

## Introduction: Why Act Like a Man?

*When asked, "What's a drag king?" I reply: "Anyone, (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity."*

—DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO

The first time I saw Diane Torr perform as a man the experience was a little unnerving. In the context of a lecture-demonstration, she had first appeared as "herself" and presented a slide show documenting the development of her work. She then disappeared offstage, leaving us to watch a video about her "Man for a Day" female-to-male transformation workshops. Eventually she reappeared as Danny King—her middle-aged, middle-class, middle-management character—complete with business suit, slicked-back hair, mustache, stubble, and shiny black shoes. What was disorientating, though, was not the cosmetic transformation but the change in physicality. Danny walked on slowly, planting his feet squarely onto the stage floor as if he owned it, and then stopped, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at us with a look of absolute indifference. He made as if to begin speaking, then thought better of it. He adjusted his posture, looked down at his shoes, back up at us, and stared some more. A moment more, and he began striding casually around the stage as if checking out its dimensions, utterly unconcerned by the presence of observers. By the time he finally deigned to speak to us, he was indisputably in command of the stage and his audience and yet he had *done* almost nothing. Despite his diminutive stature (Diane is five foot four), we had ceded authority to him as a commanding, masculine presence. Indeed, some subconscious part of my brain was telling me that this was, in fact, a man even though my conscious mind knew that Danny was also Diane. The uncanny effect was further underlined as Danny began to explain—in character—the means by which he was creating this impression of "innate" masculine entitlement.

My fascination with Diane's drag performances began there, with the simple fact of her ability to adopt and inhabit varying forms of masculine physicality that men tend to assume are inborn. Her apparent ease in exposing this strange artifice of naturalized masculinity is an unsettling reminder that the assumptions men have about their own identities are themselves based on performance, even pretense. Working with Diane Torr, and watching her perform, has been a way for me to keep what I hope is a healthy sense of perspective about my own daily performance of masculinity. But of course Diane did not get into male impersonation in order to niggle at the self-awareness of men. Her objectives, rather, are epitomized by the Man for a Day workshop—originally the Drag King workshop—which she first facilitated in 1990, in collaboration with Johnny Science, even before she had presented any full-drag performances of her own. The workshop's goal has always been to help facilitate women in "passing" as male in the world at large. In seeing the world, at least temporarily, from a man's perspective, and in being responded to as male, women are able to distance themselves critically from their socialized perspectives as females, sometimes with life-changing results. To take a male character created in the studio out onto city streets as a functioning identity is to cross over not only the line between "art" and "life" but the line between female and male experience, thereby challenging all kinds of constructions and assumptions.

Diane is one of the key pioneers of drag king performance as it emerged internationally during the 1990s, but her drag work grew logically out of other gender-related investigations she conducted during the 1980s as a part of New York's then thriving East Village performance scene. That work, in turn, grew out of the ideas and influences she absorbed in her formative years as an artist during the feminist awakenings of the 1970s. Her personal artistic evolution, in effect, shadows a cultural evolution in feminist, queer, and transgender activism.<sup>1</sup> It will be part of our aim to trace something of that history through this book. With this in mind, though, it is important to acknowledge that my involvement with this project will seem curious to some. Diane proposed the collaboration because of our ongoing dialogue on performance matters and also because of my previous work document-

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1. In recent years, Diane has moved on to explorations that lie beyond our current, gender-crossing remit, and so our narrative will not engage in detail with developments in her work since the turn of this new century.

ing New York–based experimental theater.<sup>2</sup> At first I was hesitant to agree because I was acutely aware that drag king performance is a phenomenon strongly associated with (though not exclusive to) lesbian subculture. Obviously I can claim no “right” to write about that milieu. It gradually dawned on me, though, that Diane’s interest in having a straight man in this particular double act was itself a statement of sorts. Opening up a dialogue *across* presumed sex and gender boundaries has always been one of her primary objectives as an artist, and female-to-male drag is, after all, as much concerned with men as it is with women—even though in this case men become the objects of performative scrutiny rather than its agents.

Moreover, to assume that the cross-dresser is a figure of concern only to a particular subculture is to participate in what Eve Sedgwick calls the “minoritizing view” of queer activity, which sees it as being of little or no significance to the majority culture. The alternative, “universalizing view” sees “the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” as being fundamentally intertwined and interdependent (Sedgwick 1990: 1). Important critical work has previously been done on drag king activity as a manifestation of lesbian community identity; see particularly Judith Halberstam’s work in both *Female Masculinity* (1998) and *The Drag King Book* (her 1999 collaboration with the photographer Del LaGrace Volcano) and the diverse collection of essays in *The Drag King Anthology* (2002), edited by Donna Troka, Kathleen LeBesco and Jean Noble. Yet even as queer communities need to be nurtured and celebrated, it is equally important that their boundaries remain to some extent porous and that greater understanding of diversity is pursued on all sides. As transgendered performer Joey Hateley observes with typical English dryness, “It’s not necessarily a challenge for me to perform to my peers—to dykes and drag kings and trans people. It’s more political for me to perform in a straight bar and have some bloke say ‘fuckin’ hell mate, that was just top. Can I buy you a beer?’” (Hateley and Hateley 2008).

There is also an important distinction to make here. Whereas studies such as Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* set out to examine the cultural position of butches, tomboys, and other women whose everyday self-presentation appears more masculine than feminine, this book is specifically about females performing or adopting male roles, in such a way as to ques-

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2. See especially my *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Bottoms 2004).

tion the assumption that biological markers of sex are also the grounds of gender identity. After all, what distinguishes “maleness”? In the eyes of most, it is probably still the penis—which females supposedly “lack”—and yet men do not go around flashing their members to legitimize their privileged status in the world. They rely on performative metonyms for their manhood, on markers, if you will, of male masculinity. As Diane’s work demonstrates, all of these can be appropriated and performed equally well by women with a little rehearsal. Butch and boyish women challenge social norms and expectations in different, and arguably more profound, ways than do women performing male character roles. Nevertheless, since female forms of masculinity are still regarded, by all too many, as being merely “inferior copies” of an assumed original, there is also political value in demonstrating that this “original”—male masculinity—is itself “a copy, and an inevitably failed one” (Butler [1990] 1999: 189).

## AN EXPERIMENT

What does it mean to perform masculinity? As the brief discussion so far should make clear, this is a question with no single answer, one that shifts radically according to context and definition. Gender distinctions always intersect with, and are shaded or even defined by, issues of (for example) class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality, and as this book progresses these other elements will variously come to the forefront. At the risk of reductiveness, however, one way to begin to come to grips with the issue is to point out that notions of masculinity always already exist in a constitutive, binary relationship with notions of femininity. Without the one the other has no meaning. As in all such binary pairings, moreover, one partner is privileged (implicitly or explicitly) over the other. In patriarchal cultures, as a general rule, masculinity is given precedence. To “act like a man” is thus to assume a certain authority and control, and to “be womanly” is to submit to a certain passivity. Of course this distinction has greater force in some cultures than others, and it is one that individuals constantly deviate from in a multitude of ways, but as long as the male-female binary itself remains in place as a guiding principle of cultural organization, assumptions about our “essential differences” tend to reinforce this basic opposition of “man leads, woman follows.” To perform masculinity is to perform mastery, whether attempted or achieved, whether earnestly or playfully, whether over oneself, one’s environment, or other people.

One chilling demonstration of this basic dynamic was provided by the Stanford prison experiment of 1971. This psychological research project was an exercise in simulated incarceration designed to monitor behavior in individuals subjected to arbitrary power differentials. A group of male volunteers were randomly assigned roles as guards and prisoners in a mock prison environment. Those roles were underlined by casting the subjects into polar extremes of gender disparity, between masculine militarism on the one hand and feminized vulnerability on the other. As the Stanford researchers explain:

For the guards, the uniform consisted of: plain khaki shirts and trousers; a whistle; a police nightstick (wooden batons); and reflecting sunglasses which made eye contact impossible. The prisoners' uniform consisted of a loose fitting muslin smock with an identification number on the front and back, no underclothes . . . and a cap made from a nylon stocking. . . . Since these "dresses" were worn without undergarments, the uniforms forced them to assume unfamiliar postures, more like those of a woman than a man. . . . [They also] made them look silly and enabled the guards to refer to them as "sissies" or "girls." (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo, 2004: 24–25, 32)

What is immediately striking here—in an experiment conducted just as the second-wave feminist movement was getting into its stride—is the researchers' seemingly unexamined assumption that the dichotomy of powerful-powerless should map directly onto, indeed *be represented by*, the binary distinction of masculine-feminine (quite irrespective of the biological sex of the participants). The differences in costuming and resultant physicality imposed on the participants, far more pronounced than those experienced in most "real" prisons, stemmed from the psychologists' wish for one group to experience—in an accelerated way—"the emasculating process of becoming a prisoner" (25). During the course of the experiment, however, the researchers observed that their awkwardly exposed captives signally failed to demonstrate "the assertive, independent, aggressive nature of male prisoners" in "real prisons" (32). Instead, after some initial resistance to their roles, they "adopted a generally passive response mode while guards assumed a very active initiative role in all interactions" (26).

