

# **Fantasia Fair: Put on Your Prettiest Dress and Smile**

by M.A. Gilbert

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## **One of the transgender community's biggest parties**

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I have just returned from Provincetown, Massachusetts, a small picturesque town on the very tip of Cape Cod. I was there to participate in my first Fantasia Fair, a weeklong celebration of the feminine in the male ranging from timid to committed cross dressers to long-time transsexuals with everything in between. The week consisted of workshops given by first-rank professionals, lunches with speakers on fascinating subjects, wonderful banquets, exciting events, and some of the most warm and beautiful people I've met in my life. Everybody's Fanfair is different depending on who they are, what they need, and how much they are willing to give and take. Here I'll tell you a little about the fair and what I experienced.

Fanfair, which just celebrated its 21st year, takes place in the predominantly gay and lesbian Provincetown. This quaint fishing village is now a renowned tourist resort with numerous inns sprinkled through the town. There is an abundance of great shopping in charming boutiques specializing in women's clothing, jewelry, and tourist items. As the fair takes place late in the season there are many great bargains to be had.

**Fanfair = Freedom**

The first, and perhaps the foremost, fact about Fanfair is that you are totally free to be yourself. You can dress all the time and go wherever you want. You can stroll the beach, explore the shops, sample the restaurants, go for a manicure, get your hair done, have a coffee, and walk in and out of every shop on Commercial Street. The only "looks" you'll get are from pleased and hopeful shopkeepers. As you walk down the street, the light breeze swirling your skirt against your hose, local residents will smile at you and say, "Hey honey, having a nice time?" (On my first such walk just after I registered, I reached such a heady state of euphoria I had to go off by myself and breathe slowly and deeply just to keep from bawling with joy.)

When you arrive at the fair you will already have been assigned to one of the charming inns in town. You will check in with your hosts, unpack the U-Haul trailer of clothes you brought (almost kidding), and walk down to the **Crown & Anchor** on Commercial Street to register with the fair. After that you can have a walk, a nap, or, if you're of a more serious bent, begin shopping.

The first night is the welcome dinner where you will meet many sisters from all over the world, some of whom will, by the end of the week, be friends for life. No one is lonely at Fanfair. No one sits alone, because someone will always say, "Hey, why don't you join us?" And, of course, there is always your house mother, one to each inn, to make sure that no one gets lost in the shuffle.

## Fanfair's Seven Days

Monday this year was focused on orientation. There were speakers from the police to reassure us that Ptown has zero tolerance for hate and that if we got into trouble, our mode of dress was no concern of theirs. The police told us that as long as we obeyed the parking rules (which basically means leave your car at the inn) the police are a girl's best friend. Next we were introduced to the staff and the experts who were there to help us grow and explore our feminine selves in workshops and discussions. After a sumptuous buffet lunch there were mini workshops so newcomers could get an idea of what they wanted to do. There are always free workshops and discussions available, but some have fees (never more than \$20) so that the professionals can be paid. Seems fair enough to me.

After the orientation, Fanfair was in full swing. Monday night was the Diversity Dinner, a church supper put on by us for the townspeople. Many local residents come religiously every year (pun intended). The

dinner is cooked, served, and cleaned up by us Fanfair gals. At every table there are local people and Fanfair participants, and it's a wonderful opportunity for everybody to learn about each other. And doing it is fun. I'll never forget standing next to Virginia Prince as she washed and I dried a seemingly endless stream of pots, pans, and flatware, all the while deep in discussion about the nature of cross dressing.

Mornings are taken up with workshops. Lunch, which is included in the package every day, provides a choice. You can go to one of two restaurants depending on what discussion topic interests you. The first hour of the two-hour lunch break is taken up by eating and yakking and swapping stories with new and old friends. Then, after that first hour, the speaker begins talking or running the discussion. An hour later there are more workshops and discussion groups. And any time the spirit moves you, all the work can be abandoned in favor of walking, relaxing, shopping, or exploring. No one takes attendance at Fanfair.

Tuesday night was the fashion show and it was here that our little gang, the Canadian contingent which dubbed itself The Canadian Men's Chorus, first made our presence known. We were all in the show and had a ball. Imagine this. You have four outfits or four changes, two before the break and two after. There's a tiny change room where everybody who is dressing squeezes in and helps each other with zippers and jewelry. In the front of the house are 200 people, mostly from town, who cheer and whistle with the appearance of every one of the 18 models who walk down the runway, do their little twirl, and sashay on back. Scared as I was, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

Wednesday night was the Outreach awards banquet, so we all dolled ourselves up in evening dresses. The night was a social event to celebrate those of our own community who have made special contributions above and beyond the call of duty. The food was great, the company was perfect, and the sense of celebrating ourselves was moving.

Thursday night arrived and The Canadian Men's Chorus, along with 15 or so other acts, was back to work. It was the night of the Fanfair Follies! And, if I thought the house was crowded for our fashion show, it was packed for the follies. I peeked out from the bar where I was having a small drink (OK, a large drink) to steady my nerves and saw a line of people extending half a block. "What," I asked my experienced gal, "are all those people doing here?" When I was told they were lining up for good seats for the follies, I had to be physically restrained from bolting. There was live singing, dancing, lip syncing, and the house was

full and exuberant. (And just so no one gets too scared, there were lots of sisters who enjoyed the show from the audience -- not everyone has to participate in everything.) The follies were followed by a scrumptious buffet and house parties. I think I checked in about 3 a.m.

Friday night was the Fantasy Ball. Dinner was on our own (three of seven dinners during the week were our own) and a whole bunch of us went to a really nice restaurant. At the ball, the night where you can dress up in your wildest fantasy, there were numerous Dommés in black and fishnet and leather, colorful genies, pirates, peasant maidens, and several nurses, cheerleaders, and aerobics instructors. The prize for best costume went to a charter member of The Canadian Men's Chorus, Mellissa, who stunned everyone with her magnificent Little Bo Peep costume, including ruffled pantaloons and shepherd's crook. It was a wild night, and I frankly don't know what time I got to bed.

Saturday night it poured with rain. It was the first bad weather we had had, so we really couldn't complain. And, as we were going to be in one place for the evening (and you could drive and park) it wasn't so bad. The awards banquet is where those people who have been outstanding for and during Fanfair receive recognition. There is Miss Cinderella, who is the gal who everyone thinks seemed to grow and flower the most. This year it was won by our own Mellissa, for whom the whole experience was rich with growth and sharing. Other awards were for the best dressed, Miss Femininity, Miss Congeniality, and finally, Miss Fanfair, given to the gal who has served the most and longest in the interests of the fair.

That last night was exciting and beautiful as we pulled out all the stops and wore our most wonderful dresses. But it was also tinged with sadness because we knew that the next day would bring an end to our magical ephemeral world. But, even then, we all knew that we had each changed and grown and made new friends and that would never leave us.

On Sunday there was a whenever-you-turn-up brunch at one of the restaurants and then some of us went to the Unitarian Church for the service. I'm not a church goer but I was very glad that I went. There was a sense of closure and being in that lovely tabernacle with so many local people who had embraced and loved us was, somehow, right. Leaving was incredibly difficult, but, as one friend said, "The only solace is that tomorrow is one day closer to next year's Fanfair."

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