

openness with each other about "seeing other people." One well-known meeting place for gays is Elmwood Park and the surrounding area, known in the parlance of Roanoke's gay community as The Block.

"We even go down there together sometimes," David says. "It's embarrassing, but we've stayed till dawn. There just aren't that many places you can go in Roanoke and really be yourself. After all the bars close, well, that's where you go."

The vice squad of the City Police Department has a different kind of parlance, and a different reason for being down on The Block after midnight. Though former vice chief Sgt. Jack Heath has denied that the vice squad has declared war on homosexuals, gays seem to agree that arrests on the charge of "Solicitation for Immoral Purposes" have been increasing in recent months.

"They'll never break it up," John says with a little laugh. "This crackdown on gay life has happened before. They tore down the Greyhound bus station thinking that would end the traffic, but it just moved. They locked up the men's room at Crossroads Mall for the same reason. In that case, I can see why people were offended. Nobody wants to go into a store or someplace and get approached by some queen."

"Lots of sordid things happen in the gay world, but there are plenty of sick straight people, too."

"You know — lots of sordid things happen in the gay world, but there are plenty of sick straight people too," David adds. "I think it's just that this city isn't ready to accept gay people. Friends of ours are

- Continued Page 26



Transvestite performs in drag benefit show.

The Long Road From Man To Woman

The Horoscope, Friday, October 28, 10:30 p.m. (between the full moon and Halloween)

The place is packed. Festoons of crepe paper ribbons and multi-colored udders of balloons hang over the dance floor. The atmosphere is full of freaky celebration — dense, wild, a little rowdy. A big bearded man wearing cowboy boots, a shapeless black dress, a silver hard hat and a blonde wig which appears to have died by electrocution is prancing up and down the floor holding the microphone like a daisy. The spotlight winks in a little rhinestone pasted on one of his cheeks as he stops abruptly, mutters "Oh, pardon me," and doffs the wig to scratch the top of his head, which is almost completely bald. He looks up innocently as the place goes wild with wolf-whistles and cheers.

"Eat your heart out, baby! I'm not gonna get no fifty-dollar permanent!"

The crowd that's gathered for the show is as bizarre as he is: statuesque drag queens wearing elaborate bouffant wigs and full-length gowns float through a sea of smoke and faces — gay, straight, black, white, male, female and those who could pass for either one.

There are eight "girls" in the drag show, two black and six white, who lip-sync a succession of recorded Diana Ross talk songs, Peggy Lee show tunes and melodramatic torch numbers ending on one knee with expressions of grotesque anguish. "Misty Blue," "Did You Read the Morning Paper," "Pen In Hand" and even one called "I Love Being A Girl" are met with a chorus of hoots and applause and an unending

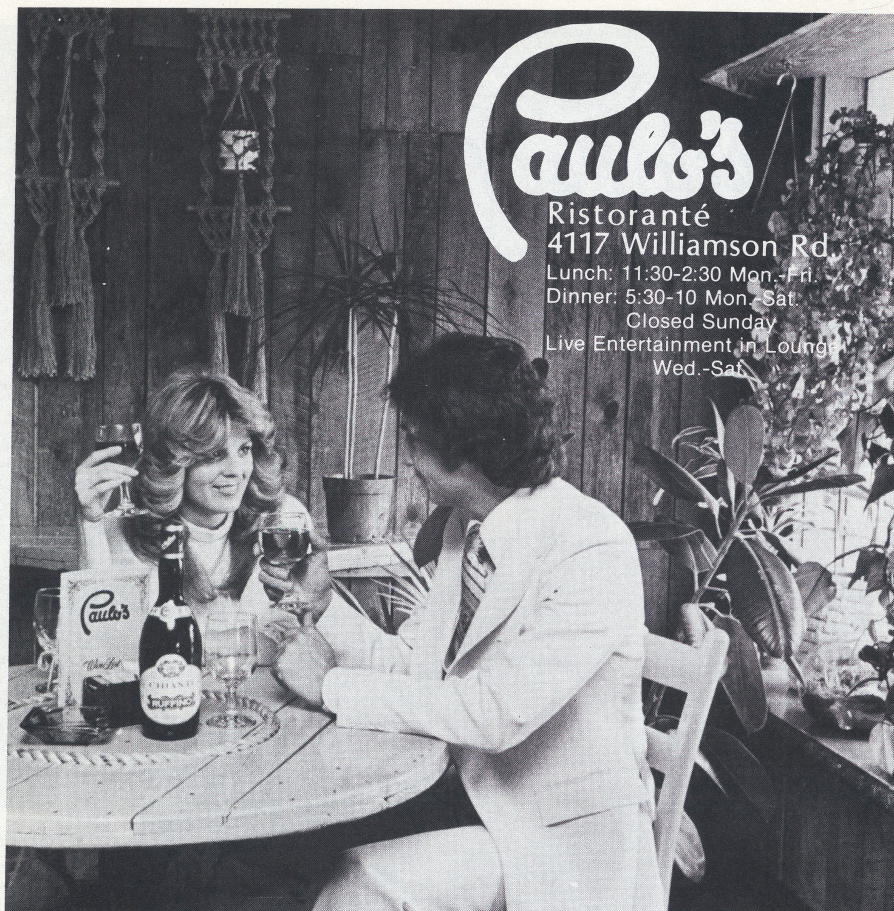
sauna bath of cigarette smoke. Periodically, people slip out of the audience to approach the "singer" for a kiss and return to their seats. The "girls" go on oblivious, unblinking.

