

Diane Torr

Performance artist and pioneer in female-to-male cross-dressing
 Born: November 10 1948;
 Died: May 31 2017

THE artist and male impersonator Diane Torr, who has died in Glasgow aged 68, was a pioneer in furthering the understanding of female-to-male cross dressing. Although she was well known in New York Ms Torr latterly lived in Glasgow and was a visiting lecturer at Glasgow School of Art.

Her work was widely seen in Scotland and Ms Torr received research funding not only from the Scottish Arts Council but institutions on the continent and in the US.

In 1990 she initiated a Drag King workshop in New York – it was a term she coined – and was a teacher at dance and theatre colleges. She also became a counter-culture icon in New York, with her performances gaining a wide following.

On stage she combined various disciplines – dance, installation, and soundtrack with Ms Torr bringing them together to create a vibrant and radical art form.

Neil Butler of Uz Arts who worked with Ms Torr for more than 30 years told The Herald: “Diane was an amazing enthusiast – generous with her time and offering constructive and helpful advice. Even when she was ill she mentored young dancers at SWG3 in Glasgow’s Eastvale Place.

“Diane loved Burns and this was evidenced when I presented Roofless, a show about the poet in 2002. In New York she held Burns Suppers which were always exuberant. Diane was a total one-off and had a wonderful joy for life.”

Ms Torr was born in Canada but grew up in Aberdeen, where her

father was a former petty officer in the Royal Navy. When she was 15 the family moved to Kent and she studied dance at Dartington College of Arts. She also studied Japanese martial art and became a third degree blackbelt. In 1976 Ms Torr graduated, ran away from an oppressive father, and moved to New York where she participated in the thriving fringe theatre scene.

She shared a loft in the Bowery with five other artists: the rent was \$100 a month and to pay that Ms Torr worked as an artist’s model and an office temp before discovering she could make \$10 an hour, plus tips, as a go-go dancer.

Ms Torr was keen to further her career in the Big Apple as a performance artiste and her introduction to drag came about by accident.

In the late 1980s she was approached by fellow performer Annie Sprinkle, who was writing an article about transgender men and wanted her to pose for the accompanying “before and after” photographs.

That evening Ms Torr wore male attire to a reception and she made quite an impression. “It was not long before a woman came and started flirting,” she recalled some years later. She hit on the idea of running Drag King workshops.

Her reputation grew and Ms Torr was seen in art houses in America and Canada. She had a subtle and involving way of exploring the ideas of sex, gender and was keen to further a new and more accepted attitude – less stereotypical – to sexuality.

She carefully projected the image of a masculine androgynous-looking woman but there was a definite layer of sharp humour that softened her characters.

She created many characters of her own: Jack Spratt, a DM-wearing punk-mod hybrid; Danny King, a blue collar National Rifle Association member and Charles Beresford, a “living requiem” to a gay friend who had died of Aids.

She appeared regularly on US television and latterly her drag king workshops were called Man for a Day. Ms Torr wanted to explore and expose some long-standing prejudices that she saw in society.

“There is a more interesting and subversive story to be told about drag king culture,” she once said. “It has to do with reinventing gender norms. That’s what I think drag king culture is really good at, and good for.”

Her books included Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance (2010) and Man for a Day (2012). Since 2000 she was based in Glasgow and Ms Torr was much in demand as a teacher and lecturer. In 2002 she co-directed the Festival at Tacheles in Berlin and sat on a steering committee to attract new talent at the Tramway Theatre. The workshops she held in Europe and America proved hugely influential.

Angie Dight set up Mischief La-Bas with her husband Ian Smith in 1992 at the Arches nightclub in Glasgow. She often performed and toured with Ms Torr.

“Diane and I met in 1989,” she told The Herald “and we became great friends. She was a loyal and energising friend with a great love of dance. At the evenings to celebrate my late husband in 2015 she danced the Banana Dance, which was hilarious and a perfect for a celebration of his life.

