

Sexual definition is a grey area for New York performance artist Diane Torr. Jane Czyzelska meets the mother who has disregarded the barriers of womanhood

Gender Blender



Photos: Jane Czyzelska

Gender is a state of mind for New York drag artiste Diane Torr. The cross-dressing, sex activist mother is no ordinary performer. Juggling motherhood with an in-your-face stage performance and lecturing on gender and contemporary performance around the world, she is something of an anomaly. Best known in the UK for her *Drag King for a Day* workshop where she teaches women to take on male identities, Torr is considered an authority on the politics and practices of cross-dressing.

Sitting in a smoky downtown cafe, Torr has just finished a two-hour class for what she calls 'physically reluctant intellectuals'.

"I call it exercise for eggheads," she laughs. "I teach my students to think about the inside of their bodies, so they can develop anatomical images."

When we look at our reflections in a mirror, argues Torr, we have a one-dimensional image of the body. By visualising the appearance of the bones and muscles, we can begin to change the interior image we have of ourselves.

Torr was born in Aberdeen, but moved to Kent at the age of 15, where she was viewed by her contemporaries as radical. Her rebellious streak has its roots in her teenage

years when she was expelled from Beckenham Grammar School for Girls. "It was because of my Scottish accent," she says in a now soft state-side drawl. "Actually," she confesses, "my home life wasn't really conducive to study. At the time, my mother was dying of cancer and I was living with an alcoholic father. So I was wagging school and writing counterfeit notes but that's the reason I gave to my father," adding as a rider, "people did ridicule my accent though, which made me an outcast."

For Torr, Scottish propriety is a marked contrast to the daily bustle of her native New York, where people make it their business to inconvenience others in order to

get by. "New York is about food, rent and work. It's a tough city." But it is also a diverse and exotic city where she chose to launch her performing career.

Torr was something of a waif when she arrived in New York, 20 years ago. Drifting in and out of the

underground scenes, she hung out with the likes of cult punk figure Richard Hell and beat poet Eileen Myles. She spent her time modelling in art schools and dreaming up unusual money-making schemes. Her most lucrative employment was as a go-go dancer in working men's bars in the late Allen Ginsburg's hometown of Patterson, New

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Jersey.

In 1982, she took a troupe of go-go dancers to a women's festival in Amsterdam and caused a full-scale riot. Speaking wistfully in the incident, Torr says: "Until that point, women's sexual expression had been defined by the male sexual gaze and commercial interest alone. I wanted to try to re-define that with an audience of women and still retain our dignity." With her roots in Marxist feminism, Torr began to turn the go-go world upside down. "I'd get really bored just doing the old routines," she explains. "So I started to parody the go-go formula, inadvertently mocking the men who were watching." Torr's androgynous frame did not fit the physical stereotype of the hourglass figured go-go girls, and she knew that to succeed she would have to use props like feathers and leather to stimulate the male audience. At the time, public fetishism was neither common nor fashionable, Torr began to explore new notions of the erotic which now feature in much of her work.

Torr's current performance, *Drag Kings and Subjects* is the product of 20 years of research into gender issues. Her exploration into gender challenges the dominant characteristics of the female identity, and while work place demographics have shifted in favour of women, her work is still candidly relevant. "No matter what profession or background, women have learned certain responses in order to deal with the world and we've been limited to specific identities." She cites the

concessionary smile in a work place conflict as an example. "Women are still generally perceived as facilitators, the invisible lubricant that keeps things flowing along. If you try to expand beyond this by role-playing, you can access all sorts of other possibilities."

This theme is reflected in her own one-woman performance where she investigates the idea of ownership of territory, where women can be whatever they choose. She humorously creates the familiar scenario of a middle-aged woman sexually abandoned by her husband, who embarks on a voyage of self discovery with the use sex toys. So, it's a metaphor about survival, then? "It's more than that," Torr interjects, "it's about becoming more than what you've been allotted in life."

It is this idea of challenging life's pattern that lies behind Torr's *Drag King for a Day* workshop. Women who take the workshop discover that there are many ways of being. "Sometimes the women don't pass as men, but that actually doesn't matter," Torr adds

as a caveat. Teaching women about how they can change their lives is her main objective.

Happily Torr's own history is living proof that all women can develop beyond expectations. Her own 13-year-old daughter has provided much of the impetus to keep exploring her own identity, as she tries to create a culture where women are free to do whatever they choose. Torr's workshops have already prompted an explosion of drag king communities across American and Europe and she intends to capitalise on her labours. She is writing a book documenting her experiences, and is taking the workshop to Asia and the Mediterranean. "I'd like to see the continued evolution of a drag king culture throughout the world." ■

Diane Torr will be performing as part of the *It's Queer Up North* showcase on May 10 at Blooms Hotel, Bloom St, Manchester. For tickets and details about forthcoming workshops call: 0161 228 1998 and at London's Queer Club Duckie on May 17.