In his recent book revisiting the prison experiment's implications, *The Lucifer Effect*, lead researcher Philip Zimbardo notes that "the initial script

for guard and prisoner role-playing came from the participants' own experiences with power and powerlessness" such as "their observation of interactions between parents (traditionally, Dad is the guard, Mom the prisoner)" (2007: 216). This statement remains undeveloped—a fact indicative of Zimbardo's general tendency to avoid the gender implications of his research. He may be alluding, though, to Betty Friedan's foundational feminist text *The Feminine Mystique*, which argued that American women of the postwar era had been conditioned into "dependent, passive, childlike" relationships with their husbands, and pictured the suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp" ([1963] 1973: 296). The young men participating in the Stanford study were sons of the generation of women Friedan was writing about, and it does seem that—while there were certainly many other factors involved in shaping their responses—the experiment's imposition of an extreme gender dichotomy in costuming and role-playing prompted them to internalize and act out stereotypically binarized extremes of "masculine" aggression and "feminine" passivity. This was, moreover, no mere "act"; although physical violence was explicitly prohibited by the researchers, the guards became increasingly aggressive and abusive even as it became apparent that their cruelty was having a real psychological impact on the prisoners. The result was that an experiment initially intended to last two weeks had to be cut short at six days because five of the twelve prisoners had already reached the point of "extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety" and one had developed "a psychosomatic rash which covered portions of his body" (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 2004: 26). The researchers also noted that the prisoners had become so passively accepting of their incarceration that it did not even occur to them that they had the right, at any time, simply to quit the experiment. The line between role-playing and the real had vanished.

The Stanford experiment provides an intensified physical illustration of Judith Butler's argument in her landmark study *Gender Trouble* (1990)—and its clarifying sequel, *Bodies that Matter* (1993)—that gendered behavior is produced as a consequence of socially determined norms rather than as an outworking of any internal "essence" of gender. That is, the dominant system of assumptions about gender constantly reproduces itself through our reiterative enactments of its premises: if we are told that we are "male" or "female," we learn that we are supposed to behave in broadly masculine or feminine ways and may subsequently come to assume that those behaviors are "natural" to us. As Butler explains pithily in her preface to the book's

1999 reprint, “[T]he anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits outside itself” ([1990] 1999: xv). Biological sex, as the Stanford incident illustrates, may have very little to do with “determining” gender behavior except insofar that in the everyday run of things our initial reading of genitalia—“it’s a girl!”—acts as the first trigger for us to begin imposing “normalizing” expectations on the child.

Why, then, do we not all end up reenacting the extremes of behavior seen in the Stanford experiment? Because, Butler maintains, gender norms are not fixed in stone for all time, but are constituted by a collection of unwritten regulations that are constantly evolving through the performative repetition of their behavioral premises, and constantly vary according to the contextual specifics of class, race, and geographical location. Thus, while we cannot arbitrarily step outside of the binary gender framework and simply “choose” our own ways of being, a degree of individual agency may come into play through our modified repetition of the existing gender models available to us. For example, a woman who comes to feel oppressed (in whatever way and with whatever degree of consciousness) by social expectations of femininity may begin to challenge them by modifying or replacing them with some adapted version of “masculine” behavior or attitudes. As Butler concludes, “[T]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” ([1990] 1999: 202–3). Repetition may proliferate difference to the point where—in an ideal world to come—the binary separation of male and female eventually loses its authority.

Butler’s argument is familiar to anyone who has engaged in gender-related studies over the past two decades. Indeed, *Gender Trouble* is now seen by many as the foundational text for contemporary gender-queer thinking. First appearing in 1990, moreover, its history is almost exactly coterminous with that of the “drag king” performance genre which it is one purpose of this book to investigate. (Butler, of course, took the drag act as an exemplary instance of the potentially subversive repetition of gender norms, although at the time she was writing the drag *queen* was her assumed referent.) Another development of the last two decades has been the growing interest in “masculinity studies” in the academy, which has turned unprecedented attention to the ways in which men are “constructed” both socially and culturally. It is notable, however, that, in spite of the influence of Butler and other key feminist and queer theorists, such studies of mas-

culinity *still* overwhelmingly tend to assume men as their given subject, unreflexively conflating sex with gender. The silliness of this is clearly apparent if one considers the idea of women identifying themselves with something called “femininity studies.” Yet men will lay claim to masculinity because, as the Stanford example makes painfully clear, it is equated with power. As Judith Halberstam notes in *Female Masculinity*, “[M]asculinity and maleness are profoundly difficult to pry apart” (1998: 2). Despite her astute reading of the blind spots in some key 1990s texts on masculinity, the problems she outlines have been repeated in many a publication since.

It is almost a commonplace nowadays to suggest that men, too, are male impersonators (see Simpson 1994), imitating the available models of masculinity and anxiously trying to live up to some idealized notion of what a “real man” looks like. It has also become something of a commonplace in contemporary theater and performance for male artists—gay and straight—to seek to question and ironize these dominant models of masculinity.<sup>3</sup> Yet all too often the status of such artists as biological men depicting biological males still tends to naturalize the notion that men “possess” masculinity (or, in Lacanian terms, that they “own” the phallus). Men are very good at masochistic self-criticism—indeed, David Savran has argued in *Taking It Like a Man* that masochism is intrinsic to contemporary white heterosexual masculinity—but as long as their reflections lead automatically back to *themselves* we are stuck in a closed loop. The situation is rather as if the “guards” in Zimbardo’s prison experiment had organized a therapy group to discuss how difficult it is being guards all the time, but without inviting or even referring to the “prisoners” whose existence defines them as guards.

One might, of course, have more sympathy with the prisoners attempting to organize themselves as a means of resisting their oppression, just as feminist groups have done for decades. Again, though, there is the danger that when those on *either* side of a binary divide define themselves according to the terms of that division they simply reinforce the very separation that is the root of the problem. As Butler asks, “[T]o what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical enquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?” ([1990] 1999: xxxii). Or, to put it another way, what

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3. My study of the playwright Sam Shepard, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (Bottoms 1998), took his interrogations of machismo as one of its main concerns.



if we could begin to see our insistent cultural separation of men and women as *no less arbitrary* than Zimbardo's initial separation of guards and prisoners? Such a proposition, which still feels radical, seeks not to erase difference but to acknowledge its multiplicity (why draw this line here when one could make other distinctions here or here or here?). Indeed, as the sociologist R. W. Connell pointedly observes, an entire century of "sex difference" research—investigating everything from mental abilities to "emotions, attitudes, personality traits, interests, indeed everything that psychologists thought they could measure"—has consistently concluded that "sex differences between men and women, on almost every psychological trait measured, are either non-existent or fairly small" (1995: 21). No consistent, significant distinctions between the male and female sections of the human population can be traced because individual personalities vary in so many, multitudinous ways that no neat, binary pattern emerges. This is not to deny the importance of gender identity to one's makeup but simply to acknowledge it as one factor among many. The absence of totalizing distinctions should probably not come as a surprise to any of us. Even biological differences do not work to neatly distinguish us, since there exists a whole spectrum of variations in physical attributes, including hundreds of recognized intersex conditions. Yet our societies continue to propagate the notion that men and women are somehow worlds apart, and use this manufactured gulf to explain and justify the still very pronounced differences in our cultural and economic fortunes.

