

# UNASSUMING GENDER

**Jill Dolan**

BOOKS REVIEWED: Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010; Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Alternative identity performances have always characterized subcultures. Dick Hebdige documented the punks and the mods of the UK in the late 1970s in his landmark book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. In the thirty-odd years since he launched his investigation, resistant subcultural styles have, just as he predicted, been co-opted by capitalism, their often politically progressive or at least oppositional meanings all but wiped out by its voracious appetite for appropriating the new. I thought a lot about subcultures and style reading two new books on gender performance in everyday life and in theatre: Kate Davy's *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre* and Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms's collaboratively written *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, both published by the University of Michigan Press in 2010. (Full disclosure: Davy's book is part of a series I co-edit with David Román at

Michigan called "Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Drama/Theatre/Performance," which showcases scholarship on queer performance broadly construed. Although I have no editorial relationship to the Torr/Bottoms book, I do have a close connection to the press, given the Triangulations series and Michigan's support of my own scholarship.)

But my discussion here isn't meant as a "review," *per se*, so much as it is a meditation on the resonance of these books in a contemporary moment when gender performance has become so much more visible in American culture. In the early 1980s, the women at WOW were creating performance under the rubric of an *outré* feminism at odds with its predominating party line. Torr was performing in male drag and beginning to teach other women how to do the same. Using performance in such politically edgy gendered ways was practically revolutionary then and often caused an uproar among women spectators whose tastes

were more catholic. Women performing as men; the blatant erotics of same-sex desire; the parody of male power and the popular culture venues in which it was enshrined; an openness to experimenting with sex roles and sexuality, all in framed performances that frequently bled into the performance of everyday life—all these choices offered exciting alternatives to a more serious and staid feminist culture.

These days, what scholar Judith Halberstam described in the late 1990s as “female masculinity” is more visible in mainstream American culture. The so-called pregnant man, Thomas Beatie, was profiled in *People Magazine*, among many other popular publications, when he and his partner decided to have a child that he carried. Although Beatie is a “transman”—a female-to-male transgendered person who lives as a man—he hadn’t had surgery to remove his female reproductive organs, and was able to carry the baby to term. Chaz Bono, the daughter of Cher and Sonny Bono, who grew up on national television as a tow-headed little girl named Chastity, was also featured in *People* when he publicly declared his intention to live as a man. Although the popular press’s attention to Beatie and Bono is nothing if not prurient, these men’s visibility and their very presence in the widely circulated magazine mark a sea-change in American attitudes toward gender.

*Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers* and *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* provide crucial historical context to remind readers that a short thirty years ago, attitudes toward gender fluidity were much less forgiving. Years before Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* (1990), her landmark theoretical study of “gender performativ-

ity,” those Davy calls the “WOW girls” had already experimented personally, politically, and in performance with the notion of gender as what Butler called a surface enactment of culture style. WOW performances already parodied socially inculcated binary gender roles dictated to be strictly (and innately) masculine and feminine, congruent with biological sex seen only as male or female.

The WOW Café still makes its home on E. 4th Street in Manhattan’s East Village, where it shares a block with La MaMa and New York Theatre Workshop. It began as an outgrowth of two international women’s performance festivals that lesbian performers Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, along with Pamela Camhe and Jordy Mark, organized in 1980 and 1981. Without a penny of grant money or institutional support, the four artists spread the word and hosted women performers from around the world, many of whom they had met on their own European performance tours with the male drag group Hot Peaches and the multi-ethnic feminist company Spiderwoman Theatre. Davy documents how the Women’s One World (WOW) festivals created an energizing atmosphere of playful abandon in which all bets were off about how women might perform their identities and their relationships: “The festivals embraced features antithetical to the preponderant feminist sensibility coming out of the 1970s—cross-dressed and sexually explicit performances, festival-goers who showed up dressed to kill (nary a Birkenstock sandal or flannel shirt among them), and the erotically charged atmosphere that permeated nearly every dimension of the festivals.”

