

GETTING TO THIS DAY hasn't been easy for "April." In a world where most women wish they had a smaller nose or thinner ankles or longer legs, imagine trying to ape Grace Kelly when you're a six-foot, 200-pound man with a two-o'clock shadow and hands like bear claws.

But thanks to Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, there's hope.

"No one can fool 100 percent of the people all the time," says April, a broad-shouldered foundryman who's wearing hoop earrings and a lacy maid's bonnet. But lifting the hem of his short, puckered skirt, April points out his assets: "I do have great legs."

April is one of the three men who today are marking their initiation into Miss Vera's academy by showing their poise while serving drinks to 30 or so of Vera's friends. They are gathered in the Chelsea studio that serves as Vera's academy.

Most of Veronica Vera's students are from nearby, but some have traveled from London and Rome. "We get executives, lawyers, construction workers, even a lumberjack," says the 40-year-old Vera, spilling out of her spaghetti-strap gold lamé dress. "I'd say 80 percent of my students are straight. Some people have brought their wives."

"I'm heterosexual," says "Jennifer," a 40-year-old nuclear-reactor engineer who favors a red wig, black stockings, and a flouncy

taffeta skirt. "Not a shadow of a doubt," he continues. "I'm a kick-ass athlete. An excellent pool player. And believe me, you don't get through thirteen years of marriage without being pretty good in the sack."

It was just about a year ago that Vera was approached by a male friend who wanted her to show him the fine points of being a lady.

"He stayed dressed up the whole weekend," says Vera. "I showed him how to put on makeup. We went shopping for lingerie. I took him to be waxed."

Vera decided that her "women's-studies course" would be a great way to make some extra money while she wrote her autobiography. The Catholic daughter of a



Mistress Antoinette (a guest) and Sprinkle.

Linden, New Jersey, caterer.

she's traded over-the-counter stocks, posed for Robert Mapplethorpe, starred in a dozen X-rated films, published articles about her adventures in the skin trade, lectured at Dartmouth and Yale, and testified about pornography before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Since she first advertised her finishing school in *Transvestian* magazine, Vera says, she's helped about 100 men "experience the sensual pleasure of their femmeselves." She charges \$300 for a private class



Miss Veronica Vera, flanked by "April," left, and "Jennifer."

conducted by herself and Paulette Powell, her dean of cosmetology; \$1,000 buys a day of "photo therapy" with Annie Sprinkle, the porn actress turned performance artist. There are cheaper group sessions, as well as a \$2,000 weekend that allows a man to join Vera and Paulette when "three bombshells do the town."

"Oh, we've had adventures!" boasts Jennifer. "Shopping at Bergdorf's. Rumpelmayer's for ice cream. Tavern on the Green for breakfast on Easter morning!"

Most of Vera's pupils are between 35 and 45 years old. "A lot of them have never

undergoing "sex reassignment." April says his ideal companion would be a woman, but until he finds her, he enjoys the company of men who dress up as women.

"We have to be nice to one another," says April, "because there are not too many people who are nice to us."

April especially looks forward to attending the pajama parties that Miss Vera throws with her sexy female "deans." "The pajama parties are great," Jennifer exclaims. "We generally have about six students and six deans. I guess that's what I like about Miss Vera's—the student-to-teacher ratio." GEORGE RUSH

shared this side of themselves with anyone," she says. "Some have no outfits, so we provide them. Others have enviable wardrobes."

Jennifer keeps his cross-dressing hidden from most people he knows, as do many of Miss Vera's students. He has no doubt that his transvestism ended his marriage. April's gender-bending broke both his marriages. A second-degree black belt and the father of a 14-year-old son, he's thinking about



Boys will be girls: In training.