“We went to lots of theatres together especially to see experimen-



tal work throughout Glasgow. She was wonderful to perform with – giving superb maverick performances – and as a person was very sociable and a brilliant hostess.”

Ms Torr had relationships with men and women and described herself as “an in-between”. She and

her husband separated in 2001 but remained on good terms.

Ms Torr is survived by their daughter Martina, who lives in Brooklyn but nursed her mother through the last months of her illness.

ALASDAIR STEVEN

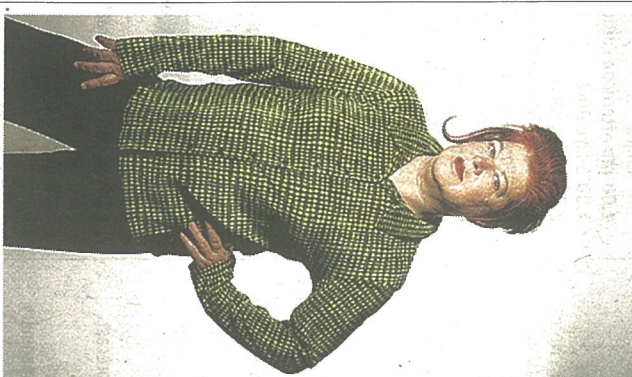
Diane Torr

Performance artist who challenged perceptions of masculinity with her 'Man for a Day' workshops

DIANE TORR, who has died aged 68, was a performance artist who moved from a Scottish housing estate to New York's "drag" scene, where she ran workshops which encouraged women to step – both figuratively and literally – into a man's shoes.

Although, as a trained dancer, Diane Torr had long been interested in the differing physicalities of men and women, her introduction to drag came about by accident. In the late 1980s she was approached by fellow performer Annie Sprinkle, who was writing an article about transgender men and wanted her to pose for the accompanying "before and after" photographs.

Diane Torr wore her male ensemble to an event that evening, and was struck by the way in which strangers approached her. "It wasn't long before a woman came up and started flirting," she recalled. At 5ft 3in tall, she was hardly the most imposing individual; yet Diane-as-a-man was treated with a respect that Diane-as-a-woman would have not have received automatically. Determined to explore the idea



Torr: she started her career as a go-go dancer in working men's clubs

further, Diane Torr began running Drag King workshops – she claimed to have coined the term "drag king" as a counterpoint to the existing drag queen culture, though she later rebranded her

sessions under the title "Man for a Day". Attendees were asked to bring their own outfit, as well as material to bind their breasts and a fake penis ("Don't make it too large!", warned a poster for one event).

In addition to providing wardrobe advice, she gave lessons on how to adopt a man's intonation, body language – forceful hand gestures, legs wide apart – and facial expressions. To smile a lot, she advised, was unmasculine, since it betrayed an overanxious desire to be liked.

The workshops took her across America and Britain, as well as to more far-flung destinations such as New Delhi's National School of Drama. Gay men started attending her sessions, looking for tips on how to project a more macho image in public.

At the same time she carried on performing at festivals and clubs as a variety of different characters, some female and some male. One such alter ego was "Danny King", a middle-aged businessman and member of the National Rifle Association through whom Diane Torr explored the "sense of privilege" she saw as inherent in

the white American male. In later years she also performed as her own brother, Donald, as a way of keeping his memory alive: he had died of Aids in 1992.

She was born in Ontario, Canada, on November 10 1948, and moved with her family to Aberdeen when she was four. Her father, a former petty officer in the Royal Navy, was a strict disciplinarian who would beat his children with a belt for misbehaviour. She and her two brothers sought respite through cycling trips in the woods. Donald, a year older than his sister, would also dress up in women's clothes. In later years they discussed staging a drag act dressed as each other, but he died before the plan could come to anything.

The family moved to Kent when Diane was 15, and after her mother became ill Diane was taken into foster care. She graduated from Dartington College of Arts in Devon in 1976 and saved up her air fare for New York by working as a gardener in a stately home.