## **A LITTLE HISTORY**

In focusing on the performance of male characters by female-bodied performers, this book modestly proposes that such practices can function to challenge and critique the continuing, structural power divide between the sexes. "If subversion is possible," Butler notes, "it will be subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself" ([1990] 1999: 127). It is important to acknowledge, though, that such permutations are by no means a new invention and that—as Diane has always stressed—contemporary drag king performance is only the most recent manifestation of a long-standing, though historically fragmented, tradition of female-to-male theatrical cross-dressing. This tradition, as I will seek briefly to demonstrate, has existed on the borderlines of cultural accept-

ability because of its tendency to trouble the established gender order. "Male impersonation, when seriously intended, was a risky encroachment on patriarchal prerogative," Laurence Senelick argues in his encyclopedic history of theatrical drag, *The Changing Room*, whereas the still older convention of men impersonating women has been "hallowed by tradition as a violation of taboo; hence it could be safely indulged in by college students, naval cadets and Rotarians alike" (2000: 340). This is not to belittle the struggles that many male-to-female performers have faced, particularly in the last century or so, as a result of homophobic prejudice. But for women to "upgrade" themselves to the status of men, and to do so *plausibly*, is to imply that the authority traditionally held by men is a matter of posture and theatricality (bluff) more than divine or biological right. Indeed, Marjorie Garber has speculated that the male fascination with performing absurd exaggerations of femininity—"balloon breasts, fluffy wigs, make-up"—may itself "mask another (I hesitate to say, a deeper) concern about the artifactuality and detachability of maleness." In English slang, she notes, the word *cod*—as in *codpiece*—"means both scrotum or testicles, and hoax, fool, pretence or mock. The anxiety of male artifactuality is summed up, as it were, in a nutshell" (1993: 125).

In England, during the Shakespearean era of codpieces (around the turn of the seventeenth century), puritanical proscriptions against women displaying themselves "lasciviously" meant that they were barred from appearing on public stages as performers, whether in female or male roles, although they began to do so in France, Spain, and Italy at around this time. Female characters in the theater of Shakespeare's day (including those disguising themselves as men in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*) were played by apprentice male actors. However, after the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, following an eighteen-year republican period during which theaters were banned, the tradition of boys playing women's roles was swiftly done away with, not least because King Charles II liked to see women perform, and indeed to select mistresses from among those on show (most famously, Nell Gwyn). Like the monarch, society at large seems to have regarded the new breed of actresses as frankly licentious, and since tight male breeches showed off a woman's legs far better than did full skirts it was logical enough that these first English actresses frequently appeared provocatively cross-dressed, just as was the case on the continent.

The right or ability of women to assume male roles onstage does not

seem, at first, to have been widely questioned. This may be because the early modern conception of sex roles was somewhat different from the diametric opposition of female versus male that is commonly assumed today. Women were regarded as different from men, but different in the sense of being incomplete or inferior versions of the same template (a worldview traceable all the way back to Aristotle). It follows that women could attempt to play males, albeit perhaps in a mode of comic inadequacy, once religious and legal objections to the theatrical display of female bodies were overcome. Indeed, "breeches roles" became so popular during the Restoration that between 1660 and 1700 almost one in four of the new plays produced in London included male roles written for performance by women. This sudden popularity clearly owed a great deal to the titillation factor involved, but breeches roles were not simply a matter of pandering to the male gaze. This was also a period when women were publicly staking a claim to sexual liberty of their own. As one female character in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (ca. 1677) remarks, "For as 'tis true, 'all' men are stark mad for wenches, so 'tis true, however custom pretends otherwise, that we wenches be as inly stark as men" (1987: 24). This bold willingness to compete on equal terms also seems to have factored into women playing male roles. As the cross-dressed Anne Reeve would remark to the audience in John Dryden's 1672 epilogue to *Secret Love, or The Maiden Queen*:

What think you, Sirs, was't not all well enough,  
Will you not grant that we can strut, and huff?  
Men may be proud: but faith, for ought I see,  
They neither walk, nor cock, as well as we.  
(qtd. Senelick 2000: 214)

It would be easy, perhaps, to assume that Dryden intended this joke to rebound on Reeve, that her imitation of masculine strutting did not measure up to "the real thing." And yet, thanks to the increasing number of theatrical reviews and memoirs published in the eighteenth century (as popular print culture expanded rapidly), it is possible to trace evidence that some breeches performers *did* succeed in creating entirely plausible performances of maleness. Peg Woffington, for example, became particularly celebrated for her rendition of the role of Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar's *The Constant Couple*. When she first assayed the role in 1740, one reviewer asserted that "in the well-bred rake of quality, who lightly tripped

across the stage, there was no trace of the woman. The audience beheld only a young man of faultless figure, distinguished by an ease of manner, polish of address, and nonchalance that at once surprised and fascinated them" (qtd. Wahrman 2004: 48). Likewise, memoirs published after Woffington's death in 1760 remarked on the fact that "Females were equally well pleased with her acting as the Men were, but could not persuade themselves that it was a Woman that acted the Character" (qtd. Straub 1992: 129). This fascination with Woffington's Wildair allegedly extended to the point where "The Men grew envious [of her], and the Women loved [her]," an inversion of the conventional expectation that made some observers distinctly uneasy, particularly in response to Wildair's love scene with his leading lady. An otherwise approving review in *The Actor* (1750), for instance, maintained that "no one of the audience ever saw without disgust" Woffington's attempt at this scene: "it is insipid, or it is worse; it conveys no ideas at all, or a very hateful one; and either the insensibility, or the disgust we conceive, quite break in upon the delusion" (qtd. Straub 1992: 134). Modern commentators generally agree that "no ideas at all" alludes to the known absence of this Wildair's penis, and "a very hateful one" to the specter of same-sex love. The eighteenth century, however, had no concept of lesbianism in the modern sense. Women seducing other women were often thought to be hermaphrodites of some sort, representatives of a "third sex."<sup>4</sup>

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a more rigidly binarized system of gender classification began to dominate public discourse. One manifestation of this shift was the fact that breeches roles—despite having been popular for over a century—began rapidly to fall out of fashion. The role of Sir Harry Wildair, to take but one example, was performed in London by women on at least twenty-eight occasions between 1788 and 1790 but then received only three more cross-dressed performances over the next dozen years. Equally significant are the posthumous recastings of Woffington's achievements. She made "a great attempt for a woman, but still it was *not* Sir Harry Wildair," William Cooke asserted in 1804 (almost half a century after the actress's death); "dress it how you will, the spectator [always] sees it as a woman," James Boaden concurred. This despite the 1780 memoir of Thomas Davies, who stressed that "no male actor has since equalled her in

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4. See particularly Randolph Trumbach's "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture" (1996).

that part" (see Wahrman 2004: 49–50, 55). Senelick argues that such comments indicate changing theatrical tastes and a growing preference for greater realism. The ability of women to convince in male roles during the eighteenth century, he contends, was thanks only to "highly conventionalized . . . ways of playing" that permitted "outward, behavioral signs" and "mere congeries of gesture and pose" to be read as indicative of masculinity (2000: 214, 216). But how, one might ask, is masculinity to be presented onstage—whether by men or women—*other* than by means of gesture, pose, "behavioral signs," and costuming? Senelick seems to assume that some fundamental essence of manhood lay beyond the ability of women to reproduce. Yet, as Dror Wahrman persuasively demonstrates in *The Making of the Modern Self*, that notion of essential gender difference is *itself* a historical construction that dates from around the end of the eighteenth century. Prior to that, women could be celebrated not only for passing convincingly onstage as men but for doing so in everyday life (a realm in which "realism" was of course essential).

Historical evidence for this last point is not hard to come by. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, passing women were an identifiable phenomenon. Indeed, it was not unknown for the pope to issue special dispensations for women whose cover had been blown to continue dressing as men (as was the case, for example, with Catalina de Eraso, an early-seventeenth-century Spanish adventurer). Among other surviving records, the annals of the Dutch East India Company covering the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries report more than a hundred cases of seamen having been exposed as female. In all likelihood, many more went undetected. Similarly, in England, *The Annual Register* (founded in 1758) regularly recorded cases of women who had passed as men during the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Vern and Bonnie Bullough, who report these examples in *Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993), conclude that such accounts commonly involve women from lower-class backgrounds seeking a measure of mobility and economic betterment that their female status would not allow. (Conversely, accounts of male-to-female cross-dressers are less common in this period and usually involve cases in which upper-class men are permitted by privilege to indulge themselves in wearing women's clothing.) Some such women were punished for their transgressions; Mary Read and Anne Bonny, for example, were sentenced to death for piracy in 1720 (the latter, pregnant at the time of sentencing, was hanged after giving birth). Yet it was also common for the exploits of

cross-dressing women to be celebrated in the popular culture of the period. As Wahrman puts it:

The female knight or warrior [and] her ability to put on male garb, successfully pass as a man, and excel in that most manly pursuit of all, war, was formulaically celebrated in hundreds of street ballads with titles like “The Female Warrior,” “The Maiden Sailor,” “The Soldier Maid,” or “She Dressed Herself Like a Duke.” . . . Her confidence in fulfilling these masculine roles as well as any man . . . was commonly reaffirmed. (2004: 21–22)

Such narratives also sold well in pamphlet form and regularly drew audiences in the theater, often by emphasizing romantic imperatives such as the need to cross-dress as male in order freely to pursue one’s (male) lover. No doubt many women also cross-dressed for not so heterosexual reasons during this period, but there was no general conception at this time that masculine women were sexually “deviant.” There was scandalmongering, of course. Henry Fielding’s *The Female Husband* (1746), for example, was a sensationalized account of the trial of Mary Hamilton, who had been caught posing as a man in order to marry another woman; Fielding’s salacious narrative went as far as to tantalize readers with a reference to “something of too vile, wicked and scandalous a nature, which was found in [Hamilton’s] trunk.” Randolph Trumbach concludes, from other surviving evidence, that this was, indeed, a dildo (1996: 129). And yet this case appears not to have “tainted” the perception of other cross-dressing women. Another successful pamphlet of 1746 was by the actress Charlotte Charke (an erstwhile theatrical colleague of Fielding’s), whose *Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charke* recounted her own adventures in passing as a man offstage. Although the *Narrative* includes various scenarios depicting Charke’s cross-dressed flirtations with women, these accounts—never suggesting anything more sexual than wordplay—remained acceptable to readers of the day. (Modern critics have debated the question of her “true” orientation, although, of course, this is unknowable at this remove.)

