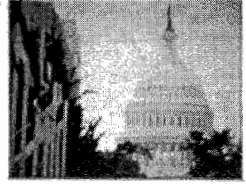
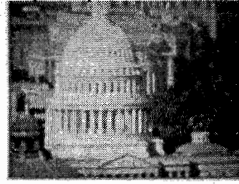
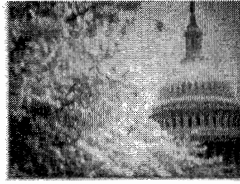
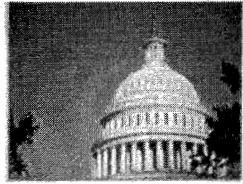
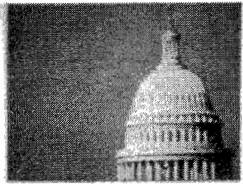


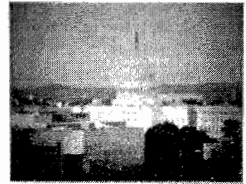
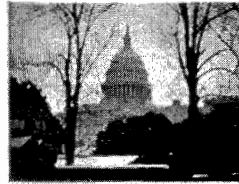
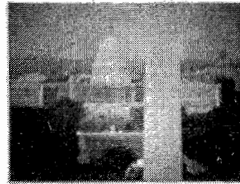
BROOKLYN RAIL

Critical perspectives on arts, politics, and culture

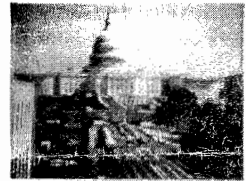
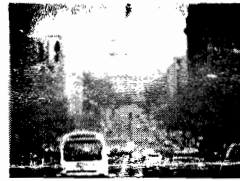


RNC & Beyond

SEPTEMBER 2004

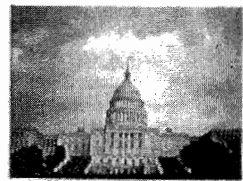
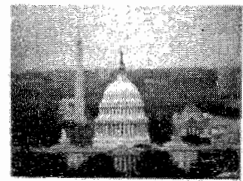


Tribute to Leon Golub



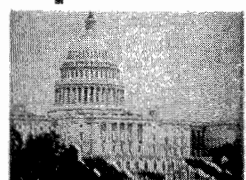
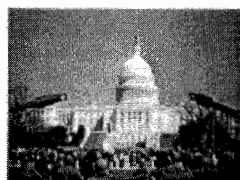
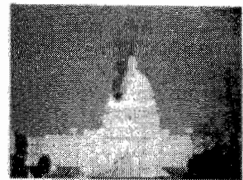
Diane Torr, King of Drag

Meet the Elephants

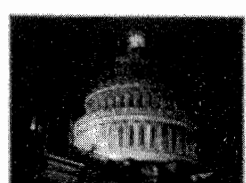
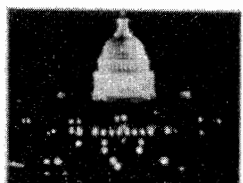
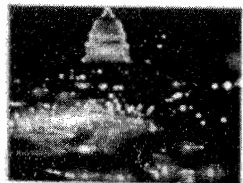


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Diane Torr, King of Drag and Rebecca Patterson of the Queen's Company

with Sonya Sobieski

This September, New Georges theater company will produce Manifest, a festival geared to challenge gender assumptions and spark conversations extending far beyond the event's two week duration. Among the offerings is a drag king workshop. A drag king workshop?? I was immediately intrigued, and who wouldn't be. Apparently, you're instructed to bring your own penis. At the workshop's end, you must go as a man into the outside world where you, presumably, fool people. I googled instructor Diane Torr, and found several thousand hits. She's been doing this for years (performing in drag since 1982 in New York), and I realized that an interview with novice me would be old hat for her. So The Brooklyn Rail recruited Rebecca Patterson, Artistic Director of the Queen's Company, which produces classical plays with exclusively all-female casts, to converse with Diane while I eavesdropped.

Sonya Sobieski (Rail): Can you tell the readers about your work and how you got started?

