The world of drag

by Des Wilson

Female impersonators are popular entertainers, though still quite rare in the West End. The author describes three of the double drag acts currently performing in London. Photographs by Richard Cooke.

Dr Evadne Hinge and Dame Hilda Bracket are in private life two young men, George Logan and Perri St Claire.

Ostensibly, the cabaret artists selected to entertain Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips at a charity ball in London last month could not have been more tastefully or more safely chosen, for what could be more respectable than a concert of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan?

It was for Doctor Evadne Hinge and Dame Hilda Bracket the climax of a happy career that started for them in Eastbourne just after the war. Dame Hilda went to audition for a light opera company and was sitting in the stalls when a tall, angular woman stumbled into her in the semi-darkness, knocking her libretto and chocolates on to the floor and then standing on her fingers as she reached to retrieve them. After the apologies came a cup of tea and the start of a friendship and musical partnership that at the time of last month's Royal Performance had lasted for 30 years.

Dame Hilda comes from an old Suffolk family, and is the daughter of Sir Osbert Bracket, who left her a home in Stackton Tressel where she and the Doctor now live. They have named it Utopia Ltd, after the work by Gilbert and Sullivan. The Doctor comes from a fairly eccentric Scottish family. Her sister, now Lavinia Gore Wilmington, hasn't spoken to her for 25 years, after a row over the broken cup of a tea service that had been left to the two of them, and her twin brother Lester ran off to sea and has never been heard of since. (Like the Doctor, he had a hearing aid, only his was in the other ear; she remains confident he will turn up one day and they will know each other by the matching hearing aids.)

Dame Hilda is the home-maker and the cook and is said to be the more feminine of the two. The Doctor has a more scientific mind and spends a lot of her time inventing things. The Doctor is also an amateur wine-maker and once made half of Stacton Tressel ill with a particularly disastrous recipe.

They are both active in the local community: the Doctor is on the Board of Magistrates, the Dame is a governor of a local school. But, of course, their main concern is the Stackton Tressel Light Operatic Society. Over the years the Doctor and the Dame have developed a little two-handed concert called "Gilbert and Sullivan For All" and its popularity in Stackton Tressel led to invitations to perform for charity in nearby church halls. They now appear all over the country.

Now, while all this is pleasant enough, it is hardly exceptional. Nor, no matter how popular their recitals may have been in local halls, does it really explain their invitation to perform before royalty. What is exceptional about Doctor Evadne Hinge and Dame Hilda Bracket is that while they look like 50-year-old ladies, and sound like 50-year-old ladies, and behave in the theatre like 50-year-old ladies, they are in fact two young men of about 30 who have developed perhaps the most remarkable female impersonation act the West End has ever seen. Based entirely on the two lovingly-developed characters of Hinge and Bracket, the act was one of the successes of last year's Edinburgh Festival and is now packing the May Fair Theatre, as well as becoming much sought-after for cabaret.

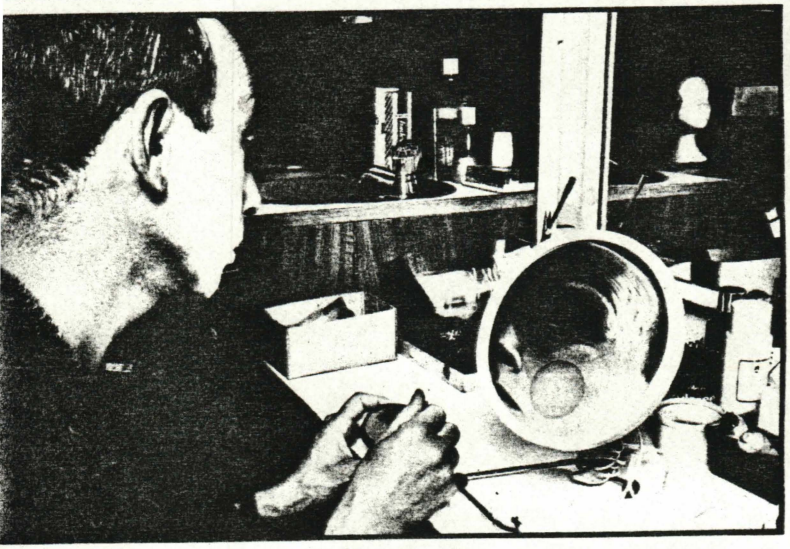
For the show at the May Fair, the theatre has been adapted to look like the church hall at Blagden, with rock cakes on sale for the village green fund. The two "ladies" invite the audience to sherry and then the Doctor, bespectacled, in black dress with pearls, takes her place at the piano and the Dame, shorter, also in black, launches into the opening number—"Poor Wandering One" from *The Pirates of Penzance*.