Other cross-dressing women of the period also enjoyed a degree of fame and financial success when their stories became public. Hannah Gray, for example, who joined the army as James Gray in 1745, apparently as a survival tactic after being abandoned by her husband, allegedly endured five hundred lashes in routine punishments without being detected as female. When she was eventually exposed, she enjoyed a brief career onstage

playing male roles before retiring on her army pension to open a pub, whose shingle read, "The Widow in Masquerade or the Female Warrior." (Clearly she was happy to cash in on her renown!) By 1801, however, in another case of history being rewritten to reassert gender distinctions, a reprint of Gray's story amended the narrative to emphasize her "utmost disgust" at being forced to dress as a man and replaced a masculine-looking cover portrait with a softer, more feminine rendition. Similarly, the naval adventurer Mary Ann Talbot had to qualify her own turn-of-the-century memoirs with apologies, insisting that she had been forced into cross-dressing as male by a seducer and that it "was by no means congenial to [her] feelings" (qtd. Wahrman 2004: 23). This despite the fact that she continued to wear male garb long after the death of the man in question. Other popular narratives of this later period also tended to insist on the flaws in the gender act being apparent to anyone who looked for them. In short, whether cross-dressing occurred onstage or in everyday life, the "common sense" view was now that the disguise could easily be seen through—and any previous evidence to the contrary could be rewritten to refute its own implications. "There is no woman, nor ever was a woman, who can fully supply this character [of a man]," William Cooke's 1804 treatise insisted, for "There is such a *reverse* in all the habits and modes of the two sexes . . . that it is next to an impossibility for the one to resemble the other so as totally to escape detection" (qtd. Straub 1992: 133).

One factor in this shift of attitudes around the end of the eighteenth century may have been the various accounts of "sapphist" relationships that began circulating publicly from about 1770. "[T]he new sapphist's role probably did begin to affect women's consciousness to some degree," Trumbach notes, although "the stigmatization [of gay women] was never as great as that experienced by male sodomites" (1993: 135). Wahrman notes that "essentialized maternity as an innate precondition of femininity" began to be emphasized in popular culture around this time, whereas women adopting more masculine attributes were increasingly derided as unnatural (2004: 15). Wahrman emphasizes, however, that the changing attitude toward cross-dressed women was just one factor in a general shift in the perceptual world order: just as the revolution in France swept away the *ancien régime* in 1789, so an *ancien régime* of gender gave way around this time to emerging, Enlightenment era conceptions of the self. Prior to the late eighteenth century, an individual could try on roles and be seen, to some degree, to *become* the role assumed; indeed, women cross-dress-

ing as men may have seen themselves, on some level, as both female and male. The new consensus, however, was that outward behavior sprang from an internal core of essential identity. Thus, where the old order had maintained broad distinctions between masculine and feminine but had permitted individuals to vary from that broad pattern, the new view replaced "gender play" with "gender panic" (Wahrman's terms) and began to insist that divergence from established gender patterns was unnatural to the point of being inconceivable. "Assume no masculine airs," Isabella Howard, Countess of Carlisle, counseled women in 1789, since "real robustness, and superior force, is denied you by nature; its semblance, denied you by the laws of decency" (qtd. Wahrman 2004: 79). Meanwhile, in the newly independent United States, men were being encouraged to disavow effeminate European manners and embrace their natural, rugged masculinity, a situation slyly satirized in Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787), whose central character, Manly, is just a little too convinced of his own authenticity.

It is not surprising, in light of changing attitudes, that female-to-male cross-dressing was less widely recorded, and certainly less celebrated, in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth. Although the phenomenon persisted, exposure of the "masquerade" was now more likely to be posthumous. On his death in 1865, for example, after forty years working all over the world as a doctor in the British Army, and having attained the rank of Inspector General of hospitals, James Barry was discovered to have a female body. As a woman he would not even have gained medical training. Many other female cross-dressers were discovered after their deaths during the American Civil War of 1861–65. Feelings on both sides of that conflict ran so high that it is not surprising many women sought to participate directly in the war effort. Mary Livermore, a nurse in the Union Army, estimated that there were as many as four hundred cross-dressers on her side alone (see Bullough and Bullough 1993: 158). In her book *Amazons and Military Maids* (1990), Julie Wheelwright excavates a rich international history of women posing as male soldiers extending well into the twentieth century.

Even as cross-dressing remained a life-and-death reality, though, the nineteenth-century stage reassigned the woman in male garb as a knowingly artificial novelty act. Although breeches roles persisted, those figure-hugging garments became increasingly distant from everyday masculine attire, as trousers extended off and down the leg. The woman in breeches



was thus a visibly theatrical convention rather than any reflection of off-stage reality, and she became associated—in particular—with androgynously youthful male roles rather than the performance of adult characters such as Harry Wildair. Senelick dates the first “principal boy” in British pantomime to 1815, noting that this tradition became increasingly entrenched “throughout the Victorian era owing to the fixation on the female legs and bosoms” (2000: 262). It persisted well into the twentieth century also, thanks in part to the popularity of J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. The fact that “the boy who never grew up” was conventionally played by a woman speaks volumes about the way women had become infantilized onstage. Boys and women were linked by their fresh-faced innocence while adult males stood aside on another plane of maturity and authority altogether. These attitudes were apparent even when women did appear in adult male roles during the nineteenth century. When Madame Vestris played Macheath in Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* in 1820, for example, one reviewer described her as “nothing more than a premature scapegrace, a sort of Little Pickle, mounted into the dignity of boots and cravat” (qtd. Senelick 266). This hardly sounds like “Mack the Knife,” but the era demanded that criminality be neutered and sentimentalized by being rendered boyishly feminine. The notorious highwayman Jack Sheppard also came to be played by cross-dressed women.

Later in the nineteenth century, some outstanding individuals, such as the American actress Charlotte Cushman and French actress Sarah Bernhardt, succeeded in lending some dignity to the cross-dressed female by achieving success in major Shakespearean roles. Even there, though, gender stereotypes connecting femininity with immaturity and indecisiveness dictated which roles were permissible for cross-casting; characters such as Romeo and Hamlet were considered rash and youthful enough to be inappropriate models for adult manhood and thus fair game for female performers. Bernhardt, though fifty-four when she first assayed the role, insisted that her Hamlet was a youth of twenty, and that since no male actor so young could have a real understanding of the character’s genius, the role was better suited to a mature woman who could convince as a youthful man (just as in the principal boy tradition). Decades later, in 1936, Eve Le Gallienne was using the same justification: “If one thinks of Hamlet as a man in his thirties, the idea of a woman’s attempting to play the part is of course ridiculous. But Hamlet’s whole psychology seemed to me that of a youth rather than a mature man” (qtd. Ferris 1993: 2).

Charlotte Cushman, performing in the mid-Victorian period, somewhat twisted this trend of women playing “flighty” young men because her stoutly unfeminine appearance in breeches did not lend itself to eroticization by the male gaze. “Singularly masculine in her energy and her decisive action,” one London reviewer of Cushman’s *Romeo* noted in 1846, “this lady might pass for a *youthful* actor with little chance of her sex being detected” (emphasis added). Another concurred that “what there was of the woman just served to indicate juvenility, and no more” (qtd. Merrill 1999: 116). By working within permissible conventions, Cushman became a star on both sides of the Atlantic, but, as Lisa Merrill has persuasively demonstrated in her study *When Romeo Was a Woman*, her ambiguous gender performances—both onstage and off—also made her the center of a circle of female admirers at a time when the possibility of lesbian attraction was barely even acknowledged culturally.

