few miles down the road from her spacious ranch-style home lives Richard Nixon. It's the sort of neighbourhood described as 'exclusive' - all sprinklers and manicured lawns and private pools.

Miss J looks radiant, talks like a Muppet on speed and spills over with *joie de vivre* - 'my favourite perfume'. In fact, she is so alive and well that she plans to revive her old night-club act in Australia - feathers, impressions of Tallulah Bankhead and Marlene Dietrich, plus a finale in which trans-sexualism's First Lady sings 'I Like Being a Girl'. 'I open in Sydney soon,' she says. 'I'm just thrilled, the Australians were wonderful to me when I toured there in 1959.'

Chrissie is the perfect picture of an Orange County matron, pink, immaculately coiffed, chic and a little plump. She's on a diet, of course, had a face-lift last year, is charming and laughs a lot. Her favourite colour is gold. She has gold walls, gold jewellery, gold hair, gold carpets, goldfish, gold mirrors, a vintage gold Cadillac and a tall, golden-haired live-in boy-friend called Steve who doesn't talk much but likes to play with dogs.

How does she make a living? She 'dabbles in real estate', and lectures on the topic of Christine Jorgensen at colleges and universities. She thought, when these tours began in 1970, that her sponsors, Bantam Books, were quite *insane*, but they weren't. 'I was far from forgotten. I'm in all their little text-books, I'm a subject of study and concern, and probably alarm, and I must say the kids are much, much nicer and more understanding than in my young days. Then a trans-sexual could get murdered.'

She trills and gushes and cracks one-liners. I'm suitably dazzled. Would she pose beneath the regal portrait in oils of herself, aged 26, in evening gown and mink stole, which graces one wall? Of course. 'I don't think the old girl has changed much.'

The men in her life? 'I always say that I've been deeply in love twice, and I've been engaged twice; but I was never in love with the man I was engaged to, and never engaged to the man I was in love with.'

Was she, in fact, the first American to change sex?

'The first American, yes. I've read of a German doctor who performed some kind of similar operation in the

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Above: Christine Jorgensen, once ex-GI George Jorgensen. Now 51, she underwent the operation in 1952. Left: teacher Doris Richards became bearded Steve Dain two years ago.

Subsequent legal battles to keep his job were costly - and unsuccessful.

thirties. But he was a Jew, and when Hitler came along he and his records disappeared, so we don't know exactly what he did. I was the first person to combine operation and hormonal treatment, which is so important. The aging process goes much faster without it.'

Few outsiders, said Miss Jorgensen, could understand what drives trans-sexuals to seek the change - 'the desperation one can feel, trapped inside the wrong body'. She still receives hundreds of letters and calls asking for help. 'I do what little I can.' As 23-year-old George, she spent hours studying books on hormonal biology, visited a score of unhelpful doctors, attempted self-treatment with pills and considered suicide before buying her ticket to Denmark.

She has met her share of prejudice. 'I've been barred from clubs and refused entry to public toilets. People would come up to me in restaurants and pull my hair to see if it was a wig. I've been called a freak, a pervert, a hermaphrodite. I've battled the Pentagon for my rights as an entertainer [she lost]. I've paid my dues.'

Miss Jorgensen fights on with TV talk-shows, tours, cabaret - building a little industry out of her sexuality. 'As I told my sister the other day, dear, if I close my eyes tomorrow don't cry for me because life doesn't owe me a thing. I've had a wonderful time!'

But all is not as cosy in the perplexing world of trans-sexuality as Christine Jorgensen might lead you to believe.

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Some 500 miles away, at the other end of California in the dim little industrial suburb of Emeryville, bearded, muscular Mr Steve Dain, 37, has paid dearly for his change of sex. Until 1976 Dain was Doris Richards, a blonde, blue-eyed gym teacher at Emery High School.

