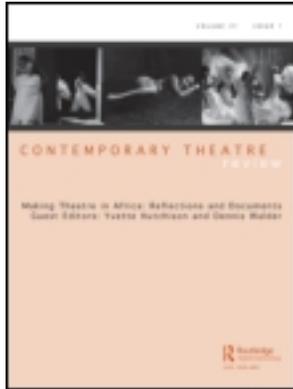


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Contemporary Theatre Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gctr20>

### Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance

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Available online: 14 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Caridad Svich (2012): Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance, Contemporary Theatre Review, 22:1, 170-171

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2012.651919>

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Stiles aims to edit an accessible volume of the correspondence that forms a significant part of the archive Schneemann recently sold to the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. That archive is vast: even this book's 500 pages reproduce only a small selection of the letters filed away there. The letters were written between the early 1950s – when Schneemann was training as a painter – and 1999 when the artist's performance work was beginning to achieve more serious recognition within both academic writing and the museum. Stiles' introduction suggests that the book is meant to establish Schneemann's work in a historical milieu, drawing attention to the artists who inspired her, the artists with whom she collaborated, and those who disseminated her work. As the title suggests, there is an attempt to reconstruct Schneemann's 'circle' from the letters presented here. The volume only partly succeeds in this aim.

There are several veins of correspondence that Stiles chooses to follow where a rich dialogue can be found – the letters with Stan Brakhage for example. Yet these are always with people who lived somewhere physically remote from Schneemann's home. The day-to-day process of making work in a supportive creative environment suggested by the term 'circle' is rarely glimpsed here. Despite letters between Schneemann and the choreographer Yvonne Rainer, we are no closer to seeing *Meat Joy* as part of the performances at Judson Dance Theatre with which it was initially staged in New York. Despite correspondence surrounding Charlotte Moorman's New York Avant-Garde Festival, the status of women within the Fluxus movement is hardly illuminated. As Gavin Butt has suggested in *Between You and Me*, his book examining art and gossip in the 1960s, there is as much lost to us about the affective ties between individuals in that milieu as we will ever find in their letters.

A fascinating aspect of the book is the exploration of what it meant to be a creative woman before the emergence of second-wave feminism in the USA. The letters recounting Schneemann's illegal abortions are harrowing testimony to her fierce drive for sexual and social independence from the earliest years of her career. Schneemann's feminism developed in the late 1950s from reading Simone de Beauvoir – it is fascinating to see this thinking used in letters that analyse the domestic arrangements of male artists within her circle and also used to build a life with her husband, the composer James Tenney.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is the way in which it shows, as no previous account of the work has, how Schneemann struggled to build a professional career out of her practice. At the beginning of Schneemann's

working life there were no precedents to follow, and many of the debates about how an artistic career in performance practice might work practically are negotiated through this book: the problem of mediation is mapped out as images of Schneemann's *Meat Joy* appear in tabloid newspapers, the subsequent notoriety a mixed blessing in the years that followed; numerous letters are sent to the authors of survey volumes and articles offering support in order to insert her work into the historical archive; she gathers photographic and written material for the book that would become *More than Meat Joy*, managing her own image in the design of the pages; she negotiates the price of significant works and attempts to place them in significant collections. All of this takes place without the support of the gallerists who made the careers of many of her contemporaries. It is a shame that there is little pertaining to the re-performance of *Interior Scroll* in 1993 and that the book ends before her 2002 restaging of *Meat Joy* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, both of which developed questions of re-performance which are at the heart of performance studies now.

This book tells a significant story, allowing other voices to intervene in a narrative that until now has been mostly crafted by Schneemann herself. The gaps in the narrative beg for someone to use these letters in the archive in conjunction with her notebooks, slides and clippings – alongside the artworks themselves – in order to give this significant pioneer the full account that her work deserves.

