



AGGRESSIVE GLAMOUR

Doris Fish isn't what she appears to be. But then again, he is.

BY CRAIG SELIGMAN

Doris is in the drag room, taking inventory. Fifty-three pairs of false eyelashes (not counting the "Eyelash Museum" in the living room). Three dozen lipsticks. Eye shadow in every known color; Day-Glo pigment for special effects. Some 100 wigs, plus switches and hairpieces, from human hair to synthetic purples. Costume jewelry for days. For weeks. And: three commercial floor racks, five more hanging racks, shelves everywhere you can jam a shelf. Yellow suits, pink suits, green, gray, polka-dot suits, sequined slack suits, sequined gowns, show-girl costumes, waitress outfits, nurse outfits, doctor outfits, inmate outfits, black tails, white tails, day dresses, fur coats, fake fur coats, cloth coats, vinyl coats, '60s plastic raincoats, feather boas, tinsel boas, space suits, wedding dresses. . . "My roommate Tippi says we're collecting things for the Smithsonian they don't know they want yet."

Shoes? "I don't have as many as Imelda Marcos," Doris says defensively. "None of them were new." How many? He's evasive. "You never know what you're going to need. You need a silver pair, a red pair, a few specialty shoes to match a specialty outfit. . ." How many? "Oh," he considers, "about 400 pairs."

You get the picture: Doris Fish is obsessed. *Obsessed.*

It isn't just the one room—it's the whole flat. If it's possible for a house to do drag, this is the place. "Doris loves to redecorate constantly," Tippi explains rather wistfully. The current look is Hollywood rococo—clean, elegant, fake. The hardwood floors have been painted a tastefully restrained white. White piano in the hall. A faux marble mantelpiece adorning Doris's bedroom. Butterfly wing chairs, a double-width chaise longue—furniture from the days when Barbie was young. Blue-sky walls and plenty of fake fur. And everywhere there's any space for pictures, pictures—Doris, Tippi, Sandal Hebert, Miss X, Ginger Quest and their 40,000 personalities. State-of-the-art drag, 1986.

Transvestism, cross-dressing, drag—whatever you prefer to call it—has been around San Francisco for so long that now it almost seems respectable. Finocchio's, the Broadway club that made its name with drag revues for straight audiences, celebrated its fiftieth birthday this year with a proclamation from the mayor and fanfare in the press. Charles Pierce used to do his Bette Davis routines for gay audiences in an unassuming club on Gold Street; now he plays the Venetian Room at the Fairmont.

Still, in recent decades, most drag shows have come out of the gay underground. There was a time, before the era of black leather and gay machismo, when men who went for other men were excoriated as womanish—back in the days when that was considered an insult. So drag was a way for gay men to thumb their noses at the straight world, to say, You want womanish? We'll give you womanish! It took a negative stereotype so far that it crossed the line into parody and became a campy in-joke for gays to enjoy. Drag shows became a big draw at gay bars.

The drag queen of the hour is Doris. Talent and glamour have something to do with it; so does a genius for publicity. Not to mention sheer ubiquity. He's appeared in cabaret-theater shows like *Blonde Sin* and *Naked Brunch* at Club 181 in the Tenderloin; in legitimate stage shows at Theatre Rhinoceros; on the rude, wacky greeting cards put out by West Graphics of San Francisco; as a go-go dancer with the Zazu Pitts Memorial Orchestra (and now with the faction renamed Big Bang Beat); as a regular on the Gay Cable Network TV show *The Right Stuff*; in the upcoming movie (it's been upcoming for a very long time now) *Vegas in Space*; and as a personage at countless dance parties, charity functions and social events.

Doris is a long way from the old image of the dizzy drag queen—he's savvy and eloquent and self-assured. "I'm just being myself. To me it's just like an art form, putting on the makeup and putting on the costumes. People have been doing this since day one."

"I believe that everybody, within their personality, has more than just one gender. If you take your mind away from your physical body, your personality away from your physical outline—what

gender are you? It probably has something to do with my belief in reincarnation: that your personality or your soul will go from the outward signs of one gender to another in different lifetimes."

Drag queens have sometimes been chastised, especially by feminists, for being cartoons of women. Isn't it kind of retro, as a liberated gay, to be promoting a style that a lot of women have found stereotypical and oppressive? Doris admits he exaggerates ("Usually what I'm satirizing is a particular look—a Hollywood version of something, a public image"), but he thinks the charge is losing ground. "Feminists had to say, 'Hey, we're not doing that now because that style represents something we don't want to be anymore.' But now they realize they can say, 'Yes, this is what I want to be—for the next twenty minutes—and it doesn't make me any less of a person.' People are realizing that liberation means not so much turning away from as embracing more things, and giving everything its due. There's a time to have a lot of fun. There's a time to look ridiculous. And there's a time to put on high heels and eyelashes and long gloves."

Doris was born in a Sydney suburb called, by a rather grotesque irony, Manly Vale. His accent is refined-British, with Australian occasionally peeking through ("art" becomes "at"). Today he's a minor luminary on his home shores. The greeting cards he does for West Graphics are big sellers there, and he's been prominent in Sydney's gay Mardi Gras for the past two years.

Sydney has long been "the drag capital of the world," according to Doris, but he has a special nostalgia for the late '60s—the years when he was coming out in the city's rather frenetic gay scene—when the transvestite populace was, as he puts it, "thicker. They

were like covers of *Vogue* magazine times ten—aggressively glamorous. You know, hairdos that were three or four feet tall, jeweled—and this was just daytime wear."

It wasn't until 1972, however, when he was in art school, that Doris himself got seriously into drag with a group that called themselves Sylvia and the Synthetics. About this time he was inhabiting a roomful of blond wood furniture everybody was calling the Doris Day Suite: Voila, Doris. "Fish" came from a cat named Lillian Fish, and Doris—who's been attacked for taking his name from a misogynous vulgarism—swears the double entendre was unknown in Australia.

Sylvia and the Synthetics had a lot in common with San Francisco's more famous drag pack, the Cockettes, although they developed independently. Both troupes saw gender confusion—mus-

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"Face it," says Doris, "if I could paint my eyeballs, I would."

cles and high heels, lipstick and hairy backs—as political theater. During the first shock of gay liberation in the early '70s, slipping into fishnets (if you were male) was a political tactic. The idea was that men and women had been forced into gender roles; drag was one way of breaking out of them.

Both the Synthetics and the Cockettes were anarchic, to put it politely. No scripts, no rehearsals, just get out on stage and do something—it'll be fabulous. Typical Synthetics: Somebody dressed up as a television set throws various goods at a housewife with a vacuum cleaner. "The Blue Danube" is playing. Eventually a bunch of other people come out from behind the TV with more products and start squirting shaving cream and flinging breakfast cereal.

Doris is candid: "We didn't think it had *any* point." It got reviewed, of course, as a mordant art piece on consumerism.

Over the years Doris's drag has gotten more traditional, and infinitely more meticulous. But he's still heir to the Synthetic/Cockettes aesthetic (which is also a political stance) in that he's