

Suits you, madam

Diane Torr is not your average drag artiste: she does not cross-dress for laughs. Her moustache and suit are artistic statements. By Sophia Chauchard-Stuart

Appearances are deceptive. You wouldn't imagine Diane Torr is the mother of a 12-year-old daughter. She juggles motherhood with in-your-face stage performance and lectures at universities in Europe and the US on gender as performance art. Her roots are in Marxist theory and contemporary dance. She could be described as bisexual, but she has been in a long-term relationship with her daughter's father and prefers not to put a label on her sexuality.

Torr is best known in the UK for her Drag King Workshops and has been rather unfairly compared to the drag queen RuPaul. Torr has been a respected performance artist for more than 20 years and RuPaul is a loveable drag artist in a long tradition of pantomime dames. RuPaul has also taken his act out of the club circuit and into mainstream television, recording a single last year with Elton John. Torr is more likely to be found on-stage at the ICA.

So what is a drag king? If drag queens dress up in feminine clothes for fun, and transvestites are men who feel happier in women's clothes, and transsexuals feel they are the right sex trapped in the wrong body and often seek surgery to rectify this - where does Diane Torr's performance art fit in?

As a trained dancer, Torr would observe the differences between women and men when building on a character for her performances. She was interested in the way men would stand rooted to the spot while women moved from hip to hip, often fiddling with their hair. It suggested to her that men project their self-confidence in a physical way rather than verbally.

This fascinated Torr and she started to see if, through her performances and lectures, she could teach women to "pass" as men, taking on aspects of male behaviour to give them more self-confidence. Torr found it could be done and her workshops were born.

She came up with the drag king idea by accident, eight years ago, in New York. Fellow performer Annie Sprinkle was writing an article on transsexuals and asked Torr to pose for the accompanying photographs. Torr posed as a female and then as the

same person would look, after surgery, as a man.

"I was going to an event at the Whitney Museum straight after the session and there wasn't time to get changed into my female garb, so I just got into the cab. When I got there, I assumed that all my friends would recognise me, so I was waving at them and they looked back at me as if to say, 'What a strange guy'."

Torr started to play around with her new persona, imitating the stance and behaviour of the men around her. She was having a great time experimenting, until: "It wasn't long before a woman came up and started flirting. I kept staring at her hoping that she'd realise I wasn't really a man, but she kept talking intently at me. In the end I had to walk away. But she became more interested and followed me, coming on far stronger. I was a total stranger - she had no idea if I was a serial killer or something."

Torr was already teaching a course on gender as performance art at various institutions from Harvard and Boston University to the Berlin Art Academy but had found that 90 per cent of men were just interested in slipping into a dress and wobbling in high heels. The female students, though, were really intent on investigating the idea of gendered behaviour. Her experience at the Whitney Museum made Torr determined to take her ideas into a wider audience and she started the Drag King Workshops, eventually touring all over Europe and the US.

Torr was invited back to the UK five times last year. Her ideas have spawned club nights in London and Paris and have inspired one group of cross-dressing London lesbians, now in great demand for fashion shoots in style magazines all over the world.

Although seen as a product of the New York performance art scene, Torr trained as a dancer at the progressive performing arts institution, Dartington College, in leafy Kent. But, as Torr laughs, it wasn't known as a radical hothouse when she was there, partly due to the archaic pastoral care system that was still in place. "I spent much of my time fighting against the system of 'candle raids' where they would search your rooms for candles and hand them in to

matron. As a mature student, I felt it was such an invasion of my privacy that I just exploded."

On graduating in 1976, Torr was appalled to discover that most of the students were resigned to life on the dole until they made their name. So Torr decamped to New York and by the early Eighties shared a flat with the film-maker Hans "Cyberdyke" Schierl. The two of them spent their time between jobs giving impromptu performances as mermaids. Mermaids?

"I can't remember why," she laughs. "Hans made the costumes so that's what we did. That's the kind of thing you do in New York. I love the place but it's like a city of A-grade students, climbing on each other's back trying to be the best student. I mean, people do help each other out but it's totally tit for tat. People never forget you owe them."

Watching a Diane Torr performance is an uncomfortable experience. Her stance on stage is powerful and uncompromising, which is difficult to square with the fact that she is only about 5ft 3in tall.

In her most recent show, Torr uses physical theatre and slide shows to illustrate the history of women who have cross-dressed as men. Her concept is simple. Torr believes that the words "masculine" and "feminine" are the result of taught behaviour.

Torr opens the show with her first character, "Sylvia", a nervous, simpering housewife, dressed in a simple afternoon dress. Then, while the women in the audience are shifting uncomfortably in their seats, she moves on to look at the reality beneath the behaviour. With barely a flicker of false eyelashes, Torr unwraps the elegant housewife as a woman who, resigned to celibacy after years of marriage, sells sex toys while her husband thinks she sits quietly at home.

Torr has become involved recently in transgender rights. This is where people who have had surgery to help them resemble the sex they feel they really are, are demanding basic civil rights. Namely, to have their "correct" sex put on their birth certificates so they can get married, vote and hold a passport to acknowledge the person they are after surgery.

"I'm an artist more than a political activist, although



Gender transcender: 'I assumed my friends would recognise me, but they looked at me as if to say, "Who's that guy?"'

that is definitely a part of my work. I'm also a mother so there's a limit to how much I can do. There's a group in New York called Transsexual Menace that I'm a part of and it's so obvious to me that transgender people are the next group that should become visible. After all, they pay their taxes. They're quite a force."

As is Diane Torr. In her most recent show, Torr has another character who talks about infiltrating the ranks of the American Society of Men, followers of the Iron John movement. In the show her character was not discovered as a woman pretending to be a man. In fact, her character was promoted to re-instil "proper

masculine values" into the American Man. Is this true, or artistic licence?

"Hmmm," Torr becomes serious for a moment. "I cannot comment. But," she laughs, "Isn't all art subterfuge in one form or another?"

We will never know. Unless, one day, someone in the audience happens to be part of the American Society of Men and unmasks the woman who has done the unthinkable by fooling those who invest most in masculinity.

■ Diane Torr is doing the Drag King Day Workshop at the Green Room Workplace, Manchester, on Saturday 11 May as part of It's Queer Up North. Booking: 0161-950 5900