

Life stories

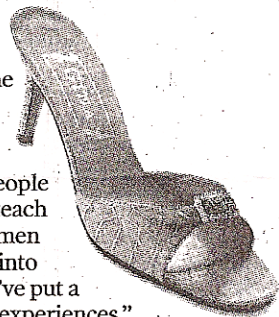
High heels for big boys

If you watch a certain building in Chelsea, New York, you might notice something strange. Many men enter, but more women leave. If you look more closely, you start to register that something is a little off about these women – their stilted way of walking, perhaps, and their wide shoulders.

But as often as not, you don't notice a thing, and that's the way they want it. After all, the men who visit Miss Vera's Finishing School For Boys Who Want To Be Girls pay hefty sums to transform themselves into the woman they always wanted to be.

The students are aged between 18 and 88, but the median age is 40, "because it's a time of self-acceptance", says the school's founder and dean Veronica Vera, a former porn star and sex columnist who has written two books and has her own web site (www.missvera.com). "A lot of people have been [cross] dressing since they were children and thought at some point it would go away. But then, at around 40, they realise it won't so they find out more about it."

Veronica Vera's love of her job is as clear as her students' lip gloss. "I like to put together the 'productions' [the makeover process] and I love helping people feel good. We teach things that women accept readily into their life, and I've put a price on these experiences."



Classes include the four-hour Miracle Miss, which can transform Mark to Marissa (each man chooses his female name) with make-up, wigs and clothes, and teaches basics such as high-heel walking, table manners and getting out of a taxi elegantly. And the two-day Femme Intensive class, during which students stay in a nearby "feminine" inn and venture on to the street.

"What students get the most pleasure from is going out, feeling the wind up their skirts," says Miss Vera. "And they get excited about showing off their legs."

High heels are important. "If they are wearing nothing else feminine when they're at home, they're putting on high heels because it's something they can get out of quickly if they need to."

A majority of the pupils are heterosexual and more than half are married. Some even bring their wives along. For most, though, it's a surreptitious experience with a measure of guilt. "Many students lead a double life," Miss Vera says. "It's not what wives expect when they say 'I do'."

"However, it's not all about sex. It's about security and how these students identify with themselves. A lot are not identifying with themselves as men."

The security, Miss Vera explains, comes from childhood, when female clothes represented safety and love. But, she warns: "Dressing might comfort them but if there's something else they should be dealing with, it's still going to be there. So I say dress, but these men must understand what they have to address or it becomes a fruitless act of escapism. Dressing should lead them to their feelings and not isolate them from them."

Amanda Chater