A slinky black queen named Carolyn is the crowd's favorite. When she isn't onstage, she slips out of the curtained dressing room door to bestow roses on the "girls" who are performing. Some of them are amazingly beautiful. Several have gorgeous, slender legs, but there are moments when the whole thing seems ludicrously campy, like a bunch of kids shunted upstairs who've gotten into Mommy's closet. Sometimes it's a heavy jawline or a certain darkness around the mouth that gives it away, sometimes a square shoulder or the incongruous bulge of a bicep, or that moment of awkwardness when they raise their dresses to mount the singer's stool. None of them seem quite sure of their footing in high heels, and there are times when their dresses look ill-fitting and old-fashioned. In fact, sometimes the show seems in an odd way square, or at least the womanhood that is being parodied is without subtlety, crudely mimicked, a cliché.

Miss Gay California is doing a misty number, her nose up into the spotlight. A sibilant undercurrent of conversation rises around her, but she seems unaware of anything but the song. A leggy black queen wearing a shimmery full-length gown slit to the knee prances out onto the floor to hand her the mandatory rose. Miss Gay California holds it to her breast, gazing up rapturously into the face of some imaginary

- Continued Page 66

Photo by Stefan Bechtel



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SEX CHANGE/From Page 25

lover. Her lips don't miss a beat, but ever so slightly, when she holds the rose away from her body, it trembles. She's nervous — scared! She's worked hard on this number. She wants it to be good.

At one point the place goes dim and a trio of dancers enters the strobe-lit arena: two white girls, their painted faces divided between the eyes into black and white, and a black man similarly painted, wearing white pants and a black top. Nothing could be more apropos than this curious visualization of divisions, of opposites, so surrealistically scrambled. In the strobe, their movements flutter like silent movies, faces vivid and grotesque as apparitions.

At the end of the show, one of the "girls," whose stage name is Rhoda Winters, stands in front of the microphone in a plain yellow dress reading a list of awards and presentations in a PTA monologue. She announces that the show has been a benefit performance for FAIR (Free Alliance for Individual Rights), and each of the "showgirls" in turn comes up to make a contribution. No one else stirs from their seats.

A year ago, Rhoda began taking the female hormones estrogen and progestin.

Of all the "girls," Rhoda is perhaps the most curious. Standing there reading in an unaffected, explanatory way, her bearing is so completely female — her skin looks soft, she has breasts, and her voice is clearly that of a woman — it seems difficult to imagine that this is an "impersonation." And most of it isn't. A year ago, Rhoda began taking the female hormones estrogen and progestin to begin the long, strange journey across what until only recently was the ultimate, unbridgeable barrier: the physical differentiation between a man and a woman.

Unlike the rest of the "girls" in the show, Rhoda is a transsexual. The differences among these various forms of sexual behavior are clear, though often misunderstood. A transsexual has a gender identity opposite to that of his or her actual physical anatomy. Transvestites, who are usually male and may or may not be homosexual, wear some or all of the clothing of the opposite sex for sexual gratification, but not out of a psychological identification with that sex.

