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Girls will be ... boys? Participants in New York's Drag King Workshop in guy garb and before their transformation.

PHOTOS BY CORI WELLS BRAUN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

GUISE and DOLLS

It takes more than a mustache and some rearranged padding to prove it's a man's world.

By Paula Span
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NEW YORK

My mustache is the envy of the other women in the group. Genuine human hair, it cost a steep 25 bucks at a costume shop at Broadway and 22nd—even the makeup man pasting it onto my lip is impressed with its quality.

But not entirely satisfied with the results. "You need a little 5 o'clock shadow," he decides, and sponges inky stubble across my chin. Still not quite hunky enough. "Let's beef up your eyebrows a bit."

Everywhere in the small apartment where the Drag King

Workshop is taking place on this Saturday evening, women are hoisting oversize trousers, practicing open-legged sitting, quizzically fingering freshly glued sideburns and goatees. Some of the male faces in the mirror are the kind that, coming toward you on a darkened sidewalk, would make you cross the street.

"Have you ever wanted to dress like a man, try on the male guise and enter the male domain?" asks the flier that advertises the workshop, given by performance artist Diane Torr. Every month about a dozen women decide that yes, it might be a distinct hoot to cross the Great Divide and get a glimpse of life on the other side. All it takes is \$60, some borrowed or thrift-shop clothing and a few, well, specialized items. Torr, observer and practitioner of male movements and gestures for years, will share what she's learned about masculine behavior ("basically, an exercise in

self-repression"). And then the participants go out somewhere to hoist a few brews and see if they can pass.

I find myself humming an old Lou Reed song. "Diane," calls someone dressing in the back room, "how are we supposed to attach our penises?"

"With safety pins," the instructor says.

Perhaps it was inevitable that as cross-dressing began to enter the cultural mainstream, filtering into fashion and film and pop music and theater, women would want to crash what has been mostly a male party. Why should the guys have all the fun?

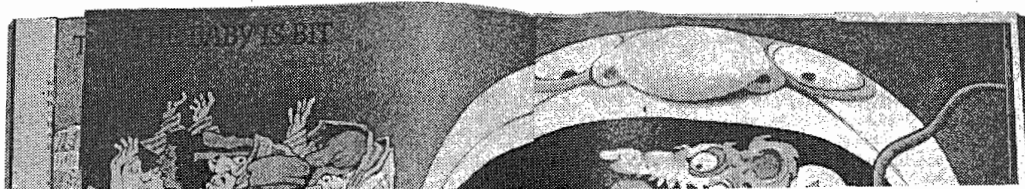
But the motivations seem different. Do the drag queens

See WORKSHOP, C2, Col. 1

ALD

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ling fortunes on their programs, nly cost to us for the black screen elite time."



Drag Kings

WORKSHOP, From C1

vamping at downtown clubs or sashaying through Greenwich Village on Halloween have much interest in looking like or figuring out ordinary women? Unh-uh, honey. They're in it for glamour and fun, for the power of attracting attention, and everyone from Amazonian songstress RuPaul to flirtatious belle The Lady Bunny acknowledges that the characters they create are cartoons, giant Barbie dolls.

Whereas the women arriving at the apartment on Lexington Avenue, toting hair gel and garment bags, show a nearly anthropological interest in how the other half lives. They're smart and artsy, ranging in age from twenties to forties—an art dealer, a sculptor, two dancer-choreographers, four writers, no stockbrokers—and they're curious. What they want is to take a walk on the gay side.

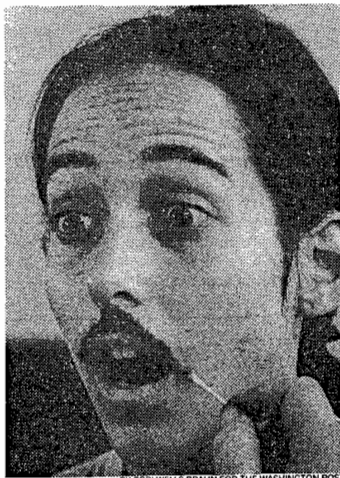
"It's just continuing to ask the question: What constitutes gender? What constitutes my identity?" says Paula Josa-Jones, a choreographer explaining what's lured her all the way from Boston. "It's philosophical as much as anything."

She invited her New York pal and onetime dance colleague Peggy Gould to come along. "I screamed, because it scared the hell out of me," Gould confesses. But she found herself wondering, "What if I had been born male, lived the life I lived but as a man?"

