

FEMINIST VISIONS

TRANSSAVVY TRANSFILMS: SIX ESSENTIALS

by Bri Smith

BY HOOK OR BY CROOK. Written & directed by Harry (Harriet) Dodge & Silas Howard. Produced by Steakhaus Productions & NGB Productions, 2001. 95 mins. Video (DVD & VHS) distribution by Wolfe Video, <http://www.wolfefideo.com>.

DIE MOMMIE DIE! Written by Charles Busch. Directed by Mark Rucker. Produced by Aviator Films, 2003. 90 mins. Theatrical distribution by Sundance Channel Home Entertainment; video distribution by Showtime Home Entertainment; available for purchase on DVD from many vendors.

PARIS IS BURNING. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Produced by Off White Productions, 1991; Orion Home Video, 1992. 76 mins. Currently available in DVD & VHS from many vendors.

TRANSAMAZON: A GENDER QUEER JOURNEY. Produced by Joelle Ruby Ryan and Peter Welch. Directed by Laurie Wen. UNH Video Services, 2003. 40 mins. Distributed (DVD & VHS) by BuyIndies.com: <http://www.buyindies.com/listings/1/0/1066841907171.html>

VENUS BOYZ. Written, directed and co-produced by Gabriel Baur. First Run Features, 2002. 104 mins. Sale: DVD, \$29.95, <http://www.firstrunfeatures.com/venusboyz.html>

YOU DON'T KNOW DICK: COURAGEOUS HEARTS OF TRANSEXUAL MEN. Directed and produced by Candace Schermerhorn and Bestor Cram. Northern Light Productions, 1997. 58 mins. Distributed by Berkeley Media LLC, <http://www.berkeleymedia.com> (Catalog #0083). Sale: VHS or DVD, \$295.00.

Movies about transgender issues have evolved. This is a good thing. There is a long history of transpeople in film, with cross-dressing, drag, and transsexuality often portrayed in either a deviant or a comical manner. In the past decade, transpeople have begun claiming agency in their own portrayal, by producing transfilms themselves and through the production of films by others who are “transsavvy” or intent on portraying transpeople as people rather than as heteronormative cinematic foils.

Most recent transfilms are in the biography or documentary genres, but the emergence of transfilms that parody Hollywood productions and

invert the heterosexual-as-comic-queer formula are an exciting development to follow. I perceive such parodies as reclamation of agency, posing heteronormative people, rather than transpeople, as the source of comedy. If I were a proponent of canonical texts, and if a transfilm canon existed, that canon would have to include the movies reviewed here: *You Don't Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Transsexual Men*; *Venus Boyz*; *Paris Is Burning*; *TransAmazon: A Gender Queer Journey*; *By Hook or by Crook*; and *Die Mommie Die!*

The most informative film on female-to-male transsexuals is *You Don't Know Dick*. Released in 1997,

it is a documentary unto itself, not an investigative report produced for television. Six transmen are featured, including the prominent scholar Jamison (James) Green and the photographer Loren Cameron. The subjects are articulate and endearing. The film is divided into “chapters” that address the key components of any transsexual narrative.

The first chapter, “The Betrayal,” addresses the incredulity and rage transmen feel as they experience adolescence, when the maturation of their female bodies contrasts sharply with their masculine gender identity. Our subjects also discuss “The Lie” of identifying as male with a female body. Max, who thought he was re

NOTES FROM THE REVIEWER

SOME MUST-KNOW TRANS TERMS:

Trans: *An overarching term I use to include anything or anyone who challenges the gender binary.*

Cross-Dressing: *Showing that sex does not equal gender. The preferred term to "transvestism."*

Drag Queen: *A male-bodied individual performing femininity, typically on stage in a drag ball or drag show.*

Drag King: *A female-bodied individual performing masculinity, typically on stage in a drag ball or drag show. Drag queens get tipped more than drag kings.*

Transpeople: *People who challenge the gender binary, including drag queens and kings, transsexuals, cross-dressers, genderqueers, and those identifying as transgendered.*