The first successful, medically supervised sex-change operation was performed in Europe in 1930, but the procedure did not receive much notice until an American ex-G.I. named George Jorgensen became Christine Jorgensen at a Danish clinic in 1952. Jorgensen wrote a book and took to the lecture circuit as an intelligent, outspoken and often flamboyant advocate of the rights of those who believe the physical change has merely brought their bodies into line with what they have always been in their minds.

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Cheryl Churchill Kathy Laeb

In 1966, Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore opened the first Gender Identity Clinic, and today there are 20 others scattered across the country, including one at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Most centers, which carefully screen applicants and reject eight out of every 10, require that those accepted for the operation dress and live as members of the sex they will become for at least two years prior to surgery.

"Time" magazine has estimated that there are some 10,000 transsexuals in the U.S. alone.

There have been far more man-into-woman sex-change operations than woman-into-man, because the latter is more difficult, costlier, and has been less successful. Though there is as yet no generally accepted explanation for transsexualism, *Time* magazine has estimated that there are some 10,000 transsexuals in the U.S. alone, and today, in many states Blue Cross will even cover the hospital bills.

It remains one of the oddest triumphs of combined science, with psychiatry, surgery and biochemistry coming together to actualize what has been the subject of myth for centuries.

From a telephone conversation with Rhoda Winters:

Is Rhoda there please? Is she up yet?

(Husky male voice — her father): "Just a second. He's still in bed. I'll get him up."

(When Rhoda comes to the phone, she says she feels like "death warmed over" and laughs that she needs to be "sandblasted" after all the makeup she had to put on for last night's show. Rhoda, 25, is a hairdresser and a college student in Norfolk, though she was born and reared in Roanoke, where her parents still live.)

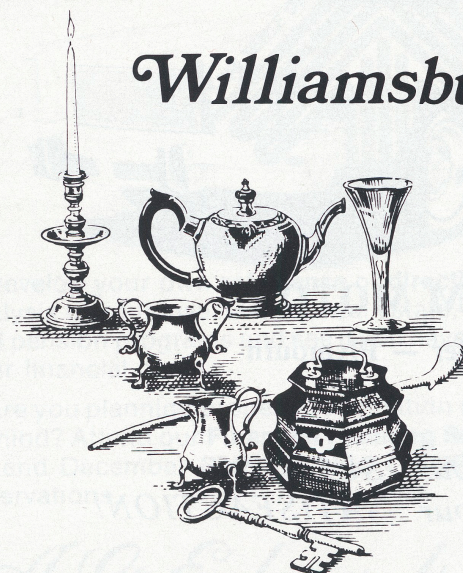
Do you do many shows like the one last night?

"I do one every other month or so. It helps pay for the hormones, which cost \$23 a month."

How long have you been taking hormones, and what do they do?

"I started a year ago this month. I had four injections, but I decided to take the rest in pill form because injections can cause the body to form blood clots and bruises very easily — one of the unhealthy side-effects. I'm taking a number of different drugs, prior to the physical operation: one drug for weight redistribution, one which causes change in skin texture — your skin softens and smoothens, it makes you look more... well, voluptuous — other drugs to develop the breasts and tilt the pelvic girdle forward, to cause loss of body hair and raise the pitch of the voice. I'm also taking voice lessons to raise the modulations — they're different in a woman's voice. The pills also make you eat like a horse, so you've got to watch it. I get

- Continued Page 68



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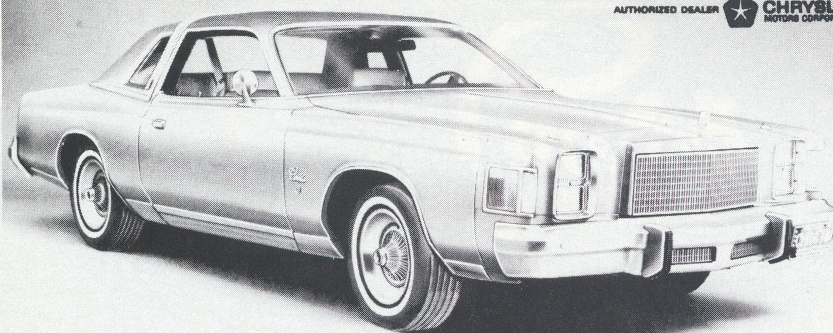
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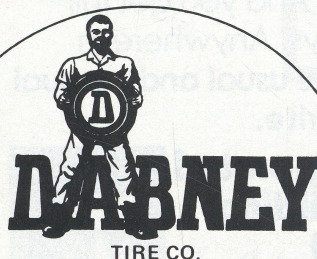
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cramps, and I've had what they call 'hormone depression' from time to time. It's like your life is going 40 directions at once, and so is your body, but you've got to focus in that one direction, on that one life you want."