Torr, who has performed in drag in New York and Europe (and has the rare versatility to have been both a topless dancer *and* a martial arts maven), makes the workshop sound like a cross between advanced assertiveness training and relationship counseling. Men and women will communicate better after having explored the other side of the gender frontier. (This supposes, of course, that men are equally willing to spend an instructive evening cross-dressing. Despite the existence of an analogous New York institution called Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, I wonder.)

More importantly, gaining even temporary access to male "authority and territory and entitlement" can be enlightening and (forgive me) empowering. We'll realize anew "that we are part of the world, that we don't need permission or protection," Torr says. Also we'll learn how to take up our full share of a subway seat.

But before we learn to walk the walk and talk the talk, we need to look the part. In various corners of the apartment, women are wrapping their chests in wide elastic bandages to flatten their breasts and pinning ersatz sex organs (cotton-stuffed socks or tubular ban-



A workshop participant practices the fine art of mustache application.

gages, not too large—"it's supposed to be a penis at rest," Torr cautions) inside their underpants.

One by one, we tell makeup artist John Grant what sort of male persona we intend to adopt—downtown hipster? grunge musician? pin-striped accountant? "You're going to make a very attractive man," he purrs to Holly Brubach, the New Yorker's fashion essayist, who's here researching a book on drag.

I've brought along a rented paunch, this being one of the few cities where you can walk into a costume shop and have a clerk say, "Certainly; what kind of paunch did you have in mind?" If I can't do anything about my height (at 5 feet 1, I'm shrimpier than even short men), maybe I can masculinize myself with bulk. I hope to look sort of professorial in my rented chinos and blazer. Think: a flabbier Robert Reich.

The group transformation, when completed, is startling. Who *are* these guys? Even before Torr gathers us into a circle and begins her lecture-demonstration, we start behaving differently. The women who lined up for the "before" photo were jovial, instinctively draping their arms around one another. In the "after" photo we practically glower into the lens (it's hard to smile with a gluey lip) and we don't touch.

Char, a slender blonde looking like a hod carrier with a hangover, practices snarling into the mirror, "You freakin' liar, get outta town."

'You Take Up Your Whole Seat'

"My name is Bob," says an artist named Maureen, introducing the character she's playing. To her chagrin, he's a whole lot like her ex-husband. "I'm an architect."

Josa-Jones has become Raoul, a shady-look-

ing guy who is, he says truculently, "an entrepreneur." The professor I'm impersonating turns out to be a faculty member at NYU who's bummed about teaching too many sections of freshman comp; we dub him David. Two of the young studs are longhairs in jeans and boots with rock-and-roll dreams. Torr (who took an appraising look at herself after being made up and muttered, "What a creep") announces that she's a department store manager from Jim Thorpe, Pa. That she's the father of four and an active member of the National Rifle Association.

And that we're all smiling too much. "Smiling all the time is conceding territory, saying, 'I'm friendly, I mean no harm.'" When George Bush was at the height of his power, delivering the State of the Union address after the Gulf War, did he grin disarmingly? Hell no, says Torr, who has watched that speech repeatedly. Bush smiled exactly twice and never touched his body except to take his glasses from his jacket pocket; he was a study in emotional opacity and steely control.

We can learn that too. "We [women] feel like we have to be honest and tell people how we're feeling. We're just walkovers," laments Torr. Playing a man, "I've learned to be more reserved and distant."

She's also noticed how men take up space. Women sit on the subway with arms and legs crossed, one buttock barely grazing the seat. But Real Men Don't Perch. "It's *your* seat, and you take up your whole seat," Torr says, hiking up her pants legs to demonstrate. "When you walk, you also have a sense of space. There's a moat of about two feet around your body and that's *your* space, your boundaries." And when it's Miller Time, Torr goes on, showing how to take hold of a glass, "you pick it up with the whole hand. You own it."

Et cetera. We practice lumbering around the room with a subtle side-to-side gait that protects our "space." We eat pita sandwiches without daintily dabbing at our mouths, letting the tabbouleh fall where it may. We think we're *highly* convincing.

Isn't this stereotypical behavior? one participant wonders. And of course it is. The fake accountant in the elegant gray suit wouldn't walk like those two hoods trading high-fives across the room. Nor will every man who Takes Up Space actually put up his dukes if someone invades it. But body language can convey either strength or supplication, Torr argues, and why shouldn't we bring a certain authority to job interviews and mass transit seating?

Or even to simple conversations? In groups of two and threes, we try improvised encounters. "Claudio," the rocker from Hoboken, tells "Niles" about a "babe" he split with 'cause she was on him all the time to be with her, man, when he had to be with the guys in the band. As "Raoul," Josa-Jones is sullen and intense; someone tries to compliment his jacket and he knocks the admirer's hand off his lapel.

