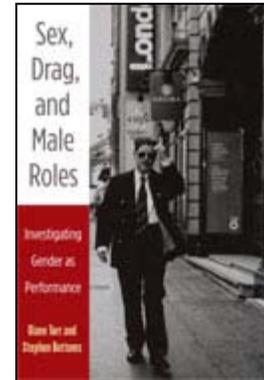


Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance
Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=236704>
The University of Michigan Press, 2010

Q&A with Diane Torr, co-author of *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*

Why would women want to perform as men? Why is gender crossing so compelling, whether it happens onstage or in everyday life? What can drag performance teach, and what aesthetic, political, and personal questions does it raise?

Performance artist Diane Torr has been experimenting with the performance of gender for thirty years—exploring everything from feminist go-go dancing to masculine power play. One of the key pioneers of "drag king" performance, Torr has been celebrated internationally for her gender transformation workshops, in which she has taught hundreds of ordinary women how to pass as men on city streets around the world. This cultural subterfuge appeals to participants for many different reasons: personal confidence-building, sexual frisson, gender subversion, trans-curious, or simply the appeal of disguise and role play.



Sex, Drag, and Male Roles documents the evolution of Torr's work by blending first-person memoir and commentary from Torr with critical reflections and contextualization from leading performance critic Stephen J. Bottoms. The book includes a consideration of the long cultural history of female-to-male cross-dressing and concludes with Torr's "Do-It-Yourself" guide to becoming a "Man for a Day."

Diane Torr developed her cross-disciplinary art in the downtown New York art scene from 1976 to 2002. Now living in Scotland, Torr has earned an international reputation for her performances and gender transformation workshops (featured on HBO, BBC, and *This American Life* on NPR, among others). Her work is the focus of a feature film, *Man for a Day*.

The University of Michigan Press: Diane, you are an internationally acclaimed performance artist best known for her performances of male roles, not merely dressing in male drag, but managing somehow to inhabit the male psyche. Your on-stage personas provide audiences new insights on what masculinity is. Introduce us to a few of your favorite on-stage characters, and tell us what you like best about them.

Diane Torr:

Jack Sprat is a middle-aged cockney mod, singer/songwriter whose claim to fame is knowing *The Who* when they were called *The High Numbers* at the beginning of their career in the early 60s in London. Jack Sprat recalls seeing The Who play at various gigs like *The Goldhawk* in Shelpherds Bush, *The Marquee* on Ward Street and he claims that the song *Happy Jack* by *The Who* was written for and about him. Jack expounds on mod life: working in *Toppers*, a famous mod shoe shop on Carnaby Street; describing his all-consuming obsessiveness with mod gear (clothes); having a girlfriend who was good at shop-lifting; the highs and lows of speed - the mod drug of choice; punch-ups with the rockers (motor-cycle gangs) on the beach at Brighton (south of England seaside resort); having a unity with other mod blokes; coming down from speed and beating up his girlfriend; his relationship with his mother. He also sings two songs that he wrote, *How much do you want to be rich?* and *She was a mutant he was an amputee*, and he plays blues harmonica.

What I like about Jack Sprat is that he is still raw, after all these years, and also unself-conscious about his

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behavior. This gives me license to snort, laugh, hack, point, play clichéd blues harp numbers, and dance wildly. Jack Sprat has an unbounded aggressive energy when he dances, and at the beginning of the performance when he enters the stage, dancing to *Can't Explain* by *The Who* he is entirely unfettered, which makes the audience "sit up straight". The name "Jack Sprat" also refers to a nursery rhyme, and Jack, like a lot of men, is still a boy and therefore has license to do as he pleases. I was a mod girl in the early 60s (we weren't mod-women - this was pre-feminist). All the material that's been written about the mods and mod culture since then has been written by men about men. The concept behind the Jack Sprat character was to tell a mod girl's perspective, but through the mouth of a mod man.

It gives me a chance in my own way to expose Jack Sprat to ridicule but at the same time make clear his vulnerability and limitations. The songs are unique and witty, and were created with a group of friends when we were in a punk art band in New York in 1979 called *The DC 10s*. We shared a large loft at the corner of Bowery and Grand Street. Singing these songs gives me (like Jack) a sense of nostalgia for a time that is no more, but which is dear to my heart.