The comedy comes from the characterization, not from crudity; it was described in *The Stage* recently as "delicate, gentle satire rather than the wild burlesque" usually associated with female impersonators. The double meanings are rare, and more witty than rude when they come. What makes Hinge and Bracket special is that they have taken the sex out of female impersonation, and this is welcome not from any puritanical standpoint but for the far greater demands on humour and skill that it makes of the artists.

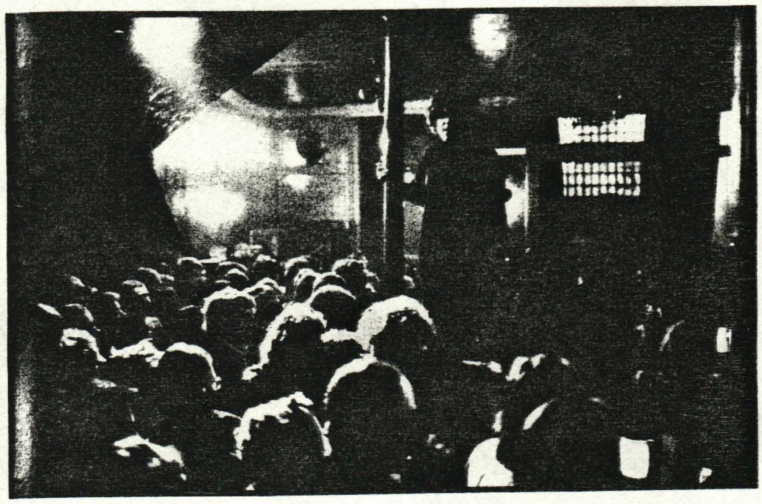
The comedy of their 90-minute show comes almost entirely from their treatment of the musical material, from Dame Hilda's introductions and from the Doctor's interruptions (and disapproving stare at any of the Dame's excesses), but there is an appearance by "the celebrated opera singer Victor Devine", an awful ham who first seeks to entice Dame Hilda but then alienates both the ladies by his upstaging of them. The hostility develops during his rendition of "The Road to Mandalay", when, while the Dame sips sherry and adjusts her make-up, the Doctor plays the piano faster and faster. However, even this does not deter the ham and finally the ladies threaten to leave. All is made up in the end, and he is rewa with a 10lb jar of the Da marrow and cucumber preserve

All this started with Perri St C who was born in Staffordshire school at 15 to be a hairdresse played a lot of the Gilbert Sullivan comedy parts for the operatic society. He did his first drag in a church concert when h 21 but only really developed female impersonator after some in repertory and music hall. character of Dame Hilda Br came from some of his e amateur experiences. He had al started to develop the part wh met George Logan, who came fr theatrical family in Scotland, st to become a concert pianist, found himself in London playi pubs and often having to accom female impersonators. The two an extraordinary *rapport* in theatre, but live entirely sep lives and hardly ever meet soc However, when they are tog they obtain enormous fun cha about their two characters, the tor and the Dame, adding stories about the ladies' lives building up an extraordinarily tailed picture of their relationsh

In cabaret, where they are al ad lib more than is possible in set concert at the May Fair, improvise brilliantly and appe markably confident, but in re claim all of the insecurity of business. While the prediction that they will end up at the top both say they would be happy j know that they will remain in for the rest of their lives.



Rogers and Starr are among Britain's best paid drag artists. Among the glamourous ladies they impersonate are Marlene Dietrich (Starr) and Mae West (Rogers), top. Above, Starr begins his make-up at the Victoria Palace.



Jerry Courbrinck, top, and Kenneth Smith both perform their act at the Roy: Vauxhall Tavern, London's best known drag pub, earning £5 each a performanc They call themselves Rhythm and Black and hope soon to turn professional.

