

# The House That Brenda Built

## *A Transvestite Response to AIDS in Brazil*

by Michael Adams

I am waiting for my next appointment to arrive. Having attended a long series of meetings with AIDS activists in São Paulo over the past four days, this might have been just another one. But when I look around, I realize that I am in a place quite unlike any other I have seen in Brazil, or anyplace else in the world, for that matter.

I share a couch with a quiet and demure young man with long dark hair, tasteful face makeup, and a surprisingly curvaceous body. Several other men, some in various stages of drag, sit in the small room with me, attention fixed on a large color television set. We are watching Xuxa, a former porn star turned Brazil's favorite children's show host, dancing scantily clad

KATHERINE McGLYNN

Brenda Lee (r) talks to a Palace resident.



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around a bright-colored studio and followed by a parade of happy young boys and girls who clearly idolize the seductive blond beauty.

At the other end of the room, a stunning transvestite in a provocative, tight-fitting nurse uniform and high-heel spikes is providing pills to two men. Another drag queen, in more traditional medical garb, is preparing medicine dosages in the adjacent office.

Turning away from Xuxa, I am just beginning to talk with the man at my side when Brenda Lee rushes in, flushed and breathless from a morning full of trips to the pharmacy and hospital. Sporting long, bleached-blond hair, three-inch black heels, and a white leather skirt with matching top, Brenda apologizes profusely for being late and invites me to her bedroom to begin our interview.

**B**renda Lee, undoubtedly the most visible member of São Paulo's large transvestite community, first opened her boarding house for drag queens in 1983. Early on, disapproving neighbors in the Italian working-class neighborhood of Bixiga dubbed the house "the Witches' Castle." But Brenda always has referred proudly to her home as "the Palace of Princesses."

The Palace was meant to serve as a home for drag queens working in the center of São Paulo. Brenda's boarders generally worked as prostitutes, which is one of the only ways for transvestites in Brazil to survive—financially and otherwise. Despite her tenants' line of work, Brenda Lee has always maintained two rules: no tricks and no drugs in the house. She served as landlord, mother, and

friend, collecting small rent payments, offering advice and emotional support, and responding to the frequent attacks on her boarders by the violent São Paulo police. The house functioned as a warm and sisterly community that Brenda proudly christened "the first historical patrimony of Brazilian transvestites."

Brenda had always planned to transform the dilapidated house into an elegant and glamorous residence. Her plans changed dramatically, however, when HIV disease hit Brazil and the number of AIDS cases in São Paulo skyrocketed in 1984.

The same year saw a series of violent attacks against transvestites working the São Paulo streets. A number of drag queens were shot, most likely by marauding police officers. One of Brenda Lee's boarders was intentionally run down by several men on motorcycles and left paralyzed. In denouncing the violence, Brenda announced that her home would always be open to transvestites in trouble. When a reporter asked her if that included transvestites with AIDS, she said, "AIDS is no worse than being machine-gunned. We're a community; somebody with AIDS would be treated just like anybody else."

Brenda's words appeared in a São Paulo newspaper that afternoon. The next day the Palace of Princesses received its first transvestite with AIDS, and one of the most unusual and innovative community responses to the disease in Brazil was launched.

As time went on, more and more transvestites with AIDS joined the 20 working boarders in the Palace. The transition was not always easy, partly because of widespread panic and misinformation about how AIDS is

contracted. "The girls living here were scared," remembers Brenda. "Some complained they didn't feel safe with people with AIDS." A few left as a result. Those who stayed educated themselves about AIDS and gradually accepted the fact that their new housemates would not infect them with the disease.

By 1987 the Palace of Princesses was taking in more and more transvestites with AIDS. Frequently the newcomers could not work, and Brenda Lee and the other boarders covered most of their rent and expenses. Brenda, by then, had been transformed into a full-time social worker and AIDS activist, shuttling sick transvestites to less than friendly hospitals, scouring São Paulo in search of desperately needed donations of medicine, clothes, and food, and rapidly learning the ropes of the Brazilian AIDS bureaucracy. It was not unusual for Brenda to spend the entire night in a hospital emergency room with a sick and frightened drag queen waiting for a bed.