Settling in New Jersey, she found employment as a go-go dancer in working men's clubs and enlisted two of her fellow dancers

to take part in New York's Women of the World Theatre Festival. The performance, in which the trio stripped before an all-female audience as they described the indignities of sex work, did not go down well with the festival's attendees, and Diane Torr had to make her escape via a back alley.

She fared better with *Arousing Reconstructions* (1982), a cross-dressing performance piece with fellow artist Bradley Wester, and with her all-female punk group DISBAND, founded in 1978. DISBAND was still active as recently as 2014, employing a variety of different "instruments" (hammers, bedsheets, fast-food buckets) in each performance. Towards the end of her life Diane Torr lived in Glasgow, where she was a visiting lecturer at the Glasgow School of Art.

When not in character, Diane Torr was a comforting and somewhat maternal figure – though, with a black belt in the martial art aikido, she was more than prepared to defend herself if challenged.

Diane Torr, born November 10 1948, died May 31 2017

Diane Torr

Drag king and gender activist who blazed a trail in feminist theatre and lesbian culture

A true original and provocateur, the performance artist, drag king and gender activist Diane Torr drew on working-class roots in Scotland, dance training in Devon and the creative crucible of 1970s New York to become a pioneering figure in female-to-male gender-crossing. Through her participatory workshops and generosity of spirit, Diane, who has died aged 68 of a brain tumour, had a transformative effect on the lives of generations of fellow artists.

Diane's importance in her field is documented in her book *Sex, Drag and Male Roles* (which I co-authored with her, 2010), and Katarina Peters's film *Man for a Day* (2012), which explores the impact of her workshops for a diverse group of people in Berlin. Diane did not let drag define her, however: throughout her life she remained curious in her other creative inquiries - in dance, film and the visual arts.

A border-crosser in every sense, Diane was born in Ontario, Canada, the daughter of Charles, a mechanical engineer, and his wife, Jane (nee Esson). She grew up in Aberdeen, before moving to London as a teenager with her family. Diane found her father an oppressive figure, and eventually ran away from home. As a consequence, she was sent for three years to a reform school in Bristol, the Crescent school for girls. Despite its strictly vocational remit, she insisted on her right to study for academic qualifications. Returning to London aged 19, Diane threw herself into the radical counterculture of the late 60s, working in support of various causes, including Release, an underground organisation that provided guidance to young people arrested for drugs offences.

She studied dance at Dartington College of Arts, in Devon, from 1973 to 1976, before moving to New York, initially to study with the dancer Merce Cunningham. Yet the strictures of modern dance

proved less alluring than the punk scene, and from 1978 Diane began making experimental movement pieces for loft spaces, clubs and bars in the East Village. She was also a founder member of the a cappella art-punk group DISBAND.