Me, I'm told I need to work on David's

wimpy handshake. And when "Tom" (Peggy Gould) and I both decline to engage in the prompting and questioning by which women have learned to keep conversations going—as men we simply say something and then shut up—dead silence falls.

The funniest part is learning to dance. Picture it: Cyndi Lauper on the CD player and a dozen transvestites-for-a-day carefully shifting their weight without moving their hips, like every graceless guy you ever saw frugging at a wedding.

The scariest part is leaving the apartment. But how else will we know if we've actually managed some sort of gender alchemy or if we look like early trick-or-treaters? The plan is to cab downtown to a SoHo block party where we can mingle in the darkness. Like a mom (which she is) readying her brood for a lengthy car trip, Torr offers a final piece of critical advice: Everyone had better use the bathroom before we leave.

'Hey, a Girl With a Mustache!'

Trouble right away. At the block party, an acquaintance instantly recognizes "Niles" and yells her real name, which is Caroline. Caroline (Koebel, a video artist) finds this so unnerving that it's 10 minutes before she remembers to Take Up Space.

Outside, strolling toward a local hangout called Fanelli's, I feel fairly anonymous. But inside, where it's brighter and crowded enough to bring patrons face to face, we prompt enough knowing grins to make it clear that we're not fooling anyone. Moreover, there are no tables available. "I don't see that all this male privilege is getting us anywhere," Caroline/Niles grumbles as we file back out.

So we cross the street to a restaurant that's too well lighted. The hostess seats us right up front near the window, where passersby do double takes and elbow their companions. Despite ordering a Rolling Rock (it seems like the most macho item on the menu) and grasping the glass with my whole hand, I don't think we're passing. And staying in character is becoming tiresome. Pretty soon, to my horror, I hear "Tom" and "Niles" trading anecdotes about gynecologists.

Patty Larkin, Leading the Show

Reprinted from yesterday's late editions

Patty Larkin was flanked on the Birchmere stage Sunday night by electric guitarist John Leventhal, Rosanne Cash's producer; and by fretless bassist Michael Manring, a Windham Hill recording artist in his own right. Yet it was Larkin, with her long red hair and gray jacket, who dominated the set musically—chopping out percussive chords from her Martin guitar, interpolating intricate Celtic lines and singing her striking melodies in a sinuous, husky voice. Her illustrious sidekicks were appropriately

But this is New York. A flotilla of drag kings in slicked-back hair eddies through the city and no one—not the cab drivers, the waiters, anyone in the restaurant or on the street—says a word. *Whatever you folks are*, goes the general reaction, *we'll all just play along*.

And when our group separates, the drag kings don't fare so badly.

As the rest of us head back uptown, Caroline Koebel in her Niles-the-Rocker guise walks home down Houston Street and into the East Village. Normally, traveling these same streets, Koebel endures catcalls and lip smacks. This time nobody gives her a second look. Even after midnight, "I was walking slowly, taking my time," she reports subsequently. "People seemed to move out of my way. One time, these men even got out of my way and said, 'Excuse me.' . . . I could just take it easy; I didn't have to be on guard so much."

"Claudio" gets challenged on his walk home ("Hey, a girl with a mustache!"). But when he cranks up his confidence and heads out alone the next weekend, he roams all over downtown, listens to a band at CBGB and mixes easily with the crowd. "I stood there and checked them out and they checked me out and I totally passed," his creator crows.

As for the rest of us guys, the consensus is that whether we passed or not—and five hours clearly isn't much time to acquire convincing masculinity—cross-dressing is a mind-stretcher and a kick. The exhilaration of drag stems from the way it lampoons all definitions of what's masculine and feminine. It makes us aware of the confines of gender even as we're vaulting over them. It's politics, but it's also play. Days later, after we've all peeled off our scratchy mustaches (*not* fun) and gone home, we're still mulling over the implications.

"It's not about wanting to be a man, it's wanting to question," Torr says. She's proud of her novice drag kings. "Just having the guts to do it . . . challenge what's expected of them, that's what's exciting."

I had my paunch dry-cleaned and returned it the following week.

deferential, filling out her songs with slippery slides and sustaining textures.

Larkin has come a long way in five years—from just one more middling folkie on the New England coffeehouse circuit to one of the most original singer-songwriters in American pop today. The distance between her schematic early songs and her wonderfully nuanced recent material was obvious. Typical of the newer songs was "Who Holds Your Hand When You're Alone," which began with a dazzling finger-picking instrumental segueing into a driving melody that carried a sometimes funny, sometimes aching rumination on the elusiveness of faith. When she sang of love coming together or falling apart, she described it with images as sharp and rigorous as her guitar playing.

—Geoffrey Himes