Transgender: *A hotly contested term at the moment among transacademics, so I prefer "trans."*

Transsexual: *One who has transitioned either from female-to-male or male-to-female. However, not everyone chooses to identify as transsexual after transitioning.*

Transitioning: *The process of changing sex, which can include hormone therapy and surgery.*

bellings against femininity, tried to construct the woman he thought he could be — but, he says, a butch dyke is still a woman. Max later explains that he did not know what a woman felt like. Jamison describes having a female body and a male identity as a lie in his existence. When he was perceived in his female body as male, he worried about being “found out.” When perceived as female, without his masculine personality taken into account, he says, he was invisible.

Deciding to transition is not “cut and dried” for all transmen. We are used to hearing stories like those of Ted, to whom suicide seems the only alternative. Max, though, does not believe all transsexuals are suicidal; in fact, the idea that they were all miserable kept him from transitioning for awhile. He also quips that there is nothing more earthshaking in our society than having a sex change. Max’s girlfriend Kyle claims he’s the most masculine man she’s ever been with.

Stephan describes grieving because he was not a man and should have been. Jamison realized that the only way to grow up was to become a man, because he could not see himself growing up to be a woman. Loren, who did not want to go through sex reassignment alone, luckily had his partner Isabella for support. Isabella says they are more invisible now as a couple, that the world does not respond so hostilely anymore.

According to the men in *You Don’t Know Dick*, testosterone can really change a person. Michael says that as a woman he craved love, but testosterone so totally changed him that now he wants sex first and foremost and relationship stuff later. Max admits being more turned on by isolated body parts. My favorite part of the film is where the camera cuts back and forth between Max describing his heightened response to feminine accoutrements and gay-identified Michael candidly sharing his appreciation of the male physique. I rewound and watched Michael’s precious response to “What I Like” numerous times. For “Doing It,” Jamison laughingly says he has sex like a normal human being: in a variety of ways, hopefully with passion and commitment. Max says he’s more inventive, and that as a transman he has to be. “In a sense I have the ultimate performance anxiety,” he says, because he has to worry about how his female partner is going to respond to his not having a biological penis. Michael would love to get bottom surgery, but it is still very costly. Jamison explains the different ways of “doing penises,” stating brilliantly that the shape and size of the penis do not make the man.

Michael admits that he does not know what kind of man he is. “I’m in my adolescence,” he says. “My personality is in transition.” Loren, in “Learning,” says,

No one teaches us how to be men. We don’t have a time where we’re socialized by genetic men. We watch men a lot and we practice watching the signifiers and how they move together.

According to Loren, there are stages of overcompensating and being insecure, but it is important to relax and stop seeing men as Other. He feels that so much of the difference between men and women is artificial, and that there is a great misunderstanding of one another's experiences. He himself inhabits a neutral "in-between" space on the inside, even if he no longer appears to on the outside.

Michael thinks it is a cosmic joke that men and women are so different. To him, transsexuals are the only ones who really know what is going on at both ends of the spectrum. Max sees transsexualism as shifting identity. Some transmen leave transsexualism behind, thereafter identifying only as men. Max, however, says that one does not give up his transsexualism; the "man part" just becomes more important.

Venus Boyz documents a group of New York drag kings who can give up their femininity and embody men. The filmmaker tells us at the beginning, "Some years ago I set out on this journey in search of women who live in between; who also live with the man within — whatever that means — be it for a night, be it for a lifetime." In 1996 the young king movement in New York City had just gotten on its feet, and that is where the filmmaker met the subjects for the film.

Venus Boyz reveals the vast array of drag king performers. Throughout the film, interviews with the drag kings are interspersed with their performances. Many of the New York kings do not exhibit masculinity offstage but convincingly portray men onstage, highlighting the performative potential of gender.

The subjects in *Venus Boyz* are even more articulate than the fellas in *You Don't Know Dick*, and this film might prove challenging to the gender-theory-illiterate. Some knowledge of gender performance on the part of the audience seems to be assumed, and most of the subjects take themselves too seriously to be endearing.