In subsequent decades, some similarly destabilizing manifestations of female-to-male cross-dressing began to appear in the “illegitimate” context of variety theater. Annie Hindle, for example, who relocated to the United States from her native Britain in 1867, developed a male impersonation act by adapting the approach of the male *lions comiques* performers then popular in England, acts that parodied certain types of middle- and upper-class masculinity for their largely working-class audience. The American Ella Wesner also began performing successfully as a male impersonator in 1870, probably after seeing Hindle’s act, and others later followed suit. Like their male-to-female “drag” counterparts, who began to appear at almost the same moment (the term *drag* probably referred to the drag of a long evening gown), the new breed of male impersonators were frankly theatrical creatures, strutting the stage solo and singing popular ditties to their audiences. Within this format, though, performers such as Hindle and Wesner could appear strikingly convincing as men. Unlike principal boys, with their corseted waists and bestockinged legs, these male impersonators dressed in contemporary male fashions, wore their hair short, and were sufficiently well built that observers felt they could have passed as male offstage. In Hindle’s act, according to a review in the *New York Clipper*, “her sex is so concealed that one is apt to imagine that it is a man who is singing.” The same journal said of Wesner that “she might easily walk Broadway in male attire without her sex being suspected” (qtd. Rodger 2002: 110). Their acts consisted largely of songs bragging about their female conquests and their superiority over other men, and these parodies of

masculine swagger were very popular with audiences. There appears to have been little hostile reaction to their cross-dressing, even though Hindle's masculine appearance extended to an authentically stubbled chin (a natural consequence of having shaved off facial hair). Their acts would surely have been more controversial had it been known that both Hindle and Wesner were romantically involved with other women. Wesner eloped to France at one point with Josie Mansfield, the former mistress of an army colonel, and Hindle posed as a man to marry her dresser, Annie Ryan, in 1886. The marriage, when exposed, ended Hindle's career, but not because of any outcry over lesbianism. Rather, her explanation that she was in fact a man—who had posed as a woman playing men—was generally believed in those limited parts of the press that took an interest in the offstage lives of variety performers.

Laurence Senelick suggests that the first generation of male impersonators may have been popular in America precisely because of the historical moment in which they first appeared. In the immediate aftermath of the gender-blurring Civil War, he notes, "the gold rush and western expansion prompted so great an influx of cross-dressers that advertisements in the mining regions had to specify 'No young women in disguise need apply'" (Ferris 1993: 89). Against this backdrop, and playing largely to working-class audiences that cared little for bourgeois standards of decency, the early male impersonators could get away with playing raffish lads and rakish drunks. Their successors, however, had to make their acts more "refined" in order to flourish in the changing climate, as variety theater managers began to expand their business by seeking a more respectable, family-oriented clientele. A new, younger generation of male impersonators such as Bessie Bonehill, Hetty King, and Vesta Tilley (all British based, but equally popular in America) gained acclaim by "grafting onto the Hindle/Wesner fast man the freshness of the principal boy" (Senelick 2000: 332). Tilley, who became *the* iconic male impersonator of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, made a point of never swearing, spitting, or even ad-libbing onstage. Her youthful male characters were more likely to aspire to romantic love than boast of sexual conquests, and the fact that she sang in a soprano voice removed any danger that she would conjure a genuine illusion of maleness, however winningly androgynous she could be.

The success and longevity of the Tilley model rested on its ability to survive the public opprobrium that began to be directed at cross-dressing of any sort in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The taxonomies of

sexual perversion that had begun to be outlined by the new “science” of psychiatry (Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* was first published in 1886) quickly became public knowledge as a result of high-profile events such as the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for “gross indecency.” Wilde’s flamboyantly stylish personality became associated in the public mind with the new concept of “homosexuality,” and—more broadly—any kind of diversion from the imposed norms of masculine and feminine behavior began to be read in terms of “sexual inversion.” Thus, as Gillian Rodger notes, “[C]omplaints about women in ‘pants’ roles [began] to appear in American newspapers in the mid-1890s, and these proliferated as the new century began” (2002: 121). To avoid charges of deviance, performers had to publicly advertise the unambivalent femininity (and thus heterosexuality) of their offstage identities. In 1904, for example, Vesta Tilley denounced “The ‘Mannish’ Woman” in an article of that title for the *Pittsburgh Gazette Home Journal*, which appeared just before she played that city. “[T]here is nothing so charming as the little home woman,” she wrote, “whose soft voice and gentle manner have done so much to make the world a better place” (qtd. Rodger 2002: 122). Meanwhile, just as had occurred a century earlier, cultural commentators felt the need to revise previous opinion by insisting that male impersonators had *never* appeared convincingly masculine. As one 1898 commentary had it, “[T]he most versatile actress in the world could never really play a man convincingly, and the fact that she cannot do it and wouldn’t if she could is the real reason why audiences like to see women in knee breeches and short jackets” (qtd. Rodger 2002: 121).

Although male impersonation remained a popular item on variety bills for the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, the decline of variety itself (particularly in the face of growing competition from cinema), coupled with ever-growing public awareness of the “scientific” connection between cross-dressing and homosexuality, meant that its days were numbered. A few established female stars, such as Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker, were able to dress in tuxedos and still appear glamorously feminine. These exceptions aside, though, female-to-male drag survived only in socially or racially marginalized contexts through the middle part of the twentieth century. Gladys Bentley, for example, was celebrated for her top hat and tails performances on the Chitlin’ Circuit of black vaudeville in the United States during the 1930s. With her deep, growling voice and raunchy lyrics, she was widely admired by fellow artists and bohemians,

but Bentley's multiply othered status as large, black, and openly lesbian prevented any mainstream acceptance of her act. By the McCarthyite era of the 1950s, she had recanted her past and married a man, claiming to have been "cured" of her deviance by taking female hormones.

An intriguing counterpart to Bentley's case is that of Stormé DeLarverié, another African American performer, who appeared as emcee of a traveling drag show, the Jewel Box Revue, between 1955 and 1969. The Jewel Box (whose history runs from the late 1930s to the early 1970s) featured a cast of twenty-five flamboyant male-to-female drag artists and DeLarverié as the sole female-to-male "turn." Yet her baritone voice and masculine appearance were so convincing that many observers apparently did not realize she was female and would assume that the "one girl" advertised in the cast was simply hiding in plain sight amid all the queens. The Jewel Box, with its frank celebration of cross-dressing in a deeply homophobic era and its multiracial cast (almost unheard of during the segregated American midcentury), remained an exotic curiosity throughout its existence without ever troubling the mainstream. DeLarverié is nonetheless a significant figure. In *Mother Camp*, her anthropological analysis of pre-Stonewall drag performers, Esther Newton states that, although "male impersonators ('drag butches') . . . are a recognized part of the profession, there are very few of them" (1972: 5). That DeLarverié is the only one of those few who has so far been accorded retrospective recognition is surely a testament to that rarity. Moreover, whereas Gladys Bentley had eventually submitted to pressure to become acceptably feminine, DeLarverié boldly took the opposite course by adopting a cross-dressed identity offstage as well as on shortly after she began performing with the revue (see Ferris 1993: 128). Perhaps it was the act of performing as male, onstage, that opened up possibilities for an alternative mode of gender expression in life.

## PERFORMING POSSIBILITIES

The end of DeLarverié's stage career at the close of the 1960s coincided with the beginnings of the "second-wave" feminist movement. An invisible baton, perhaps, was handed on. As artists and writers began to consider the implications of feminism for their work during the 1970s, the female-to-male cross-dresser was among those aspects of cultural "herstory" to be retrieved from the patriarchal scrapheap. "I had never seen male impersonators," playwright Eve Merriam commented about the conception for her

1976 musical revue *The Club*, “and I love role reversals. Why hadn’t I seen any women do this? Because they are not in positions of power and they *can’t* do it because they would offend the power structure” (Karr 1980: 27). Using a treasure trove of music hall songs from the period 1894–1905, and sequencing them with dialogue composed largely of Merriam’s carefully curated archive of chauvinist jokes—“his wife just turned forty, and he’d sure like to exchange her for a couple of twenties” (Merriam 1977: 8)—she created an entertainment evoking the heyday of the male impersonator, but with feminist bite. *The Club* is set in an exclusive gentleman’s club in 1903, with its piggishly self-satisfied clientele all played by women in tuxedos and pencil mustaches, a factor that of course colored the reception of the gag lines considerably. Despite being largely derided by New York’s male press critics when it opened off-Broadway at the Circle-in-the-Square in February 1977, the production won an extraordinary ten *Village Voice* Obie awards and proved so popular with audiences that it ran for two years and spawned a touring company. For Diane Torr, who arrived in New York in 1976, seeing the performance came as

an epiphany of sorts. I was inspired that these women had taken on these roles, and were performing with such toughness and bravado. The performance itself was experimental in its staging, taking place in different parts of the theatre, and it sparked real excitement in the audience. I left the theatre feeling elated. *The Club* added to my feeling of excitement at being in New York, where anything, including a play with a large cast of female cross-dressers, could happen.