Charles Beresford character is based on a gay friend who died of AIDS in 1992. My friend had been a real spark of life - full of sarcastic wit and joie de vivre. I was shocked when he died, and extremely distraught. I decided to become him - to take on his persona and become a living requiem to him. My brother, Donald, died of AIDS the same year. I organized an event called Brother for a Day on December 1st, International AIDS Day. Here is a description of this event:

I began presenting the Brother for a Day event on World AIDS Day 1997, at Club Mother, located in the Meat Packing District on the West side of Manhattan. Club Mother was an appropriate venue as it was the site of various lesbian, gay, trans, queer club nights (including the infamous Clit Club), and a place that thrived during the 90s under the "mother protection" of Impressario Empress, Chi-Chi Valenti.

The idea for the Brother for a Day event came from a combination of factors. I was painfully conscious of the many gay male friends and colleagues who had died of AIDS. It was a tragic time blighted by the untimely death of bold personalities like Charles Ludlam (founder and director of Ridiculous Theatre) and Keith Haring, among others. From 1990-96, I attended so many, too many, funerals – often dismal affairs that were about grief, sorrow and forgetting. I would meet friends at the funerals, and without saying a word, we knew what each other was thinking, "What a way to die." and "Who will be the next?" Yet, many of these men who had died of AIDS, had been bon vivants, life enthusiasts, creative souls, whose lives deserved to be remembered, and recalled in a spirit of joy and celebration. I clearly couldn't keep them alive, so I did the next best thing - I decided to keep their spirit alive by filling the vacuum that was created by their loss. I was compelled to do this when a wonderful friend, writer and columnist, Charles Berford, unexpectedly died. He simply did not recover from a bout of pneumonia. His immune system was shot. He was young (32); full of life and with a developed sense of sarcasm. I decided to become him for a day – to become a living requiem to him – to go to "his" café on Christopher Street, and take "his" morning espresso and croissant; and to stand, as he often did, in line at the Chase Manhattan Bank ATM on Sheridan Square; and to visit bookshops, clothes shops, card shops, and bars in the West Village and Chelsea, where he would hang out, and to try to interact with people, as he did, with his sarcastic, witty exchanges. It wasn't so easy to be him. But, in this one day, I saw the possibility for the idea to develop. Since 1989, I had taught drag king workshops, and pioneered the drag king culture throughout the USA and Europe, and there were many sisters whose brothers (blood or soul) had died of AIDS. I was the obvious person to initiate an opportunity for them to remember these men, in a spirit of celebration.

At the very first Brother for a Day event on December 1st 1997, Shelly Mars (best known for her male to female striptease in Monika Treut's *Virgin Machine*) performed as a close friend of hers who had been a designer and was also a manic depressive. In becoming him, Shelly alternated between high praise and low-down scumminess in discussing her (Shelly's) appearance. It was a characterization that had the audience alternately laughing full-heartedly and grimacing in horror. Then, Martha Wilson (founder and director of Franklin Furnace Archives)

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performed as Stephen Reichard who had died of AIDS. He was in part responsible for the establishment of the New Wave Programme, and a much loved and respected Director of the Performing Arts Program at Brooklyn Academy of Music. I performed as my brother, Donald, at the age of 13 impersonating Dusty Springfield.

In the years that followed, there were many memorable impersonations, such as a band member of Three Teens Kill Four performing as band member and visual artist, David Wojnarovitz, and the celebrated sexy, New York drag king, Dred, performing as Marvin Gaye. Yes, it's true that MG didn't die of AIDS, but Dred was celebrating the spirit of someone she thought of as a soul brother. From then on, the performance contributions to the Brother for a Day event became more varied. The next year, the event blasted off with a performance by New York's most sexually confrontational drag king troupe, The Back Door Boys, giving it up (with dildos erect) for the dead and the living, lip synching and humping to the Back Street Boys' "I Want It This Way". Another Brother for a Day event included a performance of sound poetry – sounds that celebrate life, sex and joy. Life is something to hang on to was the message. "Come one. Come all. But please wear a condom!" has become a kind of a motto.

The first Brother for a Day event in Glasgow was Dec 1, 2005, in the basement disco of the Brunswick Hotel. At each of the Brother for a Day events, I have performed as my brother, Donald, in remembrance and celebration of him - born 24th March 1947, died January 6, 1992.