When I first visited the Palace in July 1988, close to a third of the 20 or so transvestites living in

the house had AIDS. Arriving in the early evening, I encountered drag queens huddled over shared hallway mirrors, busily applying their makeup before heading out for the evening. Sitting chatting with them were Palace residents with AIDS who were no longer able to work the streets. Those who were too ill to get up carried on the banter from their beds. Gossip and friendly joking filled the air, extending warmth and camaraderie even to an obvious outsider. Presiding over the mayhem, Brenda Lee explained the structural work necessary to make the house more comfortable for people with AIDS as she hurried along her boarders in their preparations.

Four years after the AIDS crisis started, Palace residents seemed to have adjusted to the changes forced on them, but the small community was finding it increasingly difficult to make financial ends meet. The electricity and water were cut more than once, and at one point, the financial situation became so desperate that Brenda Lee was forced to put the house on the market. But the building's run-down state kept buyers away.

It was at this time that Brenda, with few, if any, other options in sight, decided to turn to the Brazilian government for help in covering the expenses of the de facto AIDS shelter. While the flamboyant and effusive transvestite was unaccustomed to working with government officials, she had received a baptism by fire in her endless dealings with unresponsive or openly hostile doctors and hospital administrators. If she had learned one thing, it was persistence. Brenda recalls, "I made an appointment with the state secretary of health, but when I got

there he was traveling. So I went and spoke with someone in the national AIDS program. I explained that we were in financial trouble, that I couldn't keep supporting people with AIDS in my house but didn't want to put them in the streets. He was very enthusiastic and told me I could get money quickly—in two or three weeks. But it took more than a year for us to receive help."

In November 1988, an agreement was finally signed with the São Paulo Ministry of Health, and the *Casa de Apoio Brenda Lee* (Brenda Lee Support House) began receiving state funds for maintenance, food, medicine, and transportation. The shelter now houses transvestites and others with AIDS, along with Brenda Lee, who sleeps on the living room couch to watch over things. A nurse and several assistants (all transvestites) have been hired. Brenda remains responsible for supervision of the shelter and still spends much of her time trying to shepherd household residents through the overburdened São Paulo public-hospital system.

Who is this transvestite that the São Paulo press compares to Mother Theresa? Born Cicero Caetano Leonardo in the northern Brazilian state of Pernambuco, Brenda was one of 24 children. Cicero's father owned a large farm, and the young boy and his siblings were all reared to be ambitious. As a child, Cicero hoped to make his family proud of him some day by getting a medical degree. He moved to Rio de Janeiro at nine to live with one of his brothers.

At 14, Cicero ran away, fearing his brother would discover his homosexuality. For the next few

years, he moved from job to job and eventually relocated to São Paulo. "In those days I only dressed as a transvestite for special occasions," Brenda says as she brushes back her long hair. "I dressed as a man for my jobs. I always wanted to be accepted, but I was never valued. In the end I was always fired for being a homosexual. I suffered a lot, but I didn't realize there was another way."

In 1978, when Cicero was fired from his job in a department store after the manager discovered his homosexuality, he decided that from that point on, his life would be different. Brenda recounts: "I revolted. I decided I would never work for anyone again. I would be a street transvestite with independence. I never saw a transvestite die of hunger in the streets. So I went to live with my friends Vandia, Marta, and Sonia Braga."

Brenda Lee permanently adopted the name of the 1950s North American teen singer (she had become a fan through a record one of her brothers had given her) and began working the streets of São Paulo as a prostitute. "At first I was so ashamed of prostituting myself," she laughs heartily. "I would have sex with a man and then be too ashamed to ask for the money, so I would end up doing it for free." That changed when she became the victim of police attacks and mistreatment. "The police went after us something terrible. But it was then I lost my shame—after all, I had friends who were judges, doctors, lawyers, even bricklayers and congressmen!"

