THE BROOKLYN RAIL
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RNC & Beyond

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Tribute to Leon Golub

-Diane Torr, King of Drag

Meet the Elephants

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

This September, New Georges theater company will produce Manhattan, a fastidiously detailed challenge to gender assumptions and expectations. The play, directed by Renee Shurkin, is set to explore drag's cultural and aesthetic dimensions. Among the offerings is a drag king workshop. A drag king workshop? I was immediately intrigued, and wouldn't you be? Apparently you're interested in being your own peer. At the workshop's end, you must go as a man into the outside world where you, presumably foolish people, go. I googled instructor Diane Torr and found several thousand hits. She's been doing this for years (performing in drag since 1962 in New York), and I noticed that an interview with novelist we would be old hat for her. So The Brooklyn Rail wanted Rebecca Patterson, Artistic Director of the Queen's Company, which produces classical plays with exclusively all-female casts, to converse with Diane while I commandeered.

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

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

Rebecca Patterson: I got started looking at transgressive performance, not necessarily drag performance, although I'm a huge admirer of it. Drag obviously is performing gender and accouterments, and I was more interested in the way that星座天星期 tells about, which is removing the filter of gender from performance, especially classical performances. The great classical roles didn't have the male and the female. I wanted to appropriate traditionally made roles for female performers, to show that the entire range of human experience is appropriate for a female performer. I believe that the universal is held within the female body.

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

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

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

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

Patterson: I've found that in the actors we work with, it's in the movement where the work becomes revolutionary. In terms of the process, it's the way that they get dressed to gain that. It's the way that the costumer is going to worry about that. But it's in the physical stuff, in finding out the feminine limitations on their bodies, that's where they find breakthroughs in terms of their performances.

Torr: In the workshop, people physically have to be in character so they can investigate themselves. What is the density of that? Are we the picture of beer mugs is being lifted? How are the muscles used in the shoulder? The instruction is about giving acute observation. How are they moving? How are they morphing? How are they casting? How are they following somebody around, seeing how they pay for things, how they take money out of their wallet, how they pick up things in a store? Is the way that people are kind of dude-y and they think, well, I'm already halfway there, but they discover that a lot about themselves is very "feminine," and that is a revelation. The whole idea of it is to be a feminine woman has to do with certain codes of practice, like smiling a lot or nodding or agreeing with people, being more accommodate and accommodating. So people discover a lot about themselves and they hopefully are able to see that as being to find other codes of behavior and being which go beyond their alloted roles.

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

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

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

Torr: I do think it's easier for a woman to perform masculinity than the other way around. A lot of the performance of the mask is damping down your expression. Performing femininity, if you want to call that, involves a massive expression, that is very difficult for men to approximate, it's much 'harder. Basically, I think for women the fact is that their lives are spent observing men. It's out of a need to project ourselves on, which is not preparing to fight, exactly, we just want to know what, going on. I grew up with two older brothers and I was observing all the time, because I didn't want to go up on one for one thing, but also because I wanted to learn how they operated because I imagined that, so they have to have privileges that I sure as hell don't have, and it paved me off to that end.

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

Torr: People make the assumption that the drag king workshop is for lesbians, but the whole idea of taking on the male identity has nothing to do with sexuality. There have been women who have wanted to do my workshop who wanted to travel alone in countries like Spain and Italy, and felt that by adopting a male role they wouldn't get bashed. Some of the women have married and are living a normal life, so they decide to go to the drag thing and becoming a man is a holiday, a way to break from all that ghastly feminine stuff they have to do all the time. Of course, not totally ghastly, but it gets tedious. I worked with a woman of seventeen-five in Italy, and she worked with a girl of eleven who came to a workshop with her mother in Brooklyn who wanted to be a big-bop boy.

RAIL: To perform that role or to live it?

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

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

Torr: Yes, the phrase "drag king" has changed. When I first started, it did mean taking on the male role and becoming that person. But we're not the arts but really been adopted almost exclusively by the lesbian community and all the performances referring to drag kings mean that, in fact, performances.

Patterson: It's a performance genre.

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

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

Torr: I'm actually working on a book that includes a lot of that material and about how to do it on your own, Nancy Frazier's My Street Gals is an older feminist book, but it's full of women's sexual fantasies, and my god, they are so involved and developed with all sorts of curlicues and deviances, quite fascinating to read. I think that I'm doing is really fascinating women's fantasies, and I can tell you that sometimes that goes against me. I remember one workshop in Germany and this woman came and she said, "Where are the clothes?" and I said, 'you're supposed to bring them,' and she said, "Don't you have any with you?" I thought I could be a modeller or an eighteenth-century English gentleman on a highwayman? And actually, women in Germany, when they've come to workshops against, died five years previously, and the found that by taking this workshop and putting on 's clothes and becoming for that workshop they could express, you know, and let go of the clothes and clear out the house.

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

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

Patterson: Absolutely. It's very empowering.

Torr: I look forward to seeing it.

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

Torr: If ever you need a middle-aged man

Patterson: We always do.

Diane Torr's "Man for a Day" workshop is September 18-19. Call 646-338-3007 or email history@queereg.org to sign up. For more info about Manon or Diane Torr see www.nycgw.org or www.dianetorr.com. The Queen's Company produces an all-female Edward II by Christopher Marlowe October 2-9 in Manhattan. For info: www.queensorp.com.

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