Danny King is a middle-aged, middle-American, middle-management guy. He works in the men's wear department in a department store in Pittsburgh. He is married, has a wife and two children. He represents a stereotype of what it is to be a man. A lot of Danny's behaviours could be seen as anachronistic, but in fact are still contemporary as his "typical male" behaviour can be seen all over the world. For me, Danny represents an American male, or how a typical American male might be considered. I use this male character to conduct my Man for a Day workshops. I am immediately recognizable to the workshop participants, and in demonstrating Danny King, I show a range of physicalities - gestures, ways of walking, eating, sitting, looking, engaging, etc. that are connected to a stereotype. I do not want the participants of the workshop to copy me, but to go out in the street and find their own male characters. In representing the stereotype, I own that. What I like about Danny King is that he is transparent. I can demonstrate "maleness" as him and it is believable. I spent many hours studying "Dannys" in diners, sportsbars, pool halls, in the US senate, in TV newsrooms, and department stores among other locales. Danny is able to gain access to places that might be off-limits to women. Danny has an innate sense of privilege and entitlement, and through this character, I can demonstrate how this is done. I can call the bluff on "inherited male superiority".

Hamish McTavish is an aficionado of the Scottish poet, Robert Burns. He gives talks on the poet and on his life. As Hamish, I am able to surrender to an adoration of this poet and to recite his unexpurgated rhymes and lifestyle with gusto.

UMP: Today it's easy to think that the gender-bending performances that we see in the mainstream media are something new, but in fact cross-gender performance has a rather deep history. Can you talk about some of the performers or performances that preceded you?

DT: When I first came to New York, I saw a theatre-performance called *The Club* at Circle in the Square Theatre. In this performance, all of the characters were performed by woman, and it was exciting to see work like that done so well. It was inspiring. I have also been inspired by all the drag queens I have ever known, with whom I have shared a stage, like Ethyl Eichelberger, Joey Arias and Sherry Vine at the Pyramid Club, and Anthony Johnson's *Black Lips* troupe in the early 90s. However, my first live encounter with cross-dressed performance was when I saw the gay theatre company, *Hot Peaches*, in London in 1975. There was not a visible gay culture at that time and I was excited and impressed by the *Hot Peaches* performance, which included Peggy Shaw and Bette Bourne, both of whom later became friends. My research on the subject of cross-dressed performance has exposed me to the work of performers such as Vesta Tillley, Hetty King, and Josephine Baker. I have also discovered women who had

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the courage to impersonate men in order to inhabit men's roles such as Isabelle Eberhart, who was a journalist and equestrian who travelled across North Africa on horseback in the late 19th century in the guise of a man. Others such as Loretta Velasquez who was a confederate scout in the civil war, and Dr. James Miranda Barry graduated from Medical School in Edinburgh in 1901. Her/his parents decided that s/he should be brought up as male if he/she would have the chance to enter Medical School, which was not open to female students. The list goes on....

UMP: What are the key differences between male drag, where a man dresses and performs as a woman, and female drag, where a woman dresses and performs as a man? Are there similarities?

DT: Everyone interprets drag differently, but generalisations can be made because we live in a world where the man is still "one" and the woman is "other". When men perform as women it is considered fun and titillating, whereas when women perform as men, it is often considered as a defilement. The idea of mimicking men is not something that most men want to see. They don't find the idea of women impersonating men amusing. As a consequence, most performances of women doing male drag happen in lesbian bars. However, it takes talent and skill to perform drag well and I feel that all drag can be appreciated for the quality and aptitude that the performer brings to it. Unfortunately, many men feel threatened when they see a woman impersonating a man. They need to loosen up and enjoy the spectacle!

UMP: Diane, your Man-for-a-Day workshops, where women experiment with dressing and acting like men, have attracted a wide variety of participants. What do you think it is that people find so compelling about this subject? Can you talk about the reasons that women attend the workshops, and what they learn from the experience?

DT: Women attend the Man for a Day workshop for many reasons. Here is a description of the workshop: The Man for a Day Workshop is a unique experience. This is a workshop, which I first created in New York, with make-up artist, Johnny Science, and which I have been teaching since 1990, in a variety of venues throughout N. America, Europe and Asia. Since its inception, the workshop gathered much media attention, and brought my work into the public eye. The workshop also pioneered a drag king performance culture in theatres and clubs in several of the cities in which it was taught. Women have taken it for many reasons, according to their situation.