Venus Boyz seems like the filmic feminist theoretical response to *Paris Is Burning* (1990), which, having been reviewed by such bigshots as bell hooks and Judith Butler, is perhaps the best-known transfilm so far. *Paris Is Burning* is about Harlem's drag (queen) ball circuit in the late 1980s and how each subject's life brought them to the circuit. As many of the interviewees state, "the ball" is the closest these male-bodied individuals will ever get to fame. All of the subjects are struggling men of color who use the ball to become anything they want.

At the heart of the Harlem balls in *Paris Is Burning* is "realness," which is described as the ability to blend as a real (straight) man or woman; realness is not a satire. According to Dorian Corey, when you're gay, you're monitored for everything, but you can do whatever you want when you're straight. Pepper LaBeija, self-described legendary "mother" of the House of LaBeija, claims it is the dream of every minority to look and live as well as a (rich) white person: "If [you have] captured the great white way of living or looking or dress-

Transmen: Typically, female-to-male transsexuals who identify as transsexual after transitioning. These fellas identify with maleness and masculinity day in and day out.

SOME TERMS I MADE UP:

Transfilms: Films about transpeople.

Transportrayals: Portrayals of transpeople.

Transsavvy: Hip to transpeople, their lives and issues they face.

Transacademics: Nerds like me who thrive on anything genderqueer and enjoy adding "trans" to words to invent new terms like "transacademics."

ABOUT PRONOUNS:

Pronouns suck.

Unfortunately our society is so hung up on the concept of two genders that people are routinely identified by gendered pronouns, and non-gender-specific pronouns have yet to become a part of the (accepted) English language.

Therefore, I have begrudgingly used gendered pronouns throughout. The pronouns I use are determined by the gender performed by each individual.

ing or speaking [in the ball], you is a marvel." Another subject says the ball tells its participants that they are somebody, and that most get lost when they leave the ball and head home, where they have to tell *themselves* that they are somebody. Many participants have no money for clothes, let alone places to live, but they do whatever it takes to get the clothes to live out the fantasy of the ball, often resorting to stealing and hustling.

Most of the subjects in *Paris Is Burning* have also been ostracized from their families. The "houses" depicted fill the void left by family, and are named after ball participants known for winning — for example, the House of Labeija. Pepper likens houses to gay street gangs whose members "fight" by walking in the ball and competing against each other in various categories. Categories can include luscious body, school-boy/girl, town and country, executive realness, butch queen, first time in drag at a ball, military, model, high-fashion eveningwear, realness, and men's winter garments. Categories are supposedly made for everybody.

"Voguing," which later came to international fame, especially via Madonna's song "Vogue" and its corresponding video, was also a category invented at the balls. Initially, it was a dance-off of sorts between two individuals who meant to settle their differences through dancing rather than fighting. The name — taken from *Vogue Magazine* — was adopted because the moves are like modeling poses. Voguers strive for perfect positions and alignment.

Willi Ninja, who established the House of Ninja because he was the best voguer around, teaches modeling to women. He is shown telling a

class, "Do not believe just because I'm a guy that I cannot do it. In order to be a teacher and show girls how to do it, I have to know how to do it." He also tells the camera that "New York City women are a little bit harder than most women. Basically I'm trying to bring that femininity back and bring some grace and poise." Like *Venus Boyz*, *Paris Is Burning* highlights the performative aspect of gender and reveals its subjects' consciousness of gender performativity.

Participating in the drag balls does not mean that one inherently wishes to be a woman. "I've been a man and I've been a man emulating a woman — I've never been a woman," Pepper says.

I can never say how a woman feels, I can only say how a man who acts like a woman or dresses like a woman feels. I never wanted to have a sex change. That's just taking it a little too far.... [W]omen get treated bad. You know, they get beat, they get robbed, they get dogged. So havin' the vagina, that doesn't mean that you gonna have a fabulous life. It might in fact be worse.

