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When boys will be girls

ent drag

THE fascination of cross-dressing has taken a new hold of the world of Western entertainment (it was always present in the Orient). The huge success of the Dustin Hoffman film "Tootsie" and the notorious drag ball scene in John Osborne's "A Patriot for Me" are just two examples. The spectacular new Broadway musical "La Cage aux Folles," said to be quite brilliant, features a female chorus line—all male. Boys will be girls.

And girls will be boys. In the Julie Andrews movie "Victor-Victoria," she pretended to be a female impersonator. In "The Roaring Girl," Helen Mirren easily suppressed her powerful sexuality to play a wilful Jacobean wench who refused both women's clothes and the "mincing obscenity" of female behaviour. Sheila Allen, in Pam Gems's "Queen Christina," was the transvestite queen who hunted before breakfast and took girls to bed. Caryl Churchill's "Top Girls" included the legendary cross-dressing Pope Joan.

More boys as girls? In

JOHN BARBER on cross-dressing on the stage and its place in theatre tradition

music-hall tradition, no-one is more popular today than Danny La Rue as herself, or Barry Humphries as Edna Everage. George Logan and Patrick Fyffe are better known as ladies called Hinge and Brackett. On the rock scene, Alice Cooper and David Bowie can appear more feminine than most females. So can Mick Jagger. The French cabaret artist Luc Chevalier looks more like the young Dietrich than Dietrich herself. Incidentally, but uproariously, "Charley's Aunt" is still at the Aldwych with Griff Rhys Jones in drag.

But there is more to cross-dressing than seeing a chap's embarrassment when imprisoned in skirts. A few years ago, Peter Ackroyd's monograph "Dressing Up" examined this whole area with insight, distinguishing between the drag phenomenon—when homosexuals adopt female dress, as in Osborne, to parody and mock women, being misogynist in origin and intent—and those many cases of trans-

vestism associated with sacred ritual and social or political dissent. "Transvestism represents," he wrote, "in public and visible form, the pure form, the spirit of difference. When one social code is breached, they are all as risk."

In adopting cross-dressing, the theatre is also adopting the anarchic, libertarian spirit of the classical festivals of the ancient world's Kalends and Saturnalia, and the medieval Feast of Fools, when both laymen and clergy dressed as women and "farced" the rituals of the Mass. "Transvestism," Ackroyd concludes, "was a troubling yet joyful force which was powerful enough to survive centuries of social and ecclesiastical reproof," and he recalls various 19th-century riots against machines, or taxes, led by men in female clothes. These, like those protest plays by women playwrights, used it as a way off defying an acquisitive and male-dominated society.

That there is comedy in seeing a feller in skirts is proved by every bloomer-flaunting panto Dame. That there is charm in seeing a girl *en travesti* is familiar to everyone who has seen a Principal Boy, or who recalls Dorothy Tutin's Viola or Vanessa Redgrave's Rosalind. And if you can resist the allure of a boy who looks like a girl, Shakespeare could not. The law may have required him to use young males for his females, but on the evidence of the 20th sonnet it did not go against the grain: the master-mistress of his passion had a woman's face and (he fancied) for a woman was first created. But there is more than piquancy in observing how successfully a male can present a female. Some of the prettiest girls I ever saw were boys in a Berlin cabaret. An idea of what can be achieved may be seen in "April Ashley's Odyssey"—pictures of herself at 22 before her sex-change, reproduced in the devastatingly revealing autobiography she wrote with Duncan Fallowell.

Without going into the complexities of gender determination or the dark science of gonadal and chromosomal sex, I suppose most people will accept that there is a feminine streak in men, and a masculine one in women (the degree differing). This clearly is in some sort released and satisfied when the stage offers a world where the social imperative to belong to one single sex no longer applies. In Japanese



Dorothy Tutin disguised as Cesario in her role as Viola in "Twelfth Night."



Barry Humphries as the ever-popular Dame Edna Everage.

kabuki drama, the onnagata (female impersonator) is traditional from earliest times, and today audiences object when frail, slender, coy girls are not played by those male actors who specialise in stylised feminine gestures and amorous behaviour. James Barrie, all-powerful in his day, was as aware as anyone of the theatre's delight in gender confusion, and sanctioned the casting of a girl as Peter Pan both on stage and in Herbert Brenon's silent film. His fairy boy certainly lost some of his elusive magic when played at the Barbican last Christmas by a tough male in his thirties.

The most striking recent example of sexual ambiguity occurs in "Torch Song Trilogy," a 4-hour cycle of plays by Harvey Fierstein which, we all hope, will be coming to London with its author-star in the mammoth central role. I saw it two years ago in New York, on the fringe in Greenwich Village, and was delighted by its flip and easy Jewish humour as I was impressed by its penetrating analysis of sexual urges and emotional upsets. The play moved later to Broadway, and this year Mr Fierstein scooped up two "Tony" awards, for both Best Actor and Best play (He scripted the libretto of "La Cage aux Folles").

In the "Trilogy" he plays

Arnold, a homosexual "drag queen" or female impersonator. The first play tells of his early cruising affairs and eventual love for straightlaced Ed who, although fond of him, is ashamed of his deviance and cruelly hurts Arnold when he makes a "straight" marriage. The second play examines at close range the tragicomic relationship of Arnold and a new friend with Ed and his wife. The masterly concluding piece reunites Arnold with Ed and shows their promising attempt to create a new kind of home and family which is not a "grade-B imitation" of heterosexual conventions.

What makes the play funny and moving is the heartbreaking precariousness of the gay world. We others know, too, how it feels "to be no one in the life of someone we love," and how hard we must fight conventional thinking to establish a full and honest marriage. But gays have it harder because, with everything else, society offers no protection and basic emotions are exposed in the raw. Here cross-dressing becomes far more than a visual effect. It has enabled Arnold to develop the female side of the male persona in such a way as to give him a wider understanding of both sexes, very much including wives and mothers, and the sweet agony of their interplay.