Brenda worked as a prostitute for four years. Sharing a crowded but "respectable" apartment with as many as 12 other transvestites, she gradually saved enough money to open a beauty

## The Politics of AIDS in Brazil

salon and then a small restaurant. By the time she bought the Bixiga district house in 1983 and made plans to open a boarding house for transvestites, Brenda had become relatively prosperous. "The only things I need to

**F**EW countries have been as hard hit by the AIDS epidemic as Brazil. The world's fifth largest country with a population of more than 140 million, Brazil consistently has consistently ranked second or third in the world in reported cases of AIDS. As of July 1989, the Brazilian government reported 7,583 AIDS cases. Yet this number significantly understates the gravity of the problem, as underreporting of AIDS cases in Brazil is estimated at 100 per cent, triple that of the United States. Close to 600,000 Brazilians now are estimated to be infected with HIV, and in the first half of 1989, Brazilian AIDS cases were growing 30 per cent a year.

One of the social factors that distinguishes AIDS in Brazil from AIDS in the United States is sexual culture. Sexuality in Brazil tends to revolve largely around the sexual act itself, so that there is no distinctly "gay" identity or culture. In fact, to many Brazilians, the term "gay" connotes a North American model of homoerotic love. Organizations composed of women and men with same-sex orientation refer to themselves, with few exceptions, as "homosexual liberation" groups, not as "gay rights" organizations.

Rather than being defined by the categories of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, then, sexuality in Brazil is perceived largely in terms of the "masculine" active partner and the "feminine" passive partner.

This is why some Brazilian men who take the active sex role with other men may not perceive themselves, or be perceived by society in general, as either homosexual or bisexual.

Nonetheless, the Brazilian medical establishment has determined that 40 per cent of Brazilian HIV transmission is attributed to "homosexual activity," and that close to 20 per cent is tied to "bisexual activity" (the distinction here refers to the overall sexual habits of each group, not the means of transmission).

Transmission through heterosexual sex has increased consistently and now accounts for 9 per cent of all Brazilian AIDS cases; 10 per cent of Brazilians with AIDS are women.

The politics of AIDS in Brazil is also quite different from that in the US.

The Brazilian government has been slow to confront the disease, and its efforts have been hampered from the outset by, among other things, the country's ongoing economic crisis, the transfer of power from a military to a civilian government in 1985, bureaucratic disorganization, and the continuing opposition of the powerful Catholic Church to explicit AIDS-prevention information.

Grassroots AIDS initiatives have been more innovative and promising. But whereas gay and lesbian organizations in the US have taken the lead in the AIDS battle, their small and fragmented counterparts in Brazil have been largely unable to mobilize to fight the disease. Instead, a number of volunteer AIDS groups have sprung up in cities around the country. These groups have a diverse membership and generally focus on assisting people with AIDS and conducting small-scale educational campaigns.