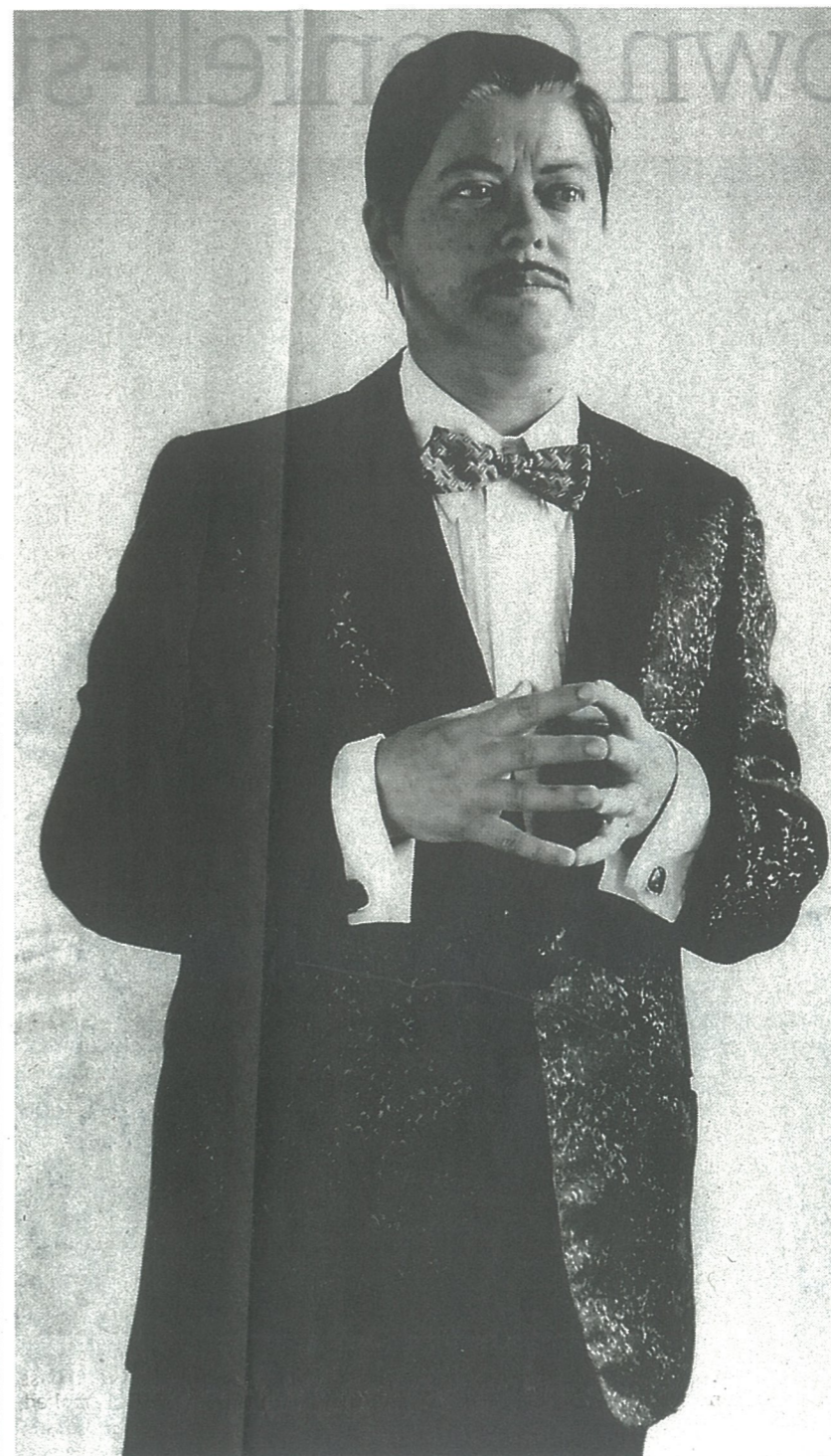
Having overstayed her student visa, she survived by working as a go-go dancer in strip clubs, a role she critiqued in one of her early performance pieces. In *Go-Go Girls Seize Control* (WOW Festival, 1981), she recontextualised erotic dancing within the downtown art world, giving a voice to strippers. At a time when the women's movement routinely condemned sex workers, and writers such as Andrea Dworkin were critical of pornography, Diane's sexualised self-expression was controversial. A performance at Amsterdam's Melkweg in 1982 ended prematurely when the audience rioted.

Still, her brazenness proved influential in the early development of the Women's One World, or WOW, Café, which she helped to establish. From 1983, at this women-only performance space in the East Village, the erotically charged work of artists including Torr, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver and Holly Hughes brought about a revolution in feminist theatre practice.

In the 80s, she focused increasingly on questions of gender identity: *Arousing Reconstructions*, with Bradley Wester, at Danspace Project at St Mark's (1982), explored androgyny, while *Girls Will Be Boys Will Be Queens*, with Chris Koenig and Lizzie Olesker, at BACA Downtown cultural centre (1986), drew on Michel Foucault's research into the 19th-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin.