Part of *The Club’s* appeal, particularly for the lesbian community, lay in this rare attraction of seeing handsomely masculine women dominate a professional stage, although the heterosexual Merriam confessed to the *Advocate* that she had “never really thought about” its potential erotic appeal (Karr 1980: 27). For her, the production was all about “sending up the male power structure,” and she took particular satisfaction from the way her cast of seven “enjoyed the power trip” (Henkel 1980: 13). As the *New York Times* reported, the long period of rehearsals and tryout performances for the show throughout 1976 had

amounted to extended consciousness-raising sessions because for most of the women, playing men required an emotional commitment beyond mere

acting. . . . There was the problem of learning to move like men, and the actresses worked long hours with the play's director and choreographer, Tommy Tune, on the accretion of almost subliminal gestures into a whole movement pattern. ("The Club" 1977: 48)

This training notwithstanding, the *Times* was also clear that "no attempt is made to disguise the fact that they are women. Seven androgynes have [been] assembled." *The Club* seems to have evoked the gentlemanly tradition of male impersonation embodied by Vesta Tilley rather than the more aggressively masculine approach of Annie Hindle or Ella Wesner. "Just as the jokes don't get vulgar or extreme, the male impersonations remain subtle and seductive," Alisa Solomon noted, adding that "there's no swaggering and flexing, no belching or bellowing" (Ferris 1993: 148). Yet, as the *Boston Phoenix* observed, "[H]earing paeans to male camaraderie crooned in lilting soprano tones is pretty jarring [to modern ears]. One is repeatedly lulled into near-acceptance of the cast as gents, then jolted back to reality by their sweet Adeline-ish singing" (Clay 1977: 13).

The reference to "reality" is telling. *The Club's* creators seem to have worked on the assumption that women could not (or should not) present a plausible image of maleness, and instead relied for the play's impact on the kind of gender-bending effect (as distinct from gender-crossing) described by the *Phoenix*. The impression created was one of androgyny rather than full-on masculinity, and this approach placed it very much in line with the mainstream of 1970s feminist thought. As Tracy Hargreaves has demonstrated in her book *Androgyny in Modern Literature*, the concept of androgyny was ubiquitous in gender discussions at that time because the idea of women appropriating traditionally "masculine" characteristics, and balancing them with existing strengths, seemed like a way out of the limiting confines of socially constructed femininity. As Carolyn Heilbrun put it in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, "[T]his ancient Greek word—from *andro* (male) and *gyn* (female)—defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate individuals from the confines of the appropriate" (1973: x). This notion of fusing gender characteristics is apparent in the comments of some of *The Club's* cast members—"I strongly believe that each of us encompasses all things," noted lead soprano Gloria Hodes, as "we are both male and female" ("The Club" 1977: 48)—and also within the comic dialogue itself.

ALGY: You know, there's something not quite masculine about that little Johnny.

FREDDIE: Well, maybe it's because half his ancestors were male and the other half female. (Merriam 1977: 16)

The potential problem with the androgynous ideal embodied by *The Club*, however, was that it did as much to reinforce gender binaries as to question them. As Kate Bornstein was to observe in *Gender Outlaw*.

Androgyny assumes that there's male stuff on one side of the spectrum, and female stuff on another side of that spectrum. And somewhere in the middle of this straight line, there's an ideal blend of "male" and "female." However, by saying there's a "middle," androgyny really keeps the opposites in place. . . . Androgyny could be seen as a trap of the bi-polar system. (1995: 115)

In the context of *The Club*, the problem could be rephrased as follows: these are women, not actually men, and there is no point in having them attempt to *convince* as men; it is fun to see them flirt with an androgynous middle ground, but there is no danger of them crossing over it. This approach reflected the accreted history of proscriptions that, as we have seen, date back to the late eighteenth century. Such assumptions also clearly underlie the female-to-male cross-dressing narratives that appeared in mainstream movies slightly later. In both *Victor/Victoria* (1982) and *Yentl* (1983), the leading women (Julie Andrews and Barbra Streisand, respectively) pass themselves off as men in order to survive and advance themselves, and their androgynous self-presentations become sufficiently familiar during the course of the films that there seems something slightly jarring about their (inevitable) resumption of feminine attire at the conclusion of the narratives. This gentle questioning of standardized femininity, however, poses no real threat to male masculinity because neither Andrews nor Streisand ever really looks male. The films invite a conventionalized suspension of disbelief on the part of spectators, and the fact that both narratives are set in past periods aids in the pretense that the people meeting these women cannot see through their disguises; modern people tend to assume that historical people were less perceptive than we are. In all this, the actuality of women's historically proven ability to pass as male is never seriously entertained.

The flip side of this argument, of course, is that for the feminist movement emerging during the 1970s the "serious" adoption of male roles was



not even on the agenda. The need to articulate and protest the specific cultural injustices faced by women required that a politicized commonality of interest be found *among* women *as* women, and in certain contexts this meant actively criticizing those who appeared too “male identified.” Butch lesbians were distrusted by many feminists for appearing to betray their sex by “mimicking” male behavior, a distrust that prompted, in turn, a defense of butch women on the grounds that, far from trying merely to pass themselves off as men, they were extending the role options available to women. “None of the butch women I was with, and this included a passing woman, ever presented themselves to me as men,” Joan Nestle emphasized of her experience of butch-femme relationships in the pre-Stonewall era (1987: 100). The 1980s saw the emergence of a theatricalized celebration of this butch-femme heritage, in the performances of Split Britches and other regulars at New York’s WOW Café (see chapter 2), but here too the assumption was that, as critic Alisa Solomon put it, “a lesbian in male clothing, after all, is not dressed as a man, but as a butch” (Ferris 1993: 151). It was not until the mid-1990s that this orthodoxy began seriously to be challenged by a constituency of women who “insist[ed] that their butchness is or was only a route to a desired status as a man” (Butler [1990] 1999: xii).

This “coming out” of the transgender movement, both within and beyond the lesbian community, coincided (not all that coincidentally) with the embrace of the drag king as part of queer subculture. Prior to the 1990s, however, lesbian-oriented male impersonation had existed only in fairly isolated instances. “The drag show scene I had written about in the 1960s,” notes Esther Newton, “was a world of gay men, in which the ten or so lesbian ‘drag kings’ competing against each other in a Chicago drag ball seemed almost an oddity among hundreds of drag queen contestants” (1996: 162). Even as late as 1994, Sarah Murray could plausibly assert that

drag has not developed into an autonomous theatrical genre within the lesbian community. Lesbians don’t dress up like Fred Astaire and dance around the stage to entertain each other. . . . We don’t dress up in suit and tie and talk like Gregory Peck. We don’t tie on chaps and swagger around saying “howdy pilgrim” invoking the aura of John Wayne in front of the appreciative gaze of a group of lesbians. . . . Why don’t women do drag like men do? (1994: 343–44)

Murray goes on to outline a series of very plausible answers to this self-posed question, including the obvious political one: "Why embrace that which oppresses you?" (353). If gay men's embrace of female drag can be read as an explicit rejection of masculine power status, and a kind of celebratory affirmation of their "feminized" marginalization, it makes less obvious sense—conversely—for women to mimic the sex *responsible* for their relative disempowerment.

What, then, prompted the subsequent embrace of theatrical artifice? Within only a couple of years of the publication of Murray's article, the image of the mustached or bearded drag king poking mischievous fun at male attitudes and privileges had become familiar in both the lesbian club context and the mainstream media. A new mood of relative confidence and empowerment led to an abandonment of what Murray calls the "lesbian-feminist asceticism" of the previous generation (355), in favor of a new spirit of fun and role-playing. Yet the rise of the drag king in the 1990s resulted not from some organic revival of hidden subcultural traditions—as some have assumed—but from the activities of an identifiable group of New York—and San Francisco—based performance artists, whose example caught on very quickly both nationally and internationally.