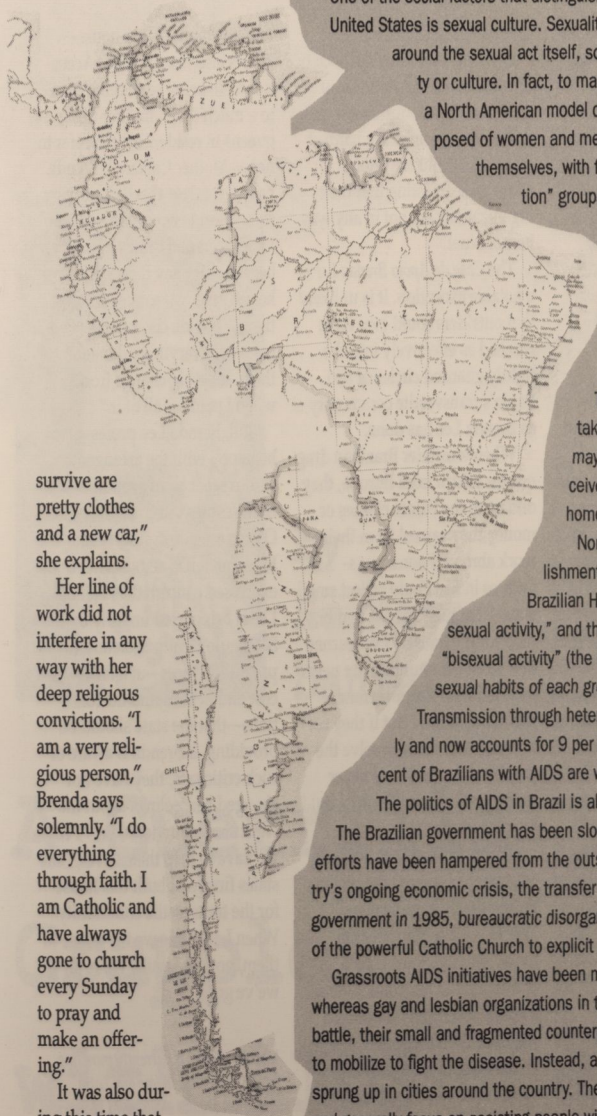
—Michael Adams

survive are pretty clothes and a new car," she explains.

Her line of work did not interfere in any way with her deep religious convictions. "I am a very religious person," Brenda says solemnly. "I do everything through faith. I am Catholic and have always gone to church every Sunday to pray and make an offering."

It was also during this time that she developed a strong

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sense of community with her fellow drag queens. “I had always thought all transvestites were robbers and things like that,” Brenda remembers. “But when I started living with them, I began to realize we’re all human, we all have the same problems. Often our families won’t accept us; we’re mistreated. So we were understanding with each other—we lived so happily then.”

Membership in the transvestite community inevitably brought lessons about AIDS and how the disease and society’s response to it ravaged the socially marginalized, a phenomenon not unique to Brazil. Brenda, in an uncharacteristically sad tone, told how a drag queen friend of hers died of AIDS in 1983. “We were all living together, and we were such a big group I didn’t notice at first that she was sick. When I finally realized, I immediately took her to the hospital. She had pneumonia. The doctor treated and released her—they didn’t want to deal with her, because she was a transvestite. She got worse constantly, so I brought her to another doctor, who told me if she had been hospitalized earlier she might have lived, but now it was too late. She died that night.”

With few active gay-identified organizations in Brazil, care for people with AIDS has been left largely to new volunteer

groups whose members come from all parts of Brazilian society. These groups usually shun, at least publicly, identification with any of the communities hardest hit by AIDS and are often adamant in insisting that their organizations are not in any way homosexual.

The *Casa de Apoio Brenda Lee* is a notable exception. It is unlikely that outsiders could ever have reached as effectively into the tightly guarded circles of São Paulo’s transvestite community as Brenda Lee has done.

When wealthier Brazilian drag queens return from Europe, they donate to the Palace clothes or money they earned from their work abroad. Poorer transvestites in São Paulo collect small sums from their friends and buy food for the house. “I’ve learned that some communities are never satisfied with the government,” Brenda remarks. “But if they set to work, they could resolve the problems themselves. I never imagined the government would support our work.”

Of course, now that the government has entered the picture, things clearly have changed. “We’re not a community anymore,” Brenda notes with a hint of nostalgia in her voice. “We’re a house specifically for people with AIDS.” Newcomers to the house must first be authorized by the state secretary of health, and they are not always transvestites. Brenda must report regularly to the secretariat. And her

relationship with her houseguests also has changed. Accustomed to being something akin to a much-loved mother (drag queens in residence often refer to her as Mother Caetana), Brenda has been taken aback slightly by some recent changes in attitude. “They demand things now because they say the secretary of health gives me money for them,” Brenda complains. “People want everything done for them. It’s a big change from when I paid for all of it.”

Still, Brenda Lee professes to be happy with the arrangement and to see it as an example for transvestites outside São Paulo. Others are not so sure. Some Brazilian AIDS activists have expressed concern that Brenda Lee is being used unfairly by the São Paulo Health Secretary to provide services—at a far lower cost and in substandard conditions—that the state should be providing. If Brenda is aware of such criticisms, they have not changed her feelings about the work she has undertaken. “People have to help themselves,” she states firmly. “I built this house for the transvestite community. When I die I’ll leave the house to them, not my family. We’re all we’ve got.” ▼

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