From 1989, Diane began experimenting with physical movements and gestures that would permit her (at 5ft 9in tall) to pass as male. Together with the transsexual make-up artist Johnny Science, she developed "drag king workshops" in which women were trained in male character roles before venturing out. The workshops were initially taught at the Lexington Avenue salon of the porn-star-turned-performance-artist Annie Sprinkle, but demand for them quickly took off all over the US, and then in Europe.

Initially run by Diane as a subversive form of empowerment for women of any background, the workshops became influential in the emerging popularity of drag kinging in lesbian subculture. Diane herself developed a whole gallery



Torr as her male alter ego Danny King and, above right, performing in the early 80s as part of the a cappella art-punk group DISBAND, of which she was a founder member



of male characters, from the hyper-realistic to the comic-grotesque, and performances such as *Drag Kings and Subjects* at the PS 122 theatre (1995) translated her gender experiments into theatrical form. Her TV appearances on daytime talk shows including *Donahue* (NBC, 1991), *Jerry Springer* (NBC, 1993) and *Montel Williams* (CBS, 1995) brought drag kings to a still wider audience.

Diane always retained a strong sense of Scottishness, hosting riotous Burns Night suppers in New York, and in her performance *Ready, Aye Ready*, based on Robert Burns's bawdy poems, at the East Village theatres La Mama and PS 122 (1992). She moved home to Glasgow in 2002. That year, she co-curated the month-long, multiveneue go drag! festival in Berlin, with Bridge Markland.

Having received an MFA degree in 2004 from Bard College, New York, Diane taught as a visiting lecturer at Glasgow School of Art. Her final theatre show, *Donald Does Dusty* (a homage to her younger brother Donald, who had died of Aids in 1992), played at Summerhall during the Edinburgh fringe in 2015. The following year, shortly before becoming ill, she presented a talk for TED (the Technology Entertainment and Design network) on performances of gender.

Diane is survived by her daughter, Martina, with Marcel Meijer, whom she married in 1983 but lived apart from after 1992, and by a brother, David.

Stephen Bottoms

Diane Torr, artist and gender activist, born 10 November 1948; died 31 May 2017

Diane Torr

Aberdeen-raised artist whose meditations on gender were groundbreaking

Diane Marian Torr, artist.
Born: Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, 10 November 1948.
Died: Clydebank, Scotland, 31 May 2017, aged 68

Diane Torr was a contemporary artist and self-styled “drag king” whose work covered a variety of media, including dance, film and installation art. Yet it was for her performance pieces that she was most well-known, dressing and acting as male characters to create work which challenged assumptions about gender. She became celebrated for her popular “Man for a Day” drag king workshops, in which she taught women to dress and move like men: not necessarily so they could “become men, but so they could open their eyes to a new way of living.”

Raised in Aberdeen, Torr lived and worked in New York throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and she found European audiences in Berlin and Amsterdam particularly welcoming of her ideas. Always possessed of a real sense of her own Scottishness – her women-only Burns Suppers were famed in New York – she relocated to Glasgow in her later years, where she continued to produce art while lecturing at universities and mentoring young Scottish artists.

A feminist who helped set up New York’s celebrated women-only Wow/Café in the 1980s, Torr explored themes of gender through characters like the alpha male Danny King – a fusion of her father and a brash American politician – and the leering cabaret performer Mr E. With both drag king culture and the transgender movement emerging strongly in the 1990s, she became a minor celebrity, appearing on Phil Donahue, Montel Williams and Maury Povich’s talk shows (although she refused to work for free, and so turned down Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey). She met Angie Dight and the late Ian Smith of Mischief La-Bas in 1989, and appeared in their 1997 production Bull! at London’s Albany Theatre and Glasgow’s Tramway. It was a combination of this friendship, increasing opportunities in Europe and a sense of safety in the UK’s social safety net which caused her to move to Glasgow in 2002, where she settled in a flat in Hyndland.