Among those creating a stir was Scotland-born performer Diane Torr who, as an illegal alien in the States, worked as a go-go dancer in men's clubs in New Jersey to pay her rent. Torr describes the freedom she found recreating herself as "Tornado," the name she adopted for her dancer persona. "At the same time," she admits, "I was having a crisis of conscience. I was, of course, well aware of the feminist arguments about women being treated as sex objects, and the sex worker's role in the perpetuation of that stereotype." To educate herself to the controversy, Torr read Andrea Dworkin's screed *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) during her breaks: "I'd dance for half an hour, then go into the toilet and read some more of Dworkin's book for half an hour, then go back out and dance. I guess I was trying to test the theory against the practice." In Torr's estimation, Dworkin's argument that "pornography was a form of sexual violation comparable to rape . . . seemed to render people like me as helpless victims . . . so wasn't *she* violating us, too?"

Invited to perform at the 1981 WOW Festival, Torr recruited two colleagues from the New Jersey strip club to create and perform *WOW-a-Go-Go*, which proved one of the most popular and contentious acts at the event. Given the predominating feminist disapproval of sex work at the time, Torr and her fellow performers' physical daring, combined with the personal narratives they shared in their act, offered a view of women and sexuality much at odds with the norm. Torr and her friends used their performance to interrogate the erotic, to push at the boundaries of feminist and conventional understandings. "My feeling was that, in order to get beyond the stereotype, you have to confront

what that is, if you're not to run the risk of simply recycling it."

Such a willingness to confront gender and sexuality assumptions characterized most of the performances at the WOW festivals and later those created at the ongoing WOW Café. Gender stereotypes also became the central contention in Torr's work. As Bottoms notes in his historical and critical exegesis, which runs helpfully interspersed among Torr's more autobiographical memories in *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles*, "The WOW aesthetic came to be marked by a playful use of a spectrum of masculine and feminine attitudes that were available for women to manipulate as they chose, while remaining proudly and essentially female." Torr's work, however, moved toward a more rigorous investigation of the performance of masculinity in which vestiges of the female were fully erased. After her initial success with *WOW-a-Go-Go* and *XXX-rated Xmas Party* (1981), one of the first raucous, themed events WOW staged to raise the rent for its new space, Torr detached herself from the café and its denizens. "Looking back," she says, "I must admit that I sometimes felt rather awkward at WOW, as if I wasn't a fully subscribed member. Although I did have sexual relationships with women, I was also involved with men, and it seemed to me that WOW was more accepting of lesbians than bisexual women."

Davy's book in fact assumes that lesbian sexuality was the overarching value of WOW's work for performers and spectators alike. In her title, *Lady Dicks* refers to Holly Hughes's second full-length play, *The Lady Dick*, a satire of film noir's gender conventions. In Hughes's play, the gumshoe heroine was called Garnet

McClit, Lady Dick, and Hughes herself played a manic, out-of-control character named Lethal Weapon. *Lesbian Brothers* in the title nods at the group the Five Lesbian Brothers—Lisa Kron, Babs Davy (Kate’s sister), Dominique Dibbell, Moe Angelos, and Peggy Healy—which formed out of their work together at WOW. Both “lady dick” and “lesbian brothers” signal the border-, boundary-, and binary-crossings conducted at WOW, where terms once held as obviously distinct suddenly rubbed up against each other, changing their meanings in profound and far-reaching ways.