Diane Torr: I'm a performance artist and educator, with a background in theater and visual art. The workshops developed in 1989. Annie Sprinkle was doing an interview with a female-to-male transsexual and wanted to use somebody who could do a transformation of female-to-male as an illustration. So I met Annie and I met the transsexual, Johnny Science. Johnny was teaching something called drag king workshops, and I thought, that would be interesting, and took his workshop. It basically was composed of dress-up and makeup, and I said, isn't there any training involved? And he said, what do you mean? And I said, well, voice training, or working on male behavior or gesture, and he said, well, no I don't know how to do that. So we joined forces. I worked with Johnny for a while and then one day he just didn't show up, so I learned to do hair and makeup on my own.

Rebecca Patterson: I got started out looking at transgender performance, not necessarily drag performance, although I'm a huge admirer of it. Drag obviously is performing gender and accentuating gender, and I was more interested in what Kate Bornstein talks about, which is removing the filter of gender from performance, especially classical performances. The great classical roles inhabit both the male and the female. I wanted to appropriate traditionally male roles for female performers, to show that the entire range of human experience is apropos for a female performer. I believe that the universal is held within the female body.

Rail: It's interesting that Rebecca's company seeks to show that the female body contains the universal, while Diane's workshops help women to find their "inner man."

Torr: A lot of people think that is what is going to happen in the workshop, but I don't think I've actually used that term. I don't contradict people when they say that. At the beginning of the workshop, I ask them, "Why are you here and what do you hope to get?" And lots of times people say, "To find my inner male," and I say, "That's fine, it's whatever you want."

Rail: But by the end of the workshop what do they think?

Torr: They can be confused. I just had a weekend workshop in Berlin and there were a lot of academics, a lot of gender studies and queer studies people. They were very much in their mind. I'm about the body and asking how is this information contained in the body and how can you access it. And they wanted to have discussions! They had all kinds of barriers to actually entering into the physical and going there.

Patterson: I've found that in the actresses I work with, it's in the movement where the work becomes revolutionary. In terms of face hair and how they get dressed, I tell them that the costumer is going to worry about that. But in the physical stuff, in finding out the feminine limitations on their bodies, that's where they find breakthroughs in terms of their performances.

Torr: In the workshop, people physically have to be in character the whole time, and they have to investigate that character. What is the density of that arm? Where is the fulcrum of that arm when a beer mug is being lifted? How are the muscles

used in the shoulder? The instruction I give is about acute observation and applying that. Doing fieldwork, going out and following somebody around, seeing how they pay for things, how they take money out of their wallet, how they pick up things in a store. Some of the people are maybe kind of dyke-y and they think, well, I'm already halfway there, but they discover that a lot about themselves is very "feminine," and that is a revelation. The whole idea of what it is to be a feminine woman has to do with certain codes of practice, like smiling a lot or nodding or agreeing with people, being more accommodating and conciliatory. So people discover a lot about themselves and they hopefully are able to see who they are as beings, to find other codes of behavior and being which go beyond their allotted roles.

Patterson: I work only on the stage; I don't work with people in terms of being on the street, what I call the "experience of gender" as opposed to the "performance of gender." But one thing I notice is the audience's reaction to seeing the actress on stage coming across as male—most of our audience members say that within ten seconds or so they totally forget that it's a female body, they just see a man—and then after the performance, when they see the actors come out with their lipstick on and their little skirts, it blows their minds! Because what they are expecting is this bulldagger to come walking out, and what they usually get are these femme girls who have learned to perform masculinity. What blows their mind I think is the awareness that gender is like a set of clothes that can be taken on and taken off.

Torr: I think it's really quite amazing that you're doing this. It's wonderful that people are interested in this, that they are not so codified in their minds about male and female. Why is it called The Queen's Company?

Patterson: One reason is a nod to what I consider the pioneers, the drag queen performers. Another is because we do classical work, so it references the artistic companies of Elizabethan time. And also as a nod to the queens of history, the powerful women who actually weren't queens because they couldn't be trumped; they were kings. The reality, in our contemporary world, is that we have women acting as though they're men, and we pretend that they're not, and so we talk about the absolute oxymoron of "feminine power," when ultimately there's just power. Women are judges, women are police officers, women are soldiers, and yet in classical performance, we're only letting them perform as Ophelia or as Juliet, when to truly reflect our society you need to let women play Richard III. Most of the female actors I'm working with have turned to me and said, actually, I identify more with Edmund, or I identify more with MacDuff than I do with a lot of the female characters.