Rogers and Starr are Britain's best-known and best-paid team of female impersonators, now able to earn £250 each to top a cabaret bill. They are currently at the Victoria Palace, number two in the show to Max Bygraves. Unlike Hinge and Bracket, this is the orthodox drag act—a combination of glamorous women and impersonations of well-known women from Fanny Craddock to Princess Anne—but their skill is undeniable.

Both have lengthy experience in show business as ordinary performers, and met in a show called *Ordinary People* in the West End. The show failed, but their reviews were good and they formed a double act that has now been together for 12 years. In addition to their cabaret work they have put together their own two-handed revues, seen first at the Chepstow Theatre in Notting Hill, and later at the Hampstead Theatre Club, and these became almost a cult event. Three years ago their Hampstead revue broke the box office record for the theatre and led to constant bookings at higher fees in bigger theatres. Now they share an enormous star's dressing room at the Victoria Palace, have the assistance of dressers and have hit the big time.

They have had to adjust their sometimes fairly sexy act considerably for the Max Bygraves Show at the Victoria Palace, which is the kind of family show that bus-loads of people come to from the provinces.

They answer frankly questions on people's attitude to drag acts. "People imagine there's a sexual aspect to drag," Michael Rogers says, "but in all the years I've been in this business I've never known that to be the motivation behind a drag act. Indeed, it's about the one thing you don't want—if you're all got up in wigs and make-up, the last thing you want is for anyone to touch you.

"People think you live in drag, go shopping in drag, and wear drag at home—but that's rubbish. It's just a costume. If you're a fishmonger, you smell of fish. If you're a drag artist you wear women's clothes in the theatre. It's as simple as that."

The star dressing rooms, with the flowers, telegrams pinned to the mirror, and discarded champagne bottles of Danny La Rue and Rogers and Starr and, these days, even Hinge and Bracket, are a far cry from the dingy little cupboards in pubs, or even lavatories, used as dressing rooms by most female impersonators. Drag artists are still a rarity in the West End and most work in pubs in the East End, or North London, or in Northern clubs. For £10 or £15 they perform (often only a mime to records) before rowdy, beer-swilling audiences, and any kind of sophisticated comedy is made impossible because it just wouldn't be heard. Rhythm and Black—in real life, Jerry Courbrinck, who is 34, and Kenneth Smith, who is 24—are two who have just started as drag artists and earn £5 each for a weekly performance at London's best known drag pub, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern.

Jerry has worked as a barman in the pub for six and a half years. One night an artist did not turn up, and so he took over. Now he and Kenneth hope to turn professional. If they did they could perhaps work themselves up to £50 a night in the really posh working men's clubs, but more likely to £15 a night for two 20-minute spots in pubs like the Royal Vauxhall.

Neither of them likes to dress up in women's clothes, except for their act, and say that they know few drag artists that do. "It's a question that everyone asks," Jerry says, "but really it's a costume like any other; in fact it's worse than most costum —because of all the make-up. And have to wear three pairs of tigh because I won't shave my legs!"

Mrs Peggy Ritchie, who has r the Royal Vauxhall for nine years ar has seen many scores of drag artis work in the pub over that time, sa the popularity of female imperson tors has in no way waned. It was s who found Lee Paris, a lorry drive who had his first opportunity at t Royal Vauxhall and has since be named by *Melody Maker* for thr years running as Number One Dr Artist of the Year.

"To succeed, a drag act has to different. At the Royal Vauxha they can run the length of the bar a this makes a difference, but t crowd that comes to this and t other drag pubs have seen it before, and you really have to co up with a new idea to arouse any r enthusiasm," Peggy says.

Most drag artists say that fem impersonation has three attractic for their audiences; first, there i kind of voyeuristic excitement ab the act—it raises questions in ma minds that are never answered; s ond, these "ladies" crack jokes or a comedy act that no real "ladi can do—what would be a tame jo from a male comic can seem o rageously funny from a "lady"; thi a really brilliant female impers tion takes a lot of skill and also a of nerve. The drag artist in a pub the theatre's bullfighter, and its a ience knows it ●