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Gender Fabulous

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Some of my best friends were transsexuals.

Actually, only one. Back in the seventies, Liz Eden, whose life was redacted in *Dog Day Afternoon*, befriended me.

I still remember how Liz shared late one night, on a Number 6 subway platform, that her operation was so successful, she was capable of fooling Italian truck drivers (I.T.D.s). Having an I.T.D. stand by the quality of your vagina was sort of like getting the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval back then.

"Do you want to see it?" she proffered, lifting up her skirt far from gingerly.

I declined, unnerved by the questionable legality of such an act on public transit.

Since then, living in the Big Apple, I could not help but be exposed to a flowing genderness amongst the populace. There was the Charles triumvirate: Charles Ludlam in *Camille*, Charles Busch in *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, and Charles Pierce doing his standup as both Bette Davis and Jeanette MacDonald. Unforgettable also were the omnipresent Rollerena, reportedly a Wall Street broker turned drag skater at night, and, of course, the Warhol legends: Candy Darling, Holly Woodlawn, and Jackie Curtis.

But women in male drag took awhile to catch on in popularity and visibility, as did the knowledge that many ladies were going under the knife to transform themselves into "male" personas.

Phalloplasty, according to the Clinic Sanssouci, "is the most demanding and difficult operation in the field of transsexuality." Consequently, *The Encyclopedia of Surgery* states, "gender reassignment procedures [both male and female] conducted in the United States each year are estimated at between 100 and 500. The number worldwide is estimated to be two to five times larger."

One of the best documentaries to broach this topic is Rosa von Praunheim's *Transsexual Menace* (1996), which vividly showcases the details of the operations and the personalities of those undergoing them, revealing the abundant pains and joys of the aftermath.

This week at the [NewFest](#), director/producer/writer/editor Jules Rosskam tackles the topic again with [Against a Trans Narrative](#), a 61-minute personal documentary billed as an investigation of "dominant constructions of trans-masculine identity, gender, and the nature of community."

Employing roundtable discussions, confessional on-camera monologues, acted-out skits, rehearsals of the acted-out skits, and rather fine rap poetry, the film can be applauded as an important tool for classroom use, but as a finished product for mass appreciation, *Against* is too haphazard, too unstructured, too insular. It's a slightly amateurish paean to academic solipsism broken up by numerous episodes of power.

In one, an interviewee, a tall, thin androgynous figure, recalls a confrontation he/she had on a beach with two young men: "One called me a faggot and one called me a dyke. They were confused, and they spit on me."

A woman who's on testosterone keeps a video diary: "I smell different. That's strange."

Another, who passes visually for a man, notes with astonishment that, when out walking one night, a woman saw "him" as "he" approached, and she crossed the street out of fear, possibly a fear of rape.

Rosskam here is trying to discover what a transsexual's identity is: How much of a man does one become? And how much of a woman does one leave behind? He writes in his production notes, "The goal of the film is not to present a cohesive image of trans-masculinity because such a task is impossible. The goal is to instigate conversations amongst feminists, queers, transfolks, and anyone else invested in radically shifting the ways in which we construct personal and historical narratives."

Clearly, Rosskam is in control of the content. Now, if he can bring that same finesse to the film medium and delegate the editing to a third party, the power of his admirable intentions might come through with more force. - *Brandon Judell*

Mr. Judell is currently starring in Rosa von Praunheim's New York Memories, which is still in production. In the fall, he'll be teaching "The Arts in New York City" at City College. He has written on film for The Village Voice, indieWire, Detour, The Advocate, and dozens of other publications.


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