Torr: I do think it's easier for a woman to perform masculinity than the other way around. A lot of the performing of the man is dampening down your expression. Performing femininity, if you want to call it that, involves a nuance of expression that is very difficult for men to approximate; it's much harder. Basically, I think for women the fact is that their lives are spent observing men. It's out of a need to protect ourselves, which is not preparing to fight, exactly, we just want to know what's going on. I grew up with two older brothers and I was observing all the time, because I didn't want them to gang up on me for one thing, but also because I wanted to learn how they operated because they seemed to have privileges that I sure as hell didn't have, and it pissed me off to no end.

Patterson: One of the things I find in the dialogue about performing gender is confusion about what somebody's gender identity is and what somebody's sexuality is.

Torr: People make the assumption that the drag king workshop is for lesbians, but the whole idea of taking on the male identity has nothing to do with sexuality. There have been women in my workshop who wanted to travel alone in countries like Spain and Italy, and felt that by adopting a male role they wouldn't get harassed. Some of the women are married and are mothers and have to do the feminine thing to the nth thing, and becoming a man is a holiday, a way to break from all that ghastly feminine stuff they have to do all the time. Of course,

not totally ghastly, but it gets tedious. I worked with a woman of seventy-five in Bolzano, Italy. I worked with a girl of eleven who came to a workshop with her mother in Brooklyn who wanted to be a hip-hop boy.

Rail: To perform that role or to live it?

Torr: I think she wanted to do both. She was doing performance herself, but she wanted to learn that behavior, because the hip-hop boys have more power than the hip-hop girls. People come with all kinds of intentions. Some of them are extremely bizarre. Two women in Bremen had horses and wanted to be acrobats. They wanted to become men so they would know how to negotiate with the circus master. These women were really big, possibly two hundred pounds, so it was really a fantasy. That's fine, I'm just saying there are so many different purposes for gender transformation. There were two married women in Boston who met their husbands in a bar after the workshop. They went out and did male things with them, drank beer and shot pool. I guess they became gay men or something. Later they told me it was a big boost to their sex lives.

Rail: When Rebecca and I were talking earlier, she said, "I understand why she calls them 'drag king workshops' but I think what she should call them is 'passing workshops.'"

Torr: Yes, the phrase "drag king" has changed. When I first started, it did mean taking on the male role and becoming that man, but now the term has really been adopted predominantly by the lesbian community and a lot of the performances referring to drag king are indeed that, performances.

Patterson: It's a performance genre.

Torr: And it's fun, it's got vibrancy, but you're right, it's not really what I'm doing. I call them "man for a day workshops."

Patterson: I can see how after your workshop people would be interested in going into drag performance, but just listening to you talk it seems like something so much larger. Not diminishing what drag king performance is, because it's lovely as a genre, but it must be fascinating to see all those reasons that women come to take your workshop.

Torr: I'm actually working on a book that includes a lot of that material, and about how to do this on your own. Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* is an old feminist book, but it's full of women's sexual fantasies, and my god, they are so involved and developed with all sorts of curlicues and deviances, quite fascinating to read. I think what I'm doing is also facilitating women's fantasies, and I can tell you that sometimes that goes against me. I remember one workshop in Germany and this woman came and she said, "Where are the clothes?" and I said you're supposed to bring them, and she said, "Don't you have any with you? I thought I could be a musketeer or an eighteenth-century English gentleman or a highwayman." And then there was a woman in this same workshop whose husband died five years previously, and she found that by taking this workshop and putting on his clothes and becoming him for that weekend she could finally expunge him and let go of the clothes and clear out the house.

Patterson: Something I truly love about doing a play with transgender performance in it, is that you're telling a story with elements of love and elements of family in it. It's not simply our identity and our gender, but it's relationships within that.

Torr: It's been great hearing about your work. You're giving these actresses fantastic opportunities to evolve. And it must leak over into their daily life, too.

Patterson: Absolutely. It's very empowering.

Torr: I look forward to seeing it.

Patterson: The next thing we're doing is Edward II and that's in October.

Torr: If ever you need a middle-aged man...

Patterson: We always do! **BR**

Diane Torr's "Man for a Day" workshop is September 18-19. Call 646-336-8077 or email info@newgeorges.org to sign up. For more info about Manifest or Diane Torr see www.newgeorges.org and www.dianetorr.com. The Queen's Company will produce an all female Edward II by Christopher Marlowe October 9-24 in Manhattan. For more info: www.queenscompany.org.