Davy traces the history that created the conditions in which a place like WOW could flourish in the 1980s. She documents the thriving East Village performance scene that sprang up simultaneously, describing genre-bending performances at Club 57 on St. Mark’s Place, at Club Chandalier [sic] on Avenue A, at Limbo Lounge on 1st Avenue, and at 8BC, on 8th between Avenues B and C in Alphabet City. Davy captures the energy of the club scene where, not unlike a progressive dinner, spectators could move from one space to the next, seeing people who had performed earlier in the evening at WOW now in the audience at Club Chandalier or vice versa. That vital subcultural arts scene hasn’t been well documented; Davy mostly relies on a single issue of *TDR: The Drama Review* that Michael Kirby edited in 1984 to describe the proliferation of clubs. In the issue, Kirby assigned a group of writers (including me) to see and document whatever performance was happening on the East Village scene on the same night (November 30th). That *TDR* volume contains the little archival evidence that remains of the club performances that inspired many

downtown artists’ careers (including Lisa Kron, Reno, John Jesurun, and more).

The energy of those historic women’s theatre festivals and the fertile atmosphere of the East Village clubs prompted the creation of a space where the artistic and the political experimentation of lesbian desire could continue to thrive. Peggy Shaw, who aggressively pursued a space to rent for the WOW Café, insisted to journalist Alisa Solomon that “desire isn’t enough by itself. . . . You have to have space where desire can be formed.” Once WOW found a permanent space at 330 E. 11th St., and shortly after, a larger one on E. 4th, the café became a social club for “wayward girls,” as well as an incubator for parodic, lesbian-envisioned theatre. (Davy notes, “Calling themselves ‘girls’ was but one of many indications that WOW’s feminism would be of a different stripe . . . . In both presentation and audience response, WOW girls behaved considerably outside the bounds of mainstream and feminist decorum.”) WOW attracted women artists who often realized their desire on its small stage, and who found the social club atmosphere combined with performance fuel for a creative conflagration that lighted a vision for imagining radical ways of being women in the world.

Davy spent years compiling interviews, ephemera, and scripts from WOW to create a comprehensive narrative of the collective’s work and its process over the more than three decades of its existence. But most of her book details WOW’s formative years, and the artists whose energy established it and kept it going, despite the café’s commitment to collective leadership. Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Holly Hughes, Alina Troyano (Carmelita Tropicana), and the Five

Lesbian Brothers get the loudest say in Davy's retelling, and she addresses their work in some critical detail. In addition to contextualizing WOW within the East Village theatre and punk rock scene, Davy locates the work within other avant-garde gay/queer theatre experiments, comparing WOW's lesbian camp aesthetic to, for instance, Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company he founded in Sheridan Square. With her fundamental commitment to WOW's feminism, Davy points out that gender differences caused (mostly male) critics to respond differently to their performances. "Critics never singled out Ludlam's work as 'homosexual theatre.' Two decades later, on the other hand, the theatre critic John Simon ended an otherwise positive review of the Five Lesbian Brother's *The Secretaries* with a backhanded remark that distinguished and thereby separated it from 'heterosexual theatre.'" Davy argues that although the WOW girls thoroughly deconstructed gender, it remained the determining and typically discriminatory lens through which critical outsiders saw their work.

Diane Torr took an alternative path through the morass of gender discrimination, using performance to cloud the distinction between reality and the stage by offering workshops for women on how to perform as men. Torr was notorious, as a performer, for realistic performances in her various male personae. Bottoms suggests that "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," partly, no doubt, because of her refusal to foreclose the possibility that passing as a man might in fact be a good thing for women. Bottoms

says the goal of Torr's workshops "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?"

As early as 1990, Torr and Johnny Science began offering what they first called "drag king" workshops, which Torr later dubbed "Man for a Day" workshops when she offered them on her own. Johnny Science was one of the first female-to-male transgendered people on the East Village scene, way before the present ubiquity of transmen in alternative cultures. From the illuminating account of her work Torr constructs with Bottoms, it's clear she was always very serious about the potential of cross-gender performance. While her go-go dances at the WOW festival offered insights into a performance of femininity that could be considered drag, Torr's training in aikido and postmodern dance shifted her focus toward a more physical engagement with how gender is on the body. The book describes her workshops as rather Brechtian "not/but" interrogations of where gender begins in action and embodiment and how it translates into specific gestures and expressions. The women attending Torr's workshops were heterosexual, lesbian, and later transgendered, attracted to the cross-gender performance study by everything from simple interest to a desire to pass as a man in their everyday lives.