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***Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance* by Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010, xiii + 291 pp, ISBN 9780472051021 (paperback)

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While drag queens have long been the subject of essays, articles, plays, novels, and films, drag kings have been slightly more marginalised as 'gender outlaws', to quote Kate Bornstein, in US and UK scholarship. Performance artist Diane Torr and scholar Stephen Bottoms's provocative text, therefore, is a welcome contribution to the field of gender studies and performance. Divided into three sections, the book is one-third memoir about Torr's

thirty years as a drag king; one-third meditation on the performance of gender – particularly in relation to the queer girl erotic movement of the mid-1990s and its different manifestations of appropriated, parodied, and intensely sexualised performative expressions in the United States; and one-third collection of four of Torr's performance texts and a cheeky do-it-yourself guide to being a 'man for a day'. Written in a clear, humorous, and intelligent dual voice, Torr and Bottoms's collaboration is a moving document.

The memoir section follows Torr's trajectory from a childhood on the outskirts of Aberdeen, Scotland in the 1950s, where concepts of 'femininity' threatened how Torr perceived access into a male 'world', to forming an all-girl art-punk band DISBAND in New York City in the 1970s while making a living as a go-go dancer called 'Tornado', to discovering the work of Andrea Dworkin and Angela Carter (in particular the latter's book *The Sadecian Woman* [1979]) and realising how the free play of sexuality and erotic sensibilities could generate new levels of performative exploration as the WOW Café flowered in New York City. Torr's reflections do not intend to be a comprehensive survey of a particular era of drag king performance and street art actions, but offer rather a personal overview of passages of coming of age and an exploration of her politicisation as a citizen-artist at a time of serendipitous convergence: a time when other queer artists and drag performers were investigating prescribed heterosexual and homosexual, masculine and feminine roles post the Stonewall riots, pre- and post-AIDS in New York City, and in the context of a rise of LGBT communities as visible political voices.

Bottoms's keen scholarly eye and witty academic voice moves seamlessly into the subsequent chapter entitled 'Applications', which positions Torr's work as artist and mentor/educator (through drag king workshops) alongside the performance work of US West and East Coast drag kings Shelley Mars, Chris Teen, Johnny Science, Tracy Blackmer (aka Buster Hymen) and Leslie Lowe; the evolution of drag king contests; the predominance of mainstream TV talk shows such as Phil Donahue, Geraldo Rivera, and Sally Jesse Raphael that featured interviews with cross-dressers and transsexuals; the emergence of dyke rock-and-roll bars in New York City and San Francisco; and the proliferation of self-initiated drag king troupes across North America.

Bottoms's breezy survey, which leans theoretically on Judith Halberstam's 1998 study *Female Masculinity*, covers first- and second-generation drag kings and the cross-generational influences manifested in their performances in the club and contest world. The next sections of the chapter

move into discussions of Torr's Man for a Day workshops, her public performative actions as a member of the Guerrilla Girls collective of feminist art activists, and her travels to countries outside of the transatlantic queer English-dominant matrix, and concludes with a hopeful call to action for the future of transgender rights and the legacy that the enabling and empowering 'early days' of drag king feminist queer performance left behind.

*Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* is a lively book aimed at both a general performance readership and a scholarly audience. It is most successful as a text that explores applicable practice rather than theory, and serves primarily as a reflective and illuminating memory piece for Diane Torr's life's work in performance and in gender transformation workshops with ordinary women. For a scholar looking to this book for an extensive theoretical exegesis on identity construction and gender subversion, this volume will perhaps be slightly disappointing, for Torr and Bottoms's aim is more in the realm of the biographical. To that end, in some ways, the book feels incomplete, or better put: it left this reader aching for more about Torr's formative years, adolescence and young adulthood, as constructions and reconstructions of gender, and more about the choices of role-play that emerged in Torr's consciousness as choices that could be embodied. However, as a survey of Torr's early career as artist and activist at a vital time and turning point in LGBT politics and performance in the USA, this is an invaluable document and one that hopefully will find wide readership.

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***Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* by Aleks Sierz**

London: Methuen, 2011, 278 pp, ISBN 9781408112380 (paperback)

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Aleks Sierz develops the study and discussion of contemporary British dramatists that he began in 2000 with his famous examination of 'In-Yer-Face' dramatists by focusing here on the next generation: playwrights writing new plays in the twenty-first century. He frames his analysis within a wider consideration of how new plays reflect and discuss images of the nation. A key consideration for Sierz is what role theatre may play in directing discussion about national identity; he argues 'that theatre is part of a widespread conversation about