Although she staged work



at the city’s CCA and elsewhere, and appeared in Mischief La-Bas 2003 show Painful Creatures, Torr remained more well-known outside of her home country. Yet within the Scottish art and performance scene, she was a tireless activist and mentor: a visiting lecturer and workshop host at Glasgow School of Art, the Royal Scottish Conservatoire and Glasgow University; a visiting artist and tenant at Wasps Studios in the Brig-gate building; a founding committee member of the dance organisation Workroom; a girls’ workshop leader at Platform in Easterhouse; and a champion of Glasgow Women’s Library who offered support to LGBT people, particularly those transitioning. With Stephen Bottoms, whom she met at Glasgow University, Torr co-authored the 2010 book *Sex, Drag and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*. She was also a 3rd dan aikido black belt and a shatsu massage therapist.

Diane Marian Torr was born in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada in 1948, although from the age of four she was raised in a housing estate on the edge of Aberdeen; she later reminisced to friends of



TRIBUTE

“Diana was a hostess extraordinary, always fun, feisty and a little bit naughty”

FRIEND ANGIE DIGHT

happy memories playing on bikes in nearby woods with her older brother David and younger brother Donald. A gay man who died from Aids in 1992, Donald was a huge inspiration to Torr, and Donald Does Dusty, her celebrated 2015 Edinburgh Fringe show at Summerhall, was inspired by him. Her mother Jane died when Torr was in her teens and her father Charles, with whom Torr had a troubled relationship, moved the family down to Wickham in London.

Torr ran away from home and ended up in a reform school in Bristol between the ages of 16 and 19, where she insisted on her right to sit O-levels.

“That tells you a bit about her,” said Bottoms. “She didn’t play by anybody’s rules, but she was determined to get what she needed where she could.” On leaving Bristol she returned to London, where she lived in a squat, immersed herself in radical feminism, edited an anarchist newspaper and ran with local Mods (she later created a male character called Jack Sprat, a laddish Mod, through whom she commented upon women’s role in the subculture).

At the age of 25, Torr won a place at Dartington College of Arts in Devon to study dance, and in 1976 she moved to New York to study under the acclaimed modern dance choreographer Merce Cunningham.

Initially in the country on a student visa, she remained illegally, and as a result was obliged to accept only cash-in-hand jobs. She created her own dance pieces and helped found the feminist art group

Disband, but as a working class Scot whose belief was that “morality has a budget”, also worked as a go-go dancer in New Jersey strip clubs.

Already considering themes of female sexuality in her work, she imported this work into her performances in art venues like Franklin Furnace, the Kitchen, the Mudd Club and Danceteria in Manhattan, to a heated reaction. Although Torr’s intention was to reclaim an appreciation of female sexuality from men at these women-only shows, many feminists were infuriated by the subject matter.

Turning the go-go work to a women’s festival at Amsterdam’s Melkweg in 1982, she inspired such a riotous reaction that she had to be escorted from the stage. It was on this trip that she met Marcel Meijer, whom she married in 1983; the couple had one daughter, Martina, and although they became estranged in the 1990s, they never divorced. Martina lives in New York, but travelled to Scotland to nurse her mother in the final few months of her life at St Margaret of Scotland Hospice in Clydebank, where the brain tumour from which she had been suffering took her life.

“Diane was a hostess extraordinary, always fun, feisty, and a little bit naughty,” said Angie Dight. “It took time to appreciate her humour, and maybe at times she appeared fierce or bossy, but she was loyal, kind and generous to a fault, and she stuck by you when she believed in you.”

“She was very funny and very energetic, a real mentor and inspiration to a lot of younger people,” says Bottoms, citing the group of artists who currently populate Glasgow’s Buzzcut festival as examples. “She was stubborn, she stuck to her guns, but was vulnerable in a way that artists who are out on a limb often are. Yet history will say that everything she did was worth it.”

DAVID POLLOCK

The Scotsman welcomes obituaries and appreciations from contributors as well as suggestions of possible obituary subjects.

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