In New York, the primary instigators were Diane Torr and Johnny Science, who began running female-to-male transformation workshops in 1990 (although the individual journeys that led them to this point stretched back many years). Science, a makeup artist and musician—and female-to-male (FTM) transsexual—always maintained that he had coined the term *drag king* himself. Two years later, just as Diane was beginning to present full-length theatrical performances in drag, Science organized the city's first Drag King Ball (May 1992), which incorporated the first formally judged drag king contest (perhaps inspired by the African-American/Latino drag queen contests showcased in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*). Subsequently, the organization of drag king contests in New York was taken up by Tracy Blackmer (a.k.a. Buster Hymen), who was mentored directly by Diane and went on to mentor other leading drag kings, including Mildred "Dred" Gerestant. Maureen Fischer (a.k.a. Mo B. Dick), who began her influential Club Casanova drag king night in 1996, also acknowledges Buster Hymen as an early inspiration.

Foundational as the Torr and Science drag king workshops were in New York, it would be misleading to posit them as a singular point of origin for the movement. Related developments were taking place almost simultane-

ously in San Francisco. Shelly Mars's drag performances at the Baybrick Inn in the mid-1980s acted as a kind of harbinger of the Bay Area scene, which began to take off in the 1990s as a result of Leigh Crow's popularity in the role of "Elvis Herselvis." Crow began performing lip-synch versions of Elvis songs in lesbian and alternative music clubs from about 1989, and by 1991 she was singing live in role. (In the same year, she was parodically married off to drag queen Glamouretta Rampage—Justin Bond—in an event at the Klubstitute Bar.)<sup>5</sup> Because she was doing both "the King" and an inversion of the classic drag queen routine, Crow began calling herself a drag king, more or less simultaneously with Johnny Science's introduction of the term in New York. (There is no reason to suppose that either borrowed the term from the other.) Crow went on to promote the drag king concept internationally—Elvis Herselvis toured to Australia in 1993, for example—and in San Francisco was aided and abetted by other influential FTM artists in the Bay Area's emergent trans scene such as Stafford, Jordy Jones, and Annie (now Anderson) Toone. There is a whole other book to be written about these West Coast developments.

Still, it was not until May 1994, two years after New York's first Drag King Ball, that the first official San Francisco Drag King Contest took place at the Eagle bar hosted by Crow. And when, the following year, a major cover story for *SF Weekly* brought the emerging drag king scene to public attention, journalist Amy Linn made a point of noting that "many observers trace the modern, American usage of drag king to . . . Diane Torr and Johnny Grant [another Science alias], who together planted the garden of a blossoming cult happening" (1995: 12). The pair had yet to host a workshop or perform in the Bay Area, but between them they had already made several appearances on nationally televised talk shows. Journalists in England were also citing Diane as a catalytic figure in 1995. In a feature on London's new drag king night, Club Naive, for the *Independent*, Frances Williams noted that her workshop at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in November 1994 "was followed up by Britain's first drag king contest in March at the National Film Theatre [for the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival]" (1995: 4). By 1996 drag king fraternities were springing up all over North America and Europe, sometimes as a direct result of Diane's having visited cities—from Boston to Berlin—to perform and/or teach workshops.

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5. I am indebted to Anderson Toone's online "Drag King Timeline" for this and other information on the San Francisco scene (Toone 2002a).

These historical details will be fleshed out further in chapter 4. Suffice it to say here that, while Diane was not the only figure responsible for the emergence of drag king culture in the 1990s, she was undoubtedly one of the most influential. Certainly, she was the individual who insisted most adamantly on performing—and teaching others to perform—realistically plausible male characters who could pass on the street rather than simply remaining within the confines of club performance. This was an important intervention, but, as was the case with some of her historical precursors, Diane’s ability to blur the line between the theatrical and the everyday, the natural and the artificial, has proved to be a source of unease for some observers. Indeed, it appears to explain why, despite her key role in the emergence of drag king performance, her contribution has tended to be minimized in the major literature on the subject to date.

Annabelle Willox, for example, in her essay for *The Drag King Anthology*, has questioned whether the label should be applied to Diane’s work at all because she “performs a non-theatrical form of drag that is more akin to male impersonation than drag” (Troka, LeBesco, and Noble 2002: 278). The awkwardness of her phrasing, however, reveals the awkwardness of her distinction. Just how “theatrical” does drag need to be before it qualifies as drag? Willox seems to assume here that drag kings must necessarily present an overtly theatricalized masquerade of masculinity—a swaggering cowboy in chaps, perhaps, or a preening rock star—a direct counterpart to the drag queen’s masquerade of femininity. Yet, while drag queens are often wildly extravagant in their self-presentation, this is an appropriate reflection of the fact that the femininity they celebrate and parody is inherently ostentatious. As Joan Riviere put it back in 1929, “womanliness and ‘the masquerade’ . . . are the same thing” (qtd. Butler [1990] 1999: 72). Femininity is *defined* by a response to the viewer’s gaze in most cultural constructions. Since masculinity, by contrast, is usually constructed as that which is more seemingly “natural,” more understated, one might conclude that naturalistic understatement is the most “natural” mode for the drag king to adopt. (It should be noted that Diane herself is not greatly concerned with labels and indeed eventually renamed the drag king workshop the Man for a Day workshop specifically to minimize the danger of misinterpretation by those who might be seeking a training in more exaggerated role-playing.)

Judith Halberstam rightly foregrounds this issue of restraint and under-

statement in drag king performance in her chapter on the topic in *Female Masculinity*. Her concern, however, is the opposite of Willox's: rather than wanting more theatricality, she wants less. Elucidating female masculinity as an outward expression of inwardly felt gender identities, she attempts to read drag king performance as an extension of offstage butchness. Thus, in laying out a taxonomy of drag king "types," Halberstam clearly privileges what she calls "butch realness"—which is "relian[t] on notions of authenticity and the real"—over the mere "femme pretenders" whose "performances are far more performative [theatrical?] than the butch realness ones, but possibly less interesting" (1998: 250). Indeed, Halberstam seems uneasy with the very idea of "pretending" and describes as a "methodological problem" the fact that most of the New York drag kings she encountered "would not identify as butch" (244).

Halberstam partially rethinks her position in *The Drag King Book*, in which she confesses to "giv[ing] up on this quest . . . to find a butch brotherhood behind the Drag King world" (Volcano and Halberstam 1999: 1). Even so, she again displays a clear preference for those performers who are not so much "acting" as doing "what comes naturally" (36). Given her overriding concern to champion and critically legitimize a constituency of butch women that has often been marginalized even by feminists, Halberstam's bias is understandable. She falls, however, into precisely the trap outlined by Butler, of attempting to locate a politics in common identity, thus implicitly delegitimizing those she does not perceive as being "in" that group. As Donna Troka has pointedly noted, Halberstam disregards the very "fluidity of identity that many of her subjects [have] worked hard to achieve" (Troka, LeBesco, and Noble 2002: 4), and this is particularly the case with respect to Diane Torr. In both *Female Masculinity* and *The Drag King Book*, Halberstam devotes considerable effort to refuting any suggestion that a theater artist (a trader in pretense) might have been a catalytic figure in the development of the new subculture. "[Torr's] workshop, obviously, has little to do with drag kings or kinging," she writes,

and certainly we would not want to attribute the origins of modern drag king culture to a workshop that is primarily designed for heterosexual women and unproblematically associates masculinity with maleness. For masculine women who walk around being mistaken for men every day, the workshop has no allure. (1998: 252–53)

This passage, relying on assumption rather than research, is misleading in a number of respects. For one thing, while the workshop has always catered to women of all orientations, it was certainly not “primarily designed for heterosexual women” (indeed, its very earliest incarnations included Johnny Science giving talks on phalloplasty surgery, presumably with an eye to any potential transsexuals present). Halberstam is also wrong to claim so categorically that masculine women, in general, could have no interest in a workshop that she herself had never experienced. (Indeed, chapter 7 offers evidence that many butch women have found it useful for a variety of reasons.) Her comments serve to underline the extent to which she “would not want” drag king performance to be associated with affected artifice as opposed to authenticity. And yet drag king performance *is* theatrical, by definition, however understated the role-playing may be. “When you put on a costume you’re doing a character, no matter how you look at it,” observes pioneering drag king Shelly Mars (who wryly identifies herself as “butch couture”), “so who *are* you? What would your guy wear? How would he think? How would he move?” (2007).

A telling counterpoint to Halberstam’s position is provided by Tina Papoulias in her account—for the lesbian magazine *Div*a—of Diane’s first London drag king workshop in November 1994. On this occasion, the workshop’s location at the ICA, rather than in a queer-specific context, resulted in a wide range of participants that initially surprised Papoulias.