But some of the subjects do wish to have sex reassignment. Octavia Saint Laurent hopes to be a woman by the following year, and has aspirations of becoming a model. "I hope the way I look will help me make money.... I don't want to end up an old drag queen with nothing going on for me but winning balls." Brooke and Carmen Xtravaganza, who cite sex reassignment surgery as the most important factor in their lives, say they can be and do whatever they

want in America if they have money. Venus Xtravaganza wants to have "the surgery" and get married in a church wearing white. Venus, who works as an escort, recounts the story of a client who freaked when "touching me down there" and threatened to kill her. Two years later, at the end of the movie, Venus's housemother Angie Xtravaganza tells us that Venus's strangled body was found under a hotel bed. Angie talks sadly about how much she misses Venus and thinks about her, that she was the "main daughter" of her house. "But that's part of life, that's part of being a transsexual in New York City and surviving," she reasons.

The film concludes with Dorian Corey, professional drag queen, applying make-up. Dorian once had hopes of being a big star, of leaving something behind and being remembered. But over the years his aspirations and perspective have changed:

[Now] you think you left a mark on the world if you just get through it. And if a few people remember your name — then you left a mark. You don't have to bend the whole world. I think it's better just to enjoy it. Pay your dues and enjoy it. If you shoot an arrow and it goes real high, good for you.

Fortunately, *Venus Boyz* does not have the depressing tone of *Paris Is Burning*.

Venus Boyz acknowledges that more people are familiar with drag queens than with drag kings. This acknowledgement was the impetus for Mo B. Dick and friends to introduce drag kinging to the New York

scene. Doing drag “started out in a political way but not consciously,” Mo says. “I think [for] any artist [who] breaks boundaries [that] it’s a political thing.” Mo finds it easier to be a powerful woman behind the mask of a man: “Instead of being an angry woman I became a funny man. A drag king is camp.” Interestingly, Mo says he was doing drag so much that his non-drag alter ego, Maureen Fischer, was getting lost; the inner man overtook the inner woman, and this concerned Mo/Maureen, who wanted to remain an aggressive woman.

Mildred, who felt that drag was empowering, developed the drag king Dred. Mildred/Dred claims that people have a masculine and a feminine side, but that not everyone chooses to explore both. “[A] lot of kings I know don’t like to show their womanhood ... but I like to mix it up.” Dred deconstructs gender and drag onstage by stripping down from Dred to reveal Mildred’s breasts, and then removing Dred’s “package” — an apple — and eating it. Mildred is a lesbian but doesn’t identify as either butch or femme. “I’m just whatever I’m feeling. I can be one way one day and one way another,” she tells renowned gender theorist Judith Halberstam. Halberstam, who says she admires Dred’s versatility, elaborates on her own gender staticity: “I’ll never wear a dress, I only go out with feminine women, and I can’t change that.” Halberstam also reveals differences between drag king troupes. Unlike the kings in New York, “in London a lot of people will say that the reason they’re interested in dressing up in drag is because they are butch.” (Judith Halberstam wrote *The Drag King Book*, which includes photographs by Del LaGrace Volcano. Del takes testosterone, has

breasts, and identifies as pansexual. Del finds it more fun to do a drag queen because — although she was born female-bodied — performing as a man in drag did not feel like a performance.)

Diane Torr is deemed the Daddy of Drag, or the forefather of drag kings. As of the release of *Venus Boyz*, she had done drag for two decades. Diane is shown conducting one of her infamous drag workshops and doing lectures around the world. According to Judith Halberstam, “what we do when we are in a gender is perform an already socially constructed script.” Diane claims: “If I can do this — from the woman who lives next door, and becomes the man who’s Mr. Macho — then anybody can do it. And if that’s the case, then so much for masculinity being sacred.”

Though masculinity may be perceived as being sacred, not all forms of masculinity are privileged. As a drag king of color, Dred reveals the stereotypes he faces when passing as a black man — recounting, for instance, the frustration of trying to hail a cab.

