

Personal choice

A CHANGE OF SEX: *George - The Big Decision/Julia - The First Year/Julia - My Body, My Choice* - BBC-2 (October 15, 16 & 17)

Remember Julia Grant - George Roberts as was? On October 15 there will be a re-screening of the documentary film, 'George - The Big Decision' first shown eighteen months ago, wherein George decides that what he needs is a sex change and cements that resolve by giving away all his male attire to Oxfam and taking the name of Julia. But this time you can see what happens next - David Pearson has made two more films about subsequent stages in Julia's life and, with unwonted boldness and imagination, the BBC is showing them as a kind of transsexual trilogy on three consecutive nights, at times which are only moderately late. The first of the new films, 'Julia - The First Year' describes the year of 'living over' as a woman in an increasingly frustrating attempt to get sex change surgery on the NHS. The second, 'Julia - My Body, My Choice' shows a determined Julia finally getting 'the' op - *not* on the NHS - and apart from bringing some of the medical detail of sex change surgery into your home, which may not be your ideal of Friday night entertainment, tries to evaluate the effect of the change on his/her life.

You may not have to hand out money for a Health Service job, but in the case of transsexual surgery there are other ways of making you pay. "Putting in time towards qualifying", for instance, is a stipulation of the NHS psychiatrist treating Julia's case. During their interviews we only see Julia but, watching her in nice red lipstick and blonde hairdo trying to be reasonable with him and hearing his disembodied, petulant admonishments about sticking to the protocol and not overstepping the mark, we do get a picture of a kind of anonymous demon playing cat and mouse with somebody's life. He dismisses the alternative of paying privately for surgery as "like buying a motor car", and there is some truth in that - Julia buys a private breast enlargement operation where the price includes "a prosthesis with VAT". He sees sex change as a coherent process and not an assembly of new bits. But the problems is that in his eyes the coherence comes from its being "a medical problem and not a personal choice". The thesis of these programmes is that it *should* be seen as a personal choice, which is why it's Julia's personal history that gives them coherence,



Julia Grant

ties them together.

So we see Julia trying to evolve a new coherence for her life, in its several aspects; work, and why she can only find it in a gay club or on the stage; legal problems - she can marry a woman but not a man. But although Julia wants to see a new gender as a complete break with the past - wants to be redesigned, recreated, resculptured - the programmes actually trace through the continuity and changes in some of her personal relationships; with her charming new boyfriend, with her mother and sisters. When she visits home, Mom and friends sit round in a Northern pub gallantly trying to fit her into the normal stereotypes. "She takes after her Mom", they say, and "Keep yer hands to yerself", and discuss whether the new young man looks like Georgie Best.

One of her sisters mutters that Julia's remodelled 40B cup breasts make her feel like a cheat.

This brings out something the programmes could have questioned more. Julia's aim of leading the life of a normal woman seems to mean relishing the *artefacts* of femininity - the clothes, the high heels; turning out to be 'larger than life', much *more* feminine than any of the female members of her family. The emphasis on 'normality' - closing shot of Julia with borrowed baby, boyfriend and dog - is something that probably won't strike much of a chord with a gay audience. But in the current atmosphere of anti-gay violence, there should be an empathy with someone who has already been through the burning-teeshirt-through-the-letterbox routine after the last television showing. Transsexualism is a phenomenon that arouses very mixed feelings, but where these particular programmes succeed is in giving a sympathetic portrait of a brave and likeable person.

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