Torr worked carefully with participants to build a physically-based, masculine gender style. The workshops demystified

gender as a social construction, and opened the possibility that women, too, could experience the freedom, power, and authority of making their way through the world as men. Torr says, “Gradually, through repetition, the gestures become more real; they appear ‘natural.’ But anyone can do it with a little practice.” Workshop participants created male characters and donned costumes that included men’s clothing from head to toe, fake genitalia, and facial hair attached with spirit gum. The workshops culminated in a foray into the local neighborhood, where the group of women would try to pass as men, intending to make their gendered performances as real as possible. Torr says that most of the time, they were successful, partly because masculinity is such an authoritative sign that even a little bit of male signification can be socially persuasive.

*Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* documents Torr’s contribution to the history of female masculinity and what’s now more widely known as drag kinging. Part of the book’s fascination is the comparison it provides between the early 1980s and the present. Torr says, “Nowadays, anyone researching gender blurring has a huge library of books to draw on for inspiration, but back then . . . I scoured the shelves of St. Mark’s Bookstore only to find that very little was available.” Torr also constructs her own genealogy of the drag king movement, over which, given its current popularity, many performers are eager to claim provenance. Torr relates that “Johnny [Science] always insisted that it was he who coined the term *drag king*, and certainly when the workshops started the term was so unfamiliar that people sometimes misheard us, thinking we’d said we were con-

ducting ‘dry cleaning workshops.’” The drag king phenomenon has since been popularized by conferences, cabaret performances, touring solo performers, and the scholarship devoted to subcultural performances that helps them gradually move into the mainstream.

Reading Torr and Bottoms’s book alongside Davy’s provides a rich portrait of resistant gender performances derived from a similar history, geography, and politic that forked in different directions. At WOW, cross-gender performances were meant to quote masculinity in ways that held it up for analysis. Davy points out that the performers’ femaleness always peaked through their masculine roles, since the work was determined to wrest control of the theatrical apparatus from the male gaze and from men, whose presence and participation in performances at the café was always a source of contention. In Torr’s workshops, the goal was to allow women to pass as men, to see what they see and accrue their power. Torr says, “The workshop helps to give women access to behavioral options that allow them to have more self-assurance, to have more sense of their own autonomy and their power in the world.”

Both books stand as historical correctives to what contemporary queer culture sometimes too glibly describes as a dour, humorless, anti-sex, essentialist version of 1980s feminism. Davy says, “WOW is a historical, embodied example of what queer culture thought feminists had missed and gay male culture got right.” For her part, Torr says, “Women’s culture [in the ’80s] needed a big injection of joy—a kick in the ass—and I think the sheer sexiness of drag king performance offered that.” Both stories detail the

do-it-yourself ethos of the moment, and the influence of the punk scene on underground performance proliferating virtually around the corner from clubs like CBGBs on the Bowery. In fact, reading these books in conjunction with Patti Smith's National Book Award-winning *Just Kids* creates a powerful reminder of a time when New York was rife with subcultural performances. This was a moment when artists who could afford to live near the clubs they founded enacted their visions with materials they discovered at hand, be it a guitar they

barely knew how to play or a performance to which they brought nothing of conventional theatre training. The countercultural productions the WOW girls and Torr pioneered might now be more visible, as dominant culture slowly begins to accept a wider spectrum of gender performances against what it's coming to recognize as a broader variety of physical sex characteristics. But reading these books, I found myself nostalgic for the thrilling radicalism and dangerous alterity of the performances these books so beautifully recall.

---

JILL DOLAN is the Annan Professor in English and Theatre at Princeton University, where she also directs the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She is the author of, most recently, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* and *Theatre & Sexuality*. She writes "The Feminist Spectator" blog at [www.feministspectator.blogspot.com](http://www.feministspectator.blogspot.com).