Most of the pupils at Emery High (across the bay from San Francisco) are black. It's a tough neighbourhood. But the 5ft 4in tall Doris was liked as a woman and admired as a teacher by pupils and parents alike. Then she took six months' leave, and came back from Stanford University's Gender Dysphoria Clinic as a man. The new Steve Dain, with his moustache, beard and deepened voice, split Emeryville right down the middle: he was greeted with reactions that ran from disbelief and derision to sympathy and encouragement. Dain lost his job. He vowed to fight for reinstatement, to the Supreme Court, if need be. But recently, broke and disillusioned, he abandoned the struggle.

'But I'm convinced,' he said, 'that a clear majority of pupils and parents wanted me back at Emery High. They told me so. I've had scores of letters, calls and visits.' The young were first to recover from the shock.

'Oh, there was sniggering and some real anger at me. But the kids took it in their stride much better than the adults. After the operation some came up and kissed me and said I was the best teacher they'd ever had.'

The school authorities fired Dain two years ago, on the grounds that he had defrauded them by taking sick leave salary over the six months he was undergoing surgery and hormone treatment at the Stanford. 'Was Doris Richards sick when we paid that salary?' asked Dr Lewis Stommel, the burly, middle-aged principal of Emery High. 'If not, she owes the taxpayer \$12,000.' Stanford's doctors ruled that male gender

had always predominated in Doris Richard's case: among other masculine characteristics she had facial hair and heavy musculature. The operation was judged a medical necessity.

But that doesn't concern Dr Stommel. 'How could we have him or her teaching kids? Let's say "it". It has a beard and a double mastectomy. It's taking male hormones. Does it have other male equipment? Would it go through the door marked MEN or one marked WOMEN? Was I to put up one marked DAIN?'

Where, he wondered, would it all end? 'Mark me, if it wins, all the sexual weirdos will be coming out of the closets across the land and

demanding teaching jobs. Kids can't handle stuff like this. They don't have the sophistication.'

But Dain also had allies in the members of the school board of the local teachers' association: stern black mothers in glossy wigs. 'It's 1978,' a young woman teacher told me, 'and we ought to look on this as a new educational opportunity. The kids here are smarter than a lot of adults. They're sophisticated, believe me. Most of them accepted Steve.'

But not all. Angry citizens almost came to blows over Dain at public meetings, and the furore was exacerbated by the media's sudden interest in Emeryville. He has appeared on

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# 'I was unhappy as a woman . . .'

nationally-televised talk shows with Jorgensen and other trans-sexuals. Court hearings dragged on. Dain borrowed money, sold his car, took a construction job. But when it became clear last August that he would have to sell his car he threw in the towel.

'I did my best to beat the system because I cared about my rights and about the kids,' he said. 'I just didn't have the money to go on.'

Was it all worthwhile? 'Oh, surely! I was terribly unhappy as a woman. I had nightmares, deep depressions, I panicked in crowds. Because I looked masculine - even with a pound of pancake makeup on I couldn't hide the fact that I had to shave - I was always being called a bull dyke, even "sir"!' One night I went to MacDonald's for a hamburger and I couldn't get out of the car, I was in such a turmoil. I couldn't face people. Then I knew I had to get help.'

Now he is happier. 'I don't worry all the time about what I do or say. I am myself at last.'

After lengthy psychological examination at the Stanford clinic, Doris Richards spent several months living as a man while taking injections of the male hormone testosterone. Then surgery began, starting with a full mastectomy.

The woman-to-man procedure is more complicated than the reverse, and more traumatic for the patient. Surgery at Stanford is always followed by long counselling sessions, group therapy, classes in voice inflection, and (for post-operative women) electrolysis to remove body hair. There's also a half-way house, run by an ex-patient, where trans-sexuals are helped to adapt to their new lives. Total cost to the individual: £5,000 - £6,000. It would be considerably more expensive in most private clinics.

The causes of the disorder remain a riddle, say Stanford doctors. 'All we can say is that it's an extremely tenacious clinical syndrome that appears to begin around the third year of life. Never once has extreme societal pressure, or psychotherapy, or both combined, persuaded a transsexual to reverse gender identity. These people are no more responsible for their condition than a child with a birth defect. And yet they're among the most derided and discriminated against groups in the world.'

California's new ruling, making surgery available on Medicaid, may help to change that in the US. And again, it may not: two state senators are already working on legislation to stop it.