

# Venus envy

At Miss Vera's  
Finishing School for  
Boys Who Want To  
Be Girls, Manhattan  
accountants and  
lawyers spend  
a fortune learning to  
take it like a woman.  
By SHERYN GEORGE

**T**he schoolroom is sex-flush pink. So are the blood velvet curtains, the bookshelves, the crimson couch. Musk incense is burning and there are rosy candles flickering in the corners. We're in Manhattan, in Chelsea, the thriving garment district of New York. Makes perfect sense that this is the site for the feminine paradise that is Miss Vera's Finishing School — for boys who want to be girls.

I've arrived at a busy time. Veronica Vera, the Dean of Students is sashaying about, pulling together a cool soirée for the birthday of sex deity Xaviera Hollander. The guest list includes Veronica's best mate Annie Sprinkle, the high priestess of pleasure positivity, Betty Dodson, the empress of female masturbation, plus a

bevy of naked babes (male) to wait on the feisty femmes. Too dizzying!

Curling like a cat in a pink armchair, Miss Vera's sizeable breasts (real) spill alarmingly from the neckline of her deep pink, crushed velvet pantsuit. Two grey pussies target her lap, writhing in pleasure once they've landed. Nearly 50, this local legend is one of Manhattan's most surprising success stories.

Helping blokes in frocks have their first female orgasm wasn't the original career choice for Veronica Vera. A star of porn films by Candida Royalle, Miss Vera has testified before a Senate Judiciary Committee for freedom of expression and was a model for Robert Mapplethorpe. After inheriting her adjacent Chelsea apartments from her late husband ("He was gay and I think it's so perfect that this is his legacy."), she settled down to write





them to look good. I thought, they can have lessons in how to walk in high heels and how to use makeup and how to dress and they need a school. I didn't have to go through whether or not they had a right to this — I saw them as going through their own personal sexual evolution, something I had done, so they were entitled."

The men who attend her classes are required to go through several rituals on arrival. Students must enclose their fees in a pink envelope, then light a candle shaped like a woman, kneel before it and make an invocation to the Goddess, handing over their trust to the deans of the school.

Divine intervention seems downright necessary. Miss Vera's students are not petite pixie men. In the main they are big blokes, football types aching to transform into "elegant, Manhattan career women".

"Y'know," she says thoughtfully, "they love to show off their legs. But sometimes their legs are..." (she raises her brows significantly) "really hairy. So we give them tights to cover up their leg hair — because it's hard to keep it from other people in their lives if they start shaving."

**W**hile some of Miss Vera's students are leg men, others are committed breast men. A large chest of drawers, full of fantasy undergarments, also bulges with synthetic breasts, complete with nipples. Miss Vera passes me a boob, which is gently leaking a little bit of fluid. The bazooka size makes sense given the larger proportions of men's bodies, although most of her students want B-cups. "At first I thought they would all want really large breasts, but it turns out they prefer the petite breast." Then there's the corset, which carves a figure out of even the most opulent beer gut. Classic Scarlett O'Hara 40cm waist material, the corsets squeeze most of the guys' guts down to an 80.

Okay, so they can attach breasts and get a waist carved into them, but what about their schlongs? Where can they go? "Oh, they strap them in place with this...slingshot thing," Miss Vera says blithely, waving a medieval-looking jock-strap. "They cup their penis between their testicles and this holds the penis down."



*After*  
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*What*  
EVERY GIRL  
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TIVE O'CLOCK  
SHADOW.  
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## Big business

Miss Vera's ads have won over many a nervous truck driver, offering a discreet and respectable service.

It doesn't look very comfy, I suggest. "It's not, but the student doesn't have to wear it unless he's worried about showing his erection. And they do get excited feeling the underwear, so you know, they can wear the panties without the slingshot, but we don't want anything sticking up!"

The picture I'm getting is that while everything looks kind of frothy, there's a mission here. It's an emotional pilgrimage these guys are on. "Yeah, we've had people with tears in their eyes. We had a guy come in last week, he was aged 55 but he looked like an old man — maybe like he was 70 years old — and he looked almost comatose as his makeup was being done. I was thinking, what's it going to be like, y'know, two days with this person, this sphinx here? But by the end he was transformed, he was cracking jokes! By the time he left and took his makeup off, all of a sudden he looked like he'd dropped 20 years. He was smiling again!

"They all become more fun," Miss Vera continues, describing the difference between the male and the female self of her students. "I've had a lot of students describe their lives as dull and boring, and the femmeself is always less emotionally inhibited. It all depends, because some people have had bad sexual experiences and some are practically virgins, but wherever they start, the femmeself is more liberated, emotionally and sexually."

"For most of the people who come here, [the sexual stimulation of female clothes] started in early childhood — getting dressed by their sister or their mother... maybe they were getting turned on, or maybe they were going into their mother's bedroom and finding security and maybe going into her closet — if this is happening at the same time as when their little penises are getting hard, getting their first reactions, it all just warps together."

That's lot of maybes, yet Miss Vera's claims ring true. Like she says: "Our earliest sexual connections do stay with us. They have huge power over us...and the trick is in removing the guilt, without eradicating the fantasy."

"I always ask the students, 'When do you get your most reliable erection, when you're dressed or not dressed?' And they always tell me when they're dressed, and so I think, well, if I were married to a cross-dresser, I would want to share that erection!". She erupts into chuckles, "I mean, if that is how he's really gonna get his most reliable erection, I want to be there!"

And wives do want to be there — Miss Vera welcomes them, but only after an interview to make sure they won't cramp hubby's style.

"I had one man come with his wife and they'd been married for a long time, both sort of late fifties, came all the way from Ireland." (He must have been really worried about someone finding out.) "The guy was a really strong, stocky wrestler type, and his wife was a total little lady in her little hat and shoes. When we went out she was a bit nervous, and because she was nervous he was conscious of being his femmeself — she was kind of getting him to be her husband. It made me realise that from then on I had to make sure the wife was there because she wanted to be there, not there to support their marriage."



the story of her sexual evolution. But a funny thing happened...

"I had met a woman who helped cross-dressers with their hair and make-up. She was about to leave town and had a lawyer from Texas who wanted to cross-dress for the entire weekend. So anyway, we got along really well on the phone and I said, 'You have to pay me plenty 'cos I will need help', because right from the start I knew I couldn't do this by myself — and much to his credit he did it. On the last day Annie Sprinkle photographed him as a porno movie star for his own collection and he stayed dressed for the whole weekend."

**N**ow in its fifth year, Miss Vera's school for cross-dressing truck drivers, lawyers, accountants (a lot of accountants) is a bona fide establishment. Fans include Johnny Depp, who studied the Academy's texts for his role as the cross-dressing schlock director in *Ed Wood*. But the bulk of students are 40-something, straight, married blokes with well-paying jobs. And a fetish for silk stockings. On their own legs.

Financially, the courses would have to attract professional men. Classes (ranging from "Playgirl After Hours" to "Centrefold Model" to "Maid to Order") are not cheap. Miss Vera now officially makes \$US72,000 per annum and an estimated 300 regular students pass through the pink halls of the Academy each year. Not bad when you consider her overheads — deans of high heels, cosmetology, voice training and home economics are on the staff, and materials include plenty of frocks and a mountainette of razors. Classes start at \$525 and finish up at around \$2,000 for a full-on trannie experience weekend. Heck, even this interview with Miss Vera cost \$300 and I'm *already* a girl.

Unlike the stars of films like *Paris Is Burning*, who used drag to hurdle class barriers, Miss Vera's students already have status. What they don't have are friends to play out their fantasies with, as most of these guys are strictly closeted cross-dressers. What they do have is the burning desire to dress as women with other men, and plenty of money to pay for the help of an expert. And Miss Vera is a professional. She doesn't want a town full of tragic trannies — she wants guys who look and feel great in their gowns.

"I didn't want men who wanted to be parodies of women — I really wanted



Miss Vera goes to work on student "Patricia" Harrington, who needs a little help in the bust department.



"Then of course, I have men who tell me, 'Oh, (dramatic deep voice) my wife is making me come.'." She laughs, her loveheart choker colliding with alternate orbs. "We had one couple come and she'd given it to him as a birthday present. After he was dressed they looked like brother and sister. People go with family types — you know, some men marry the woman they want to be with. And some men marry the woman they want to be."

**S**o all these guys are straight and married — but how do they act when they're all dressed up and out kicking up their high heels? What's their sexual preference then? "They want to be desired sex objects, desired by women and men. Some will say that they're not interested in men at all, that they're totally lesbian," she says, disconcertingly. "But most want that male attention as well as female, because the whole idea of what sex is, is so complicated. Part of it is just connected to attention from mummy and daddy, not sex at all, you know, so it's uh..." she begins to trail off, frowning slightly, "...it is complicated."

Sibling rivalry can be a major inspiration to cross-dress for some men — basically, they're out-girling the sisters who stole their childhood thunder. "One student we had here was a first-born and when his sister was born, suddenly the spotlight was taken from him and given to the sister, and he experienced what

I call Venus Envy. What this is about is getting that attention back again."

Miss Vera claims that while women needed to get in touch with their masculine sides, and did, there were multitudes of blokes left behind wishing they could do housework. Weirdly enough, they actually think they're missing out on something. "My motto is, 'For every woman who burnt her bra there's a man ready to wear one'. I think the power men have had has cast them in a kind of straightjacket — because in order to maintain that power they have given themselves very little freedom, emotionally — even sexually. In the male

world, sex can be a power thing.

"Like, some of the men who come to the Academy have a desire for anal penetration, yet identify with being straight. It's that they want to be...well, submissive in some way. Maybe," she says, looking away, "we have never really encouraged men to be on the bottom."

It's like women have a quality to celebrate, and I want the men to respect that."

Being more female, Miss Vera believes, would help all men. "I had one man come here recently and he was a total mess — he had seen a friend get exploded by a grenade in Vietnam and he had been shot just before he got out and it was like, why was he in Vietnam? He volunteered. Why? Because he'd always felt like a sissy. So he couldn't just get



"Jennifer" James even celebrated her fortieth birthday at Miss Vera's (right) after learning to tuck (below) and donning a frilly frock (left).

They may want to be on the bottom, but the women they emulate are all at the top. Role models include... "Let's see, there's Simone de Beauvoir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Cher and Madonna, and lots of movie stars. And some will pick their mother or people they actually know. It helps to have those female role models, because I figure in a way that this is kind of a female studies course for men. And I want it to have depth and meaning behind it, and it's one thing to say, 'Oh we're going to teach you how to put on a dress and teach you how to be a girl', and another to have some understanding of female consciousness.

drafted, he had to place himself in extreme danger. Just like Mike Tyson — he thought he was a sissy at school, so he became a boxer!" And the rest. "Well, that's the whole thing for so many men: the acceptance of the feminine could have helped them."

In fact, women rule at the Academy. "This is not the kind of place where a man can come and write down the list of things that he wants and the whole trip. This is like, 'No, you are the student and I am the teacher and you are here because we have something to teach you.' About female life experience. About what it is," she exclaims, "to be a man!"