Joelle Ruby Ryan is all too familiar with challenging stereotypes. In her documentary *TransAmazon*, she explores the gender, crossdressing, and transsexual stereotypes she faces on a daily basis. Interestingly, Joelle confronts not only heteronormative oppression, but also discrimination for not abiding by the sex reassignment dictates of “transsexual normativism.” Joelle says that when she came out as a transperson, the first thing she wanted to do was undergo sex reassignment to “make mind and body come together in this harmonious way.” But then she real-

ized that for her, being a transperson was not about changing one’s body but rather about changing the heteronormative culture.

Joelle did not transition like the subjects in *You Don’t Know Dick*. She believes that *transgenderism*, which she defines as challenging the pervasive bipolar gender system, is more earthshaking than transitioning. Joelle identifies as transgender, not transsexual. According to her definition, transsexualism reinforces heteronormativity, while transgenderism challenges it.

To me, the people who get the most shit are the ones who are really balancing on that line between male and female — visible invisibility, invisible visibility. It’s the sense of me being seen as who I am — a transgender person — but then immediately after being seen, being re-rendered invisible. Imagine being that all the time. Because people can’t make sense of me, I’m out the window and don’t exist.

Somehow those who are able to pass — to go undetected in their chosen gender roles — are granted visibility as either men or women, yet do not stick out and invite scrutiny.

Visibility, which is addressed in *You Don’t Know Dick*, *Venus Boyz*, *Paris is Burning*, and *TransAmazon*, is an integral topic in trans studies. The ambiguity of visibility becomes apparent in these four films. Some transpeople, like Joelle, wish to be visible as the *genderqueers* that they are; they don’t want to exist in a culture that is based on the gender binary. In *You Don’t Know Dick*, Jamison

and Max speak of having been invisible before transitioning because they did not fit within that binary. But because genderqueers do *not* fit, in many ways they become *more* visible. In *Paris Is Burning*, Dorian Corey says he has to monitor himself when he's not in drag, but can do whatever he wants when he is; an effeminate male is more visible than a male perceived as a feminine woman. Loren, in *You Don't Know Dick*, also speaks of blending in after transitioning. However, he also feels like he is in between male and female, even though others no longer see him that way. In *Venus Boyz*, Dred/Mildred claims that everyone has both a masculine and feminine side. The New York drag kings are largely feminine offstage and perform masculinity on-stage. But then Mo/Maureen admits that by being Mo so often, Maureen was getting lost.

Drag puts an interesting twist on the visibility topic because it takes place in a setting where everyone is conscious — performers and audience alike — that the gender performed does not correspond to the sex of the performer. Furthermore, audience members who continually flock to drag shows may only know the people who perform *as performers*. Chances are that the frequency of Mo's performances caused Maureen to begin disappearing because Mo/Maureen was seen by others more as Mo than as Maureen. Given their offstage femininity, the majority of the New York drag kings in *Venus Boyz* would probably be invisible offstage to those who know them just as their drag personas.

From these films one can better understand the notion of "visible invisibility, invisible visibility" that

Joelle addresses in terms of "passing privilege" in *TransAmazon*. "There seems to be a particular disdain for biological males who dress as women but are unable to successfully or convincingly pass as females," she says. Passing privilege enables one to avoid scrutiny (visibility) and enjoy the benefits of subscribing to gender norms, much as Dorian describes in *Paris Is Burning*.

Passing privilege comes to those who can pass easily. Joelle is a self-described 6'6" male with no breasts and with large hands and feet, and as such does not pass well. (Neither does Del, in *Venus Boyz*, who still has breasts but exhibits the secondary sex characteristics of a male from taking testosterone.) And like the subjects in *You Don't Know Dick*, Joelle speaks of gender overcompensation. In the effort to compensate for their biological male characteristics, transwomen often appear ultra-feminine, which Joelle finds degrading. Thus, she rejects not only the passing privilege often granted through sex reassignment, but also the privilege granted to those males who appear ultra-feminine when crossdressing. Joelle says, "I don't want to pass because I want to be visible as who I am. And for being visible I feel that I am able to blend myself more easily to creating the kind of world I want to live in...to fostering gender freedom." However, such visibility comes at a high cost, as is apparent with the murder of Venus Xtravaganza in *Paris Is Burning*.