Have you always felt like you were 'a woman trapped in a man's body'?

"Well, that may be a tired line, but ever since I can remember, that's the way I've felt. I went to Community Mental Health, a psychiatric hospital in Norfolk, and they gave me a battery of psychological tests — seven in all, including the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) and the Rorschach — to determine if the operation was what I really needed. The doctors there recommended that I have it done when the results came back. I'm a transsexual — a woman."

Do you consider yourself a homosexual?

"No, although a lot of transsexuals go through the game of being gay at first. You pass through a very confusing stage. But I'm engaged to a man who is definitely not gay — he really wants me to get the operation, although he's a little scared about it because of the dangers involved."

Can you legally marry a man after the operation?

"Not in Virginia, but you can in other states. Legally, I am already a woman. I've had my name changed, and I have a Virginia driver's license in my female name. It's a little expensive but not too difficult — it cost about \$150 altogether."

"I plan to adopt children. But believe me — they'll never know about this operation."

If you could have children, would you want to?

"I plan to adopt children. But believe me — they'll never know about this operation. They won't need to, because I'll be a female."

What are your personal feelings about the surgery? Will this come as a great relief? Are you frightened?

"Well, naturally there are dangers — I mean, you can get cancer from taking some of these drugs. My sister, who is a nurse (and completely straight, sexually) says that surgery in the lower regions like that can cause an embolism, or clotting, very easily if you're not careful. She gives me more trouble about this than anybody. But the way I feel is this: if you have a malignancy or a growth that shouldn't be there, and you have it rectified by surgery, you always feel better. This is corrective surgery, as well as reconstructive."

Do you feel it's impossible for you to go on living as a male?

"Well look — if I couldn't get this surgery, I'd have to do reconstructive surgery on my left and right wrists. A couple of good deep cuts."

At this halfway stage — before the operation, but after the hormonal changes — do you use the men's or women's bathroom?

"The women's, of course. I have ever since I started taking the drugs a year ago."

What's the exact nature of the operation?

"Obviously, they remove your male organs and form a vagina in its place, though you don't have a uterus or any of the internal parts, of course. I'm really not too sure about the details."

Will you be able to have an orgasm?

"I have a friend who has had the operation, and she says that she does. Orgasm is a state of mind — it's more psychological than physical."

(NOTE: Surface penile tissue is used to form the "vagina" and retains its nerve endings intact, so orgasm does have an actual physical basis.)

Where will you have it done, and how much will it cost?

"Usually it costs about \$10,000, but I'm going to a man in Colorado — Stanley H. Biber — who is one to the best reconstructive surgeons in the country. He's very good. I've seen his work. It's going to cost me \$3,000, and that includes air fare out and back."

How are you going to pay for it?

"I've been saving every dime for two years. And my lover has money, he's very good to me. I'll have enough by next September or the September after that — one or two years from now. I'd be happy to accept donations."

"You should do whatever will make you a more complete, productive human being."

The whole idea of interfering with so basic a part of your makeup is almost like playing God. Have you wondered about the spiritual aspect of the operation?

"Let me quote what my minister said. He said, 'You should do whatever will make you a more complete, productive human being.' People tend to think that anyone who deviates from the sexual norm — transsexuals, transvestites, homosexuals, whatever — don't have God. But I think they rely on Him even more because of all the trials and tribulations they have to go through. I think I'm running up against all these walls because the good Lord has a reason for it."

What would you like to do with your life, ultimately?

"I'm taking police training in school right now. I'd like to do police work, Naval intelligence or something like that. They need more women in these fields, and you have to understand that I'll have a unique perspective: I've been both a man AND a woman."

How do your parents feel about the change?

"Well, it's been kind of difficult for them this past year. But I think they feel that if it makes me happy, that's what I should do."



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