

THE FORUM INTERVIEW



Q&A with Veronica Vera

Veronica Vera has starred in porn movies, testified in defense of pornography before a Senate Judiciary Committee and lived through the growing pains of what she calls her sexual evolution. From her roots as a "sex radical" blazing trails with Annie Sprinkle to her current affair with the mainstream media, Ms. Vera has gained a unique perspective on peoples' sexuality. Her varied experiences provided the inspiration for founding Miss Veronica Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls. I sat with her in her pink-painted, gold-glittered classroom and spoke with her about life as the dean of a cross-dressing academy.

How did your experiences as a sex worker influence your creation of the academy?

Working out my personal sexual issues helped me deal with things like sexual guilt. When I created the academy, I didn't have to decide whether the cross-dressers who called me had a right to explore this. I just immediately said, "This is who you are. Of course you have a right to explore this. Let's figure out how to do it right." I came up with the idea that these men needed a school, which helped me come up with the name Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls. The name is very up-front and

to the point; it doesn't hide anything. It's funny, it's fun. It makes it accessible to people and doesn't beat around the bush. It's really out there. I think I was able to be out there because I had dealt with my own personal sexual issues. I was prepared by my experiences in the sex industry.

So having been freed up yourself gave you the ability to free up other people?

Right. I went through my own personal female liberation, so I'm the perfect guide to help men experience their personal liberation.

What did you find surprising when you started doing this?

In the beginning, I thought twice about putting the academy out there. I did the work for about a year, saw quite a few people, and at the end of that year, I thought what we were doing for people was really great, and that I should continue. But I held back, because I thought it could be limiting. If people found out that I was dressing cross-dressers—it's such a flamboyant thing to do—they would never think of me as a writer again. And writing was very important to me. Well, no publisher was banging down my door for my sexual evolution book. So I decided to do the academy. I threw a party and invited the press. *New York* magazine came and wrote a full-page story. That started the media ball rolling. What surprised me was that, instead of limiting me, it opened up a whole world of possibilities to me. So now the academy gets students from all over the world, actors come here to get into their cross-dressing roles, we have a 900 line so people can have

classes over the telephone. I just landed a contract with Doubleday to write an academy book. My mantra is "The book, the show, the movie!" And every day there are surprises as far as the people who come here. It's very exciting work.

What is it about your students that draws them to the cross-dressing rituals?

Most of the people who come here have been dressing in some form since childhood. The clothing is connected to feelings of sensuality, sexuality, security and safety. Some were going into their mothers' bedrooms and putting on Mommy's dresses because it felt good, it was connected to feelings of love. Or maybe they were wearing these clothes when their little penises were getting hard for the first time. Those left lasting impressions, and perhaps they were reinforced. Some of the students may have been dressed by their sisters when they were young. It was a combination of love and erotic feelings.

There was one student who was beaten when he was young while his sisters weren't, so he always longed to be a girl. He associated being female with being safe. What we teach here is if they follow their "femmeself," let the "femmeself" be their guide, they can learn about their feelings and it will help them open up to the world, rather than isolate them from it. Sometimes they can very easily go to the femmeself, dress privately, not share it with anybody and really isolate themselves. One of the reasons I started the school, and why I think it's a good idea for these men to explore this side of themselves, is for them to learn more about themselves. It's not only learning how to

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look great in a dress or about passing as a female. It's what you learn in this female persona and incorporating it into your life. So no matter what your fashion statement, you're happier, healthier, more sexy, a more whole human being.

Being a cross-dresser has been considered freakish and somewhat scandalous. Tell me why you think that may be changing.

It's not as unknown a quantity as it once was. More people are aware of cross-dressing. There are support groups. More cross-dressers are connecting with other cross-dressers, finding out that they're not alone. I think a lot of times the person who's dressing still thinks that he's freakish because he's grown up with this idea of himself, and it's tough to cast off that idea. Also, I think guilt can be an aphrodisiac; it can be a real turn-on. Sometimes people want to have some hidden part of themselves to hold on to.

Would you say that most of your students are dressing privately?

Yes, I would say about 70 percent are very private.

Have you seen anyone go through the transition of sharing it with someone else?

Oh, yeah, I've seen people come out. One student who comes here regularly brought his mother to Night of a Thousand Gowns. We have more and more wives coming here with their husbands. That's

encouraging. One man brought his fiancée after he'd been in a few times.

I prefer to make sure the student is really ready to come out. There was a man who came here last week, and he had a fabulous time, but he wasn't out to his wife. I encouraged him, said that it would be nice if he could share it with his wife. I really think it's nice for people to share their cross-dressing with their sex partners. But it's important that you share it when you're ready, when you understand enough about it. Because when one of the students says, "My wife would never understand," what I'm hearing is "I don't understand, so how could anybody else understand?"

That was what one man was saying. So I gave him the recommended reading list, and I told him about the groups for wives if he did decide to share it. But I thought he needed to find out more, to be more understanding about it for himself, so that he could share it with confidence rather than terror and shame. I got a call from him a few days later. He'd had a talk with his wife and tried to share it with her, and it was a total disaster. He had just had the class. I didn't really feel he was ready. But he was so gung-ho. Of course, she wasn't ready. And I haven't really had a chance to talk to him about it yet. He was afraid to leave me a number, but he will be calling again.

Are most of your students straight?

Most of them identify as straight. They'll say they're heterosexual. About 60 percent of them are married. But many will also say, "When

I'm dressed, anything goes." Sometimes they mean that only in fantasy, and sometimes they're ready to be more adventuresome. Part of what they learn when they come here is that the line between who's heterosexual, who's bisexual and who's homosexual is very blurred. You can be heterosexual and have bisexual fantasies. We all have the physical capacity to be bisexual. I think bisexuality is something that's going to be much more out there. We're going to realize how many people are bisexual as time goes on.

I've asked students, "When do you have your most reliable erections? Is it when you're dressed, or when you're not dressed?" And they usually say, "Oh, it's when I'm dressed." So I always think that if I were married to a cross-dresser, it would be "You'd better put that dress on!" I would say, "Go for it."

I think many couples don't communicate about what their sexual needs are, that within these relationships, people aren't being totally satisfied. Part of it is that there is something missing in their sex lives and that's why these men are nervous. The wives or partners—whatever sex partners—need to speak up for their own needs. Sometimes the cross-dressers get all the understanding, and meanwhile it's the wife that really needs to be supported.

The word *goddess* has come into vogue. What is happening in our society that people are having the urge to worship women?

I think there's a big need for balance in the world. It has been so

patriarchal. I think my students represent a need most men have to be more in balance. I think men in general have what I call Venus envy. When women needed balance in our lives, we created the women's movement. We wanted to go from the bedroom to the boardroom.

Men have a need for balance also. The cross-dressers are the tip of an iceberg. So I always say, "For every woman who burned her bra, there's a man ready to wear one." It's not just a balance needed within an individual. It's a balance that's needed in this country, on this planet. To go more under the influence of the female, the nurturing, all the things we associate with the female, including sex.

How has facilitating all these transformations changed your perception of things?

I've learned so many things from my students. First of all, it's a great creative outlet for me. It's a great business. Every student who comes here wants to be me. I have the best job in the world. I've learned that you don't have to feel guilty about who you are in order to express love. I realized that this guilt can be a way of expressing love. I had gone through feeling guilty about my whole sexuality, about myself as a sexual human being, about choosing sex as my career. Even though I was really into what I was doing, I would still have times when I would have to deal with my sexual guilt. That didn't go away for a long time. There are other ways to express love. You don't have to beat yourself up to do it.—*Abby Ehmann* ♀