Joelle admits that her daily life is filled with fear and anxiety — "Every day I have to worry about being attacked by some asshole thinking my life is so worthless that I don't deserve to live. I'm tired of hearing about transpeople dying, not only

physically but having their spirit murdered every day" — yet she preaches courage:

I have to own my fear and be aware of my safety but also be aware that I only have one life to lead and want it to be the best life I can lead... I have to believe I matter. All transpeople have to believe we matter to the world, that we're here for a reason... [W]e're better than hatred and we can live our best life and do what we're supposed to do on this planet, which is to spread love, to be loved, and to love others as much as possibly can.

Unlike Venus, Joelle is able to use her voice to continue to speak out against the injustices of a culture based on gender binarism. Joelle expresses gratitude for being able to speak, for "the opportunity to tell my story, to read poetry, to raise that voice with my sisters." Documentaries like *TransAmazon* enable subjects to directly speak to the camera, and thus to an audience. Unlike the documentary subjects in *You Don't Know Dick*, *Venus Boyz* and *Paris Is Burning*, however, Joelle is able to do more than merely speak to the camera, for she also had a hand in the production of *TransAmazon*. As coproducer of her film, Joelle exhibits greater agency and is able to tell her story herself. Although the producers and directors of *You Don't Know Dick*, *Venus Boyz* and *Paris Is Burning* are obviously transsavvy, there is something to be said for self-production.

Best friends Harry Dodge and Silas Howard produced, wrote, directed, and starred in their film *By Hook or By Crook*. Unlike the other transfilms discussed thus far, this one is not a documentary, but it should definitely be included in a transfilm canon. After they have come to an understanding of transpeople via *You Don't Know Dick*, *Venus Boyz*, *Paris Is Burning*, and *TransAmazon*, viewers can appreciate the storyline of *By Hook or By Crook* without being consumed by the ambiguity of the female-bodied, masculine-gendered characters Val and Shy, played by Dodge and Howard respectively.

The film begins with this Al Capone quote: "Don't get the idea that I'm one of these goddamn radicals. Don't get the idea that I'm knocking the American system." Unlike the goals of the documentary transfilms reviewed here, the primary purpose of *By Hook or By Crook* is not to portray transpeople's existence and plight. Dodge and Howard take the positioning of transpeople a step further. In the "Afterword" to their film's screening on the Sundance Channel, they explain:

It was really important to us to make something that portrayed fluidity of gender.... [T]here's males, females and drag queens basically in the media, and we really felt like expanding that and showing variations and complexity. I think if you go into the complexity of these situations instead of trying to box everything that you end up having much more interesting life and lifestyle.

But Howard adds that they also wanted to normalize transpeople:

We wanted these characters where their [trans identity] really didn't have anything to do with the story. So that was just part of the landscape. It just was assumed. We weren't gonna talk down to the audience. We were just gonna show people this world and invite them into this world and hope that they related to the characters' transforming friendship to help them to be in the world more.

What makes this film remarkable is that the gender ambiguity of its main characters was not the central theme. *By Hook or By Crook* is first and foremost a buddy film. The fact that both Shy and Val are gender-ambiguous merely contributes to their friendship.

The film begins with Shy leaving his rural farm town, hitchhiking to San Francisco. He successfully passes as a man for the camera, and his gender ambiguity is not addressed until his arrival in San Francisco. Shy awakens in a doorway to children playing on the sidewalk. A little girl stops playing to ask him whether he is a boy or a girl, to which he answers, "Both." A little boy then chimes in with, "He's a girl."

