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Sex and suffering

By SEAN DAY-LEWIS

TRANSEXUALISM has lately become a keenly exposed theme of television drama with generally unconvincing results. On three consecutive evenings this week the documentary story of George Roberts/Julia Grant promises to be both more unlikely and more credible than any usable fiction script.

Part one of *A Change of Sex* (BBC-2) last night, expanded from a 1979 Roger Mills "Inside Story" film, discovered George as a gently amiable, bluntly humorous and unself-conscious young man able to keep the scars of an appalling past somewhere deep under the skin.

As the 165-minute trilogy progresses we are invited to watch him gradually transformed into Julia, by means of drugs and surgery and changes in clothes and hair style.

What emerges from the opener is a case history which explains vividly why people such as George, having had such disturbing experiences in the male role, should want to try again as a female.

Hatred of absentee Fleetwood fisherman father . . . death at sea of mother's lover . . . subsequent nervous breakdown, of, and neglect by, mother of George and his five sisters . . . at 14 starts homosexual encounters in public lavatories, leading to male prostitution . . . joins transvestite circles and receives marriage proposal from policeman . . . marries, fathers two children, divorces.

None of these ordeals can have been much worse than having to explain himself to an entirely unsympathetic psychiatrist and a roomful of observers, presumably students.

David Pearson's style of direction is somewhat variable. Some of the scenes are plainly spontaneous and others appear to have been rehearsed in advance, in the sense of people telling each other things they must already have known. Either way the camerawork of Mike Southon and organisation of the story is commendably clear.

Stepping out of line

By RICHARD LAST

DAVID PEARSON'S documentary trilogy *A Change of Sex* (BBC 2) confirmed anew that there is almost nothing people can't be persuaded to reveal on television, provided their urge to share some deeply-felt experience or point of view with the rest of society is strong enough.

At the end of Part One, originally shown in 1979, George Roberts, alias Julia Grant, was seen packing his (or her) male clothes into a cardboard box for despatch to Oxfam. Last night, returning to the screen after the interval of a year, she (or he) was filmed having pads of transparent plastic inserted into the pectoral muscle, to simulate bust development.

"Quite a fiddly little job," remarked the surgeon chattily. He had a grave and episcopal demeanour, and sounded as if he might have been receiving someone into the Church. The pads, he explained, were a distinct advance on the old silicone injection method, which tended to produce lumps. "The worst that can happen now is an infection."

The cost of the operation and other treatment was £720. Julia (as we must now think of her) said her boy friend had helped to find this amount. Candour might have prompted a mention of the BBC as well.

Earlier we had followed Julia's varying fortunes as she inspected her new council flat ("the first home of my own I've ever had"), parted company with her hospital employers ("The trouble was, the staff were beginning to treat her more like a patient"), and acquired a gentle and "straight" Middle Eastern boy friend, Amer.

What began to occur to me about half-way through this second 55-minute programme is that 165 minutes is an awful lot of television to devote to one case-history of rather esoteric significance. It wasn't as if George/Julia, a pleasant, open enough 25-year-old, was being studied in depth on account of intellectual prowess, or creative interest, or because she held down some unusual or significant job. Everything was pinned on the one fact of her transsexuality.

On top of that, you couldn't but be aware of the inevitable artificiality of some of the scenes contrived for the camera. "I'm the one that had the film crew with me," said Julia, ringing up the housing department.

What stood out among some rather mundane sequences, and indeed could be said to justify last night's episode, was the extraordinary attitude of the medical profession, as exemplified by the Invisible Doctor.

This was Julia's NHS psychiatrist, who appeared to wield absolute power over her future progress towards the female state. Told that she had gone to a private surgeon for the breast operation, he frothed at the mouth, or would have done if he'd been on camera.

"It's a medical matter. It's not your personal decision. I am supposed to be directing your total medical affairs. Your needs are not paramount. We don't like people who step out of line," he hissed, adding that he didn't wish to sound petulant.

His point was that there were certain laid-down procedures to be followed, notably that a year must elapse since Julia's decision to live as a woman before things could be taken further. He emerged unfortunately like a Soviet commissar explaining that patients existed to serve the health needs of the state, not vice versa. I found the whole interview deeply fascinating.

Tonight we are promised the final surgical revelation. It is claimed that details are less gory than some might fear.

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