

Be a King for a Day

New Yorker Diane Torr brings her highly acclaimed Drag King Workshop to Istanbul

JOHN COOK

Performance artist, ex-go-go dancer, Aikido black belt, mother, and just generally a great person, Diane Torr offered a free cross-dressing workshop during her month-long stay in Istanbul. The eight-hour workshop provided nine women, besides Torr, the opportunity to construct a male identity, or better, to find the male identity lurking inside themselves. Participants in the workshop learn the basics of walking, eating, sitting and gesturing like a man. Granted, in such a short time span the performers pickup only the most gross and stereotypical male traits. How is sitting at a bar different for a man or a woman? How do men use space differently than women? Why do men smile so little? I too became very conscious of my own body language while listening to Torr explain the process of transformation they would be going through for the next six to eight hours.

I spent some time at the workshop setting up a TV and VCR while my wife discussed clothing options and facial hair. I left before the breast binding and penis construction began, more for the participants comfort than my own. This was not my first encounter with the Drag Kings. Three years before in Chicago I had been impressed by the enthusiasm and confidence two friends espoused after taking Torr's workshop. They carried photos of themselves as men around in their wallets afterwards as if their male persona was a favorite relative or close male friend.

Hearing from my wife that the workshop would be held in Istanbul I encouraged her participation, though she really didn't need any encouragement to begin with. I expected to meet a rather militant Marxist-feminist when I arrived on Saturday with our TV and video player. Instead a warm welcoming woman with an assured but non-authoritarian voice came down to help me. She was exceptionally kind and interested in my work and personality. I did not find the atmosphere at all hostile to anyone, regardless of gender or sexual preference. Obviously, any idea that this was just a workshop for lesbians or those contemplating sex changes fails to recognize the broader implications of gender construction. One only has to look at the public personalities of Margaret Thatcher or Tansu Ciller to see how a male gender can be constructed on a woman's body.

The participants adopt personae complete with a new name, job and hobbies. Torr assisted each participant in putting on facial hair. She instructed them how to construct a penis and scrotum. Right down to the jockey briefs stuffed with, for most, an awkward appendage, the Drag Kings transformed their gender for a day. Torr instructs these new found men how to sit with legs spread out to make room for their new "member." They practice dancing, eating and smoking like a man. After six hours of preparation the Drag Kings head out in small groups to pass as men. My wife visited a favorite restaurant of ours in Beyoglu with Danny (one of Diane Torr's several male personae). Our regular waiter didn't recognize her/him. Her entire experience was altered, from the way he looked at her, or didn't, to the abrupt and functionary service she received instead of the usual gregarious remarks the waiters



"Danny" — Diane's male persona.



Diane Torr

make. Being a "man" for a day is not just about being assertive or dominant, it is about being invisible. What so often is referred to as being "normal" really implies invisibility, not standing out.

Why Istanbul? For all the women reading this a simple stroll down Istiklal Caddesi will quickly answer that. For the men, just visit a tea house in the back streets of Tünel. Try smiling at everyone you meet there. Take up as little space as possible whenever you sit. Discuss fashion or performance. You do not need to change the way you dress or speak, instead be aware of how men take the space you surrender.

Cross-dressing has long been a part of performance. From the Greek tragedies of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. to the seventeenth century Kabuki drama of Japan to today's choreographers such as Pina Bausch and Mark Morris, travesty has been an acceptable, if not always comfortable, theatrical device. Where Torr's Drag Kings differ is that they are not trying to draw attention to their performance, but to infiltrate the spectators/audience. As I waited for the midnight performance of the Drag Kings to begin, my companions looked around trying to spot the impersonators. When I pointed out one or two of the performers they were shocked. For the rest of the

evening everyone's gender became suspect. So, before the actual performance began, where each participant introduces their male persona, the workshop had achieved its aim.

The performance proper consisted of each participant introducing their male identity followed by a short dance. The introductions and dances were quite aggressive, defiant and loud. Unfortunately, there is little room for nuance or subtleties with only a day's training. Or perhaps, I just don't want to see my gender in such an unflattering, if accurate, light. Lasting only 15 minutes, the performance seemed abrupt and somewhat unfinished. And it was. For the Drag Kings, who still had the rest of the night before them, the performance offered an opportunity to introduce or reveal another side of their personality to friends and family.

Besides offering the Drag King workshop free of charge, usually costing \$100 per person, Torr met with members of the Istanbul dance and performance community. She has also been working with the Gay and Lesbian community in preparation for a performance. Preparations are underway to bring Torr back to Istanbul for an extended stay when she will offer a longer workshop for both women and men, plus offering lectures on Performance Art and Feminism in Performance.



Drag King Workshop Istanbul. After transformation.



Drag King Workshop Istanbul. Before transformation.