Maybe during a lifetime of observing men in your neighborhood, on the subway, in the office, in cars, in your home, etc., you have a curiosity about how men "get away" with certain behaviors that would be considered undesirable or socially unacceptable in women. You might want to experience the transformation from female to male as a way to intercept your so-called "normal" behavior as a woman, and discover new responses. Think about the process of buying a car..... as a woman, it is generally assumed that you know nothing about cars, and car dealers generally reflect that attitude. After a workshop, one particularly convincing participant actually went to a car dealership and used her male guise as a means to cut a deal that she thought would have been unthinkable as a woman. Other women have attended the workshop and then met with a lover (male or female) for a night of role-play thrills. Some participants are actresses and opera singers, who had "pants" roles and they wanted to make their characters more authentic. Occasionally, a woman has attended the workshop who wanted to explore a desire to become a man permanently, and then the workshop was a catalyst for making that decision.

For most participants - their reason to commit to being a man for a day was to have fun, to be outrageous. By exploring familiar situations, like going to a bar or restaurant and interacting with others in a new identity, there was a chance to play with ideas that are taken seriously on a daily basis, e.g. questions like "What are you? A Man or a Woman?" Of course, women have cross-dressed throughout history and used the guise to their advantage. An important distinction to the workshop is that the intention is not to "pass", but rather to question what is considered a given. In the course of constructing another identity, one instantly sees other possibilities of being.

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In becoming a man you learn how to “walk the walk” and “talk the talk” without having to wear a testosterone patch! This is a chance to escape for one day from the social construction of the identity of “woman” and to literally discover a new YOU!!

During the workshop, either Diane or a make-up artist will give each person an individual makeover and will provide facial hair, 5 o'clock shadow, etc. Each person is responsible for the male clothes they will need for their male identity. Please also bring: a wide elasticised bandage (6inches minimum) to bind breasts, and a fake penis - (condom stuffed with cotton wool, for example). We will learn how to take up space, walk, eat, drink, pick up objects, smile, etc. as men. We will interact with each other, in scene studies and in character development exercises, and create our new identities. Then we will make a visit to a public place such as café, restaurant, bar, strip club, pool hall, dance club, where we will test out our new identities.

The beginning of the following day is spent in a feedback session and then each participant learns to do their make-up by themselves. We continue to develop our characters and we have the opportunity to go out to a new location. We each take from the workshop what is useful to us, but we all leave with the shared experience (and the kick) of going beyond our “regular” selves and expanding our gender repertoire. The workshop culminates in a feedback session at the workshop studio space.

UMP: Your book interestingly combines history, original scripts, memoir, and commentary. Readers may be curious to know something about your co-author Stephen Bottoms. Tell us something about that collaboration and how it influenced the final shape of the book.

DT: I first met Stephen Bottoms when I came to Glasgow and was introduced by a friend. Steve was teaching at Glasgow University, and I was (and still am) a Visiting Lecturer at Glasgow School of Art. He had written a book called *Playing Underground* published by U of Michigan Press and had interviewed many New York directors from the 1960s/70s in the writing of that book. He was interested in my experience of performing in New York and we had much to exchange. He invited me to give a talk in his department (Theatre and Film Studies) at Glasgow University and also a Gender as Performance workshop. We developed a dialog and I felt very much at ease with him. Our collaboration grew out of a mutual respect, appreciation and understanding. I was already working on a book at the time, but not having much success in finding a publisher. I knew through my friend, Annie Sprinkle, about the series that U of Michigan Press does where the work of a performance artist is contextualised by an academic/scholar. I felt confident that in working with Steve, I, and my work, could be well-represented. I introduced him to some of the writers and theorists who had influenced me like Deleuze and Guattari, and Michel Foucault as well as American academics, Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber. Steve was already familiar with the work of some of those writers, but in researching the book, we both discovered fresh insights and nuances of meaning in their writing. The opportunity and time to bounce around ideas on a project with someone with whom you have an intense dialog is rare, and I enjoyed our many discussions and exchanges. However, Steve asked questions that I had never thought of, and this enhanced the development of the book. He has a different curiosity and his questions were insightful. In figuring out a response to his enquiry, this also enhanced my understanding of what I was doing, as an artist. I know that the question of our sexuality will be of interest to the readership so I will answer it now. Steve is heterosexual and I recently came out of a long-term relationship with a woman. I was also married to a man for many years. I have been bisexual throughout my adult life. However, I don't believe that sexual orientation is particularly relevant to the discussion of gender. I am aware that the predominant opinion of women who cross-dress as men is that they are lesbians, but whether this is the case or not, I don't think it is important in the discussion of gender.

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