Being one of only 12 lucky girls to experience a transformation into the “man of our dreams” in Torr’s London workshop, I was expecting to land in a room filled with lesbians, with whom I could flirt. . . . I was stunned to discover that the majority of the women were straight-identified and had not come to the workshop to explore lesbian masculinities. My initial surprise and suspicion would soon be challenged, as I witnessed the ease with which most women proceeded to build their characters and settle into their suits, an ease which was made all the more extraordinary by the fact that they had never performed like this before. Within the space of an hour, we had all become absorbed by the spectacle of our own transformation, gleefully tightening each other’s breast bandages, pinning dick stuffing in our Y-fronts, and generally strutting around. With the application of make-up, things started becoming more unsettling for some. . . . Facial hair is the line that most of us, even those of us that pass, do not normally cross. With the

gradual trendification of the dildo, it is stubble that has now taken its place as the final frontier beyond which few women dare to tread. . . . As the transformation continued, further unsettlement was produced as straight-identified women found themselves turned on by each other's alter egos, out lesbians became closeted gay men, and a mother started teasing her be-stubbled daughter into whipping out her new penis for the camera. (1995: 40)

This passage is worth quoting at length because of the extent to which it emphasizes *both* the "ease" with which the participants found themselves slipping into male roles *and* the uneasy challenges that this transformation presented to their everyday assumptions about their own identities as they "got into character." Far from being easily distinguishable, the theatrical/artificial and the everyday/real exist in a fluid, mutually informative relationship with each other. We return here to Judith Butler's key point: everyday gender identities may themselves be the result of habituated role-playing rather than reflections of some unchanging internal essence. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body," she writes, "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" ([1990] 1999: 45). Alternative stylizations of the body may therefore open up alternative possibilities for lived experience.

## **TRANS ACTIONS**

Indeed, if the act of sticking on facial hair represented the crossing of a line for lesbian culture in the mid-1990s—as Papoulias suggests—this is not only because it epitomized an embrace of artifice of which some were wary ("Sincerity and authenticity were needed, in art as in politics," Sarah Murray notes of the 1970s feminist movement [1994: 355]). In signifying maleness, rather than (or as well as) female masculinity, drag king role-playing helped lead some toward a frank embrace of "male identification" in their everyday lives, a choice that would once have been taboo in the women's community. As Del LaGrace Volcano writes in *The Drag King Book*, "[F]or some of us, what started out as a performance or an experiment became the reality of choice. [When] I donned a Drag King persona it didn't feel like much of an act. I was astounded by how natural it felt to be a guy and be

free of the anxieties I had lived with for years around not passing as a ‘real woman’ (Volcano and Halberstam 1999: 21, 27).<sup>6</sup> The fact that drag king theatricality began to be embraced by the queer community in the mid-1990s is thus indicative of a significant cultural shift, one that relates, as has been noted, to the growing visibility of the transgender movement around this time. Indeed, the relevance of the Torr and Science workshop to emerging trans discourses was recognized through its inclusion in the major Minneapolis conference “Genders That Be” in 1996, where Diane appeared alongside trans artists and activists, including Kate Bornstein, Jordy Jones, Loren Cameron, and Steven Grandell.

Trans identities necessarily challenge notions of essence and authenticity and involve the adoption of new “roles” in ways that radically destabilize attempts to maintain borderlines between different identity groups. This much was apparent in the events surrounding what is sometimes described as the transgender movement’s “Stonewall moment.” In 1991, the organizers of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival chose to enforce a strict reading of their separatist-feminist ethos by expelling from the festival Nancy Jean Burkholder, a postoperative male-to-female transsexual, on the grounds that she was “actually” a man (even though she did not identify as one). Only “womyn born womyn” were to be admitted, the festival organizers insisted, a criterion that effectively excluded not only male-to-females but also, had they sought entry, their female-to-male brothers. Burkholder’s expulsion did not prompt an immediate reaction, but by 1994 the new transgender movement had coalesced sufficiently to organize a protest camp—Camp Trans—which was set up adjacent to the festival (“For Humyn born Humyns”). Thereafter, a consciously inclusive approach to the definition of transgender was pursued by many leading voices in the movement so as to avoid the divisive and damaging effects of exclusionary policies such as this one. “The identity can cover a variety of experiences,” writes Stephen Whittle in his preface to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, and “it can take up as little of your life as five minutes a week or as much as a life-long commitment to reconfiguring the body to match the inner self” (Stryker and Whittle 2006: xi). Whittle’s objective is not to erase or ignore the differences between experiences as radically distinct as those he describes, but to build as broad a church as possible.

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6. It should be stressed that Volcano, another key figure in the development and dissemination of drag king culture internationally, does not owe any particular debt to the Torr workshop but came to drag performance by his own route.



The “five minutes a week” reference could be taken to imply a staged drag act, lip-synching to a song in a cabaret environment perhaps. But is that, one might reasonably ask, enough to qualify as “really” transgendered? In her book *Gender Outlaw*, the transsexual performance artist Kate Bornstein implies that it is not and, indeed, that stage drag is just “a gimmick, a *shtick* . . . an appropriation” unless it is informed by the reality of a transgendered lifestyle offstage (1995: 92). Again, where is one to draw the line between authenticity and mere artifice? When is gender-crossing “just an act” and when is it in earnest? These questions are thrown into sharp relief by Whittle, who as the first man to work as editor of the British *Journal of Gender Studies* was compelled to ask in a 1998 editorial exactly *why* he had been invited to take up this role. The possibilities, he decided, included the following.

I am a woman really but deluded in thinking I am a man, therefore as a woman I can edit the journal . . . or I am a woman really and an acceptable performance of masculinity by a woman, because I acknowledge it as performance, by being out about my trans status . . . or I am a woman really and my oppression as a woman lies in my childhood experiences as a girl and my experience as a woman who lives as a transsexual man . . . or I am a woman really and it is just that my body morphology simply is no longer 100% female . . . or I am a man really but the acceptable face of manhood because of my childhood experiences—wherein others thought I was female and therefore oppressed me as such . . . or I am a man really but my position as male is undoubtedly contested . . . or I am a man really but my feminist credentials are pretty good. (Stryker and Whittle 2006: 200–201)

Whittle concludes by noting that, while he does not care which of these is the “real” reason for his appointment, “they all have some potential validity to me” (201). Since several of these possibilities seem mutually exclusive, however, Whittle is clearly placing the repeated word *really* in question. Why, indeed, do we insist on knowing what “the real” of someone’s gender identity is when such a thing may well be unknowable? Drag acts, similarly, can throw the status of gender reality into doubt insofar that they bring into focus the ways in which performance and theatricality are themselves constitutive of reality, as well as being representations of it.

Authenticity, perhaps, lies not so much in substance or essence as in *intention*, in the desire to explore experiential possibilities. Might we, indeed,

think in terms of theatrical artifice *becoming* authentic? Can we, to reverse Whittle's terms, reconfigure the inner self to match the body? We all know, for example, that wearing a different set of clothes can affect the way one holds and carries one's body, or can change one's mood or attitude. Sometimes when this happens we decide to wear those clothes more often to accomplish the same effect. Alternatively, we might try to find ways to maintain that altered sense of self even when wearing more familiar clothing. In broad terms, that is precisely what Diane hopes to achieve by helping women to experience, physically, the process of presenting themselves as men, and (ideally) being read by the world as men. Some participants have, indeed, gone on to seek permanent gender reassignment partly as a result of that experience (the "act" becoming "actuality"). But equally we might ask in what ways such an experience might alter a person's subsequent outlook, or physical demeanor, even when presenting as female.

The physical reality of gender, as R. W. Connell has argued, stems not so much from the possession of particular body parts as from the ways in which a body experiences its relationship with the world, the processes by which that body becomes acculturated to certain expectations and possibilities of expression. Thus, "Bodily difference becomes social reality through body-reflexive practices, in which the social relations of gender are experienced in the body . . . and are themselves constituted in bodily action (in sexuality, in sport, in labour, etc.). . . . Through body-reflexive practices, bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies" (1995: 64, 231). Although Connell is referring to lifelong experiences, his points apply equally well to relatively brief periods of time—as the Stanford prison experiment made chillingly clear. The performance research and drag king workshops conducted by Diane Torr aim at a more constructive form of temporary transgendering. The goal is for participants and spectators to experience, through performance, the *reality* of physical possibilities other than those we take to be "natural." How else might I move in the world? How else might the world respond to me? What unexpected pleasures might this experience give rise to? And how might power relations, in the process, be reconfigured?