

QUEEN FOR A DAY

At Miss Vera's school, classes can be a drag

By JON KALISH

BOYS WILL BE — UH —

girls? Well, look at the recent reports that J. Edgar Hoover actually had a secret life as a drag queen. Or how about the popularity of "The Crying Game," whose now well-known secret revolves around the surprise gender of one of its stars.

Then look at Dame Edna Everage, the drag host of a talk show on the Fox network, and 6-foot-4-inch drag queen RuPaul, the well-exposed singer of the major dance hit "You Better Work."

It's becoming a drag, drag, drag, drag world.

Not surprising, then, is the existence of Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, a self-described cross-dressing academy based in Chelsea.

"What we're doing is looking for the woman inside every man," explains Veronica Vera, a 40-year-old ex-porn actress who founded the school a little over a year ago. "We support our students in their need to be pampered and passive."

The walls of the school's makeup and dressing room is Barbie-doll pink, with a dusting of glitter. On a recent Sunday afternoon the place reeked of geranium perfume as Miss Vera, the "Dean of Students," and Miss Paulette, the "Dean of Cosmetology," attended to "Jennifer," a 40-year-old engineer from Connecticut, and "April," a beefy Queens construction worker.



SKIRTING THE ISSUE: "Jennifer," a student at Miss Vera's Finishing School, after a makeup session

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Admiring April, who was wearing a white ballet dress with green velvet top, Miss Paulette gushed: "It's unreal how she's blossomed!"

Jennifer, who learned of the school in an ad in a newspaper called "The Transvestian," said he has been cross-dressing since he was 6. "I feel great going out all dressed up. Sometimes guys hit on me. I almost got picked up one night," he confides.

TO BOLSTER HER claim that cross-dressing is a widespread phenomenon, Vera cites a study by the Whelan, Mass.-based International Foundation for Gender Education, which found that 3% to 5% of American males have a desire to dress up as women.

And the high ratings achieved by the "Geraldo" crowd for programs featuring transvestites is further evidence of the practice's cloistered popularity, Vera maintains.

Vera turned down an invitation to appear on "Donahue" because she claims to

want no part of tabloid television's "sophomoric" and sensationalist approach to the subject.

Cross-dressers who appear in such venues, Vera contends, end up being humiliated. And if it's humiliation you're after, she says, visit an S & M club.

"I totally appreciate that some people enjoy that, but that's not where we're coming from," says Vera. "That's not our style."

The fees for this finishing school could finish a guy off if he isn't making a pretty penny. There's a \$30 half-hour consultation before students are accepted ("I'm looking for people who are really serious and want to explore, and are not just feeling an urge to put on a skirt," explains Vera.)

A PRIVATE, 2½-HOUR class costs \$300. Then there's a \$1,000 day of what's called "photo therapy" with Annie Sprinkle, a longtime associate of Vera's, and a \$2,000 weekend on the town with two faculty members — but entertainment expenses and shopping sprees are extra.

For the cross-dresser on a limited budget, the academy offers a \$100-an-hour telephone "correspondence course."

"It's not a cheap hobby," concedes Vera.

The students, most of whom are heterosexuals in their 30s and 40s, are taught how to sip tea, create their own "herstory," master the basics of makeup and walk like a woman.

"A lot of times what gives a cross-dresser away is body movement," explains Vera. "You can see him coming before you get a really good look at the person."

But Vera recognizes that, as the song says, "girls just want to have fun." So the men enrolled in this women's studies program get a chance to brush up on the fundamentals of flirting and have pajama parties.

Some men have brought their wives with them to the finishing school. Tomorrow the school has scheduled a get-together for wives and lovers of cross-dressers to share experiences and better understand their men.

(Kalish is a frequent contributor.)