

Harper's BAZAAR

BOYS will be GIRLS

Beauty

At a finishing school like no other, Veronica Vera demystifies makeup, manicures, and manners for boys who just want to be girls. By James Servin

It's academia à la mode, with course offerings like Shopping, Facials at Home, Manicures/Pedicures, Trip to the Beauty Salon, and Femmercize Aerobics. It's lowbrow, it's highbrow, it's eyebrow. It's Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, open now for a year and a half in downtown Manhattan.

"This is the main campus," proclaims the exuberant Veronica Vera ("Miss Vera" to her students) as she enters a studio with pink walls awash in glitter and pink closets stocked with pink tutus and size 13 pumps. Pink floor-to-ceiling bookshelves display academy-approved titles such as *Amy Vanderbilt's New Complete Book of Etiquette*, *Way Bandy's Designing Your Face*, and *From Masculine to Feminine and All Points In Between*.

At the far end of the room, a purple feather boa reaches from the ceiling down to a row of wigged mannequins. Their painted faces oversee a long table cluttered with tubes of lipstick, perfume bottles, press-on nails, powder puffs, and tins of eyeshadow. This is an altar to makeup, a shrine to cosmetics.

"I truly believe that the academy is the flip side of the feminist movement," says the fortyish Vera, whose résumé includes starring in about a dozen X-rated films, lecturing at Yale and Dartmouth, and testifying about pornography before the Senate Judiciary Committee. ("Plus," boasts the academy brochure, "she has a great wardrobe.")

Dressed today in black lace leggings, a burgundy velvet dress, pearls, and sparkling black cat's-eye glasses, her hair in a Cat-woman do, the wanton Svangali warms to her lecture. "The feminist movement was all about needing to share in the male experience, to get out of the bedrooms and into the boardrooms. But, meanwhile, men have suffered from what I call Venus envy. There is a deep need in men to feel soft, to be glamorous, to do housework." (The school offers a course called Personal Maid Training. This two-and-a-half-hour class meets at Vera's studio and costs \$300.)

With a two-to-one student-teacher ratio, the school offers personalized attention from its six female deans, among them, Miss Dana, Dean of High Heels ("You can look beautiful, but without the right walk, the whole thing gets blown"), and the omnipresent Paulette Powell, Dean of Cosmetology. "Growing up in the South, I made up my boyfriends every week for the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*," says Powell, 25, winner of a Marilyn Monroe look-alike contest. "I never thought there was anything weird or kinky about it."

Testimonials pour in from grateful students, most of whom are heterosexual, some of whom are married, all of whom fall into the estimated 3 to 5 percent of the male population who like to cross-dress (Miss Vera's source: the International Foundation for Gender Education). "Paulette showed me how to use eyeshadow, how to blend a turquoise or blue down by the lid with a more earthy tone up toward the brow," says one professional who calls his alter ego Stephanie. "She also taught me how to use mascara without getting it in my eyes."

Says "April," a beefy construction worker by day: "Before I entered the academy, it would take me an hour to get my face ready. I never knew if I was doing it right. Now it takes 15 minutes or so to blend the makeup, to even out the colors." And thanks to a field trip to Cosmetics Plus, April has found her funky eyeshadow shades: "gold, hot pink, and violet."

A 40-year-old engineer who goes by the name of Jennifer credits the school with bringing out "my softer, country-girl look." Along with the joys of liquid eyeliner, Jennifer learned an appreciation for "why women are so stylishly late. You've only got so much time to play." Even deeper epiphanies abound. "Living my life as Jennifer has made my interactions with women more compassionate and understanding. You've got to be very brave to go out and pull off this trick," Jennifer says. "Miss Vera and Miss Paulette give us the confidence."

And the makeup tips. Paulette Powell has the transformation routine down pat. "First, and most important, is the beard cover," she says. "There's no getting around that. Then comes the pan stick over the beard cover, then the eyelashes, then the lipstick. Men's lips are often thinner than women's, so I'll extend the lip line for a fuller look."

One thing Veronica Vera insists upon is good grooming on both sides of the gender bend. Moisturizing is mandatory. "The academy," says the Dean of Cosmetology, "is *not* interested in making femme fatales out of schlubby guys." ■