When Shy and Val (short for Valentine) first meet, Val asks Shy if he has a wife and kids (because he is good-looking). With two horns of hair growing out of his chin and his masculine wardrobe, Val also successfully passes as a man for the camera. Val's gender ambiguity is not made apparent until the audience becomes

aware of his search for his birth mother. When Val and Shy go to a diner, Val excuses himself to make a phone call. Throughout the film, he randomly places calls in hopes of finding his birth mom. The first time, he says into the receiver: "Tell her it's her daughter; I was born a baby girl."

The only time Val and Shy speak of their shared gender ambiguity is when Val discloses to Shy that his adoptive parents placed him in a mental institution at the age of thirteen for wearing boys' clothes. "Just for that?" Shy asks. To which Val responds, "I'm a special: two for one." To get out of the mental institution, Val says, "All I had to do was learn how normal people act.... I now do a decent impersonation of an actual man." Shy responds with, "Oh yeah? Me too."

Throughout the film Val and Shy refer to each other by masculine pronouns. When Val tells his girlfriend Billie about meeting Shy, he refers to him as "a little guy, a good guy guy, a running away guy." Val's repeated use of "guy" is in line with the intelligent gibberish he speaks throughout the film, but it also serves to reiterate Shy's masculine gender. In the end, Shy stops being "a running away guy" due to his friendship with Val. When Val is placed in a mental institution, Shy helps him escape. The film ends with Shy, Billie, and Val going to visit Val's birth mother. (It is important to note that Val is not returned to the mental institution because of his gender ambiguity, but because he attacks a police officer and is portrayed as having additional mental deficiencies.) In *By Hook or By Crook*, transidentity is at most secondary to

the friendship storyline. Dodge and Howard successfully take the portrayal of transpeople in film to a new height, producing a transfilm where transpeople can appear normalized and exert agency.

Die Mommie Die!, reminiscent of John Waters films in which the male-bodied actor Divine plays female characters (e.g., Edna Turnblatt in *Hairspray*), goes even further in its normalization of transpeople. The popularity of *Die Mommie Die!* suggests that such transportrayals are not merely the products of seemingly eccentric moviemakers like Waters.

This film was written by Charles Busch, who stars as Angela Arden. Ironically, *Die Mommie Die!*'s climax comes when Angela's true identity is revealed: "Angela" is exposed as Angela's twin sister, Barbara. As with Divine, Busch's character is never "revealed" as male-bodied, and thus the long history of comic portrayals

of transpeople in films is contradicted. The comedy of *Die Mommie Die!* lies in Busch's imitation of 1960s film starlets like Bette Davis, Doris Day, Judy Garland, Susan Hayward and Lana Turner. Busch's film watches like a parody of a 1960s melodrama or romantic thriller, where the acting is over the top and the lighting and closeups are dramatic. Charles Busch's portrayal of Angela Arden merely accentuates the seemingly over-the-top gender performances of 1960s starlets, although it is easy to assume that a female imitating 1960s starlet femininity would appear equally outrageous.

Die Mommie Die! suggests that someday males will play women in films and females will play men, much as straights portray gays — and vice versa — today. Such inverted gender portrayals literally play with gender, putting gender theory and trans studies into action. To make that day a reality, non-transpeople must become transsavvy and

realize the extent to which their own gender is a performance.

In our society, films are first and foremost a source of entertainment, but they can also prove educational. If you wish to become more transsavvy yourself or to help others become transsavvy, I encourage you to look at the films reviewed here. If you wish to make the world a better place by "fostering gender freedom," I implore you to check them out today.

[*"I write history by day and make history by night," says Bri Smith, a Ph.D. candidate in History (Modern Studies concentration) at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee who is writing the biography of female-to-gay-man Louis Sullivan. Bri is also an ardent volunteer with Fair Wisconsin, the statewide campaign devoted to defeating the ban on civil unions and gay marriage in Wisconsin. Feedback on this review can be emailed to Bri at smithb@uwm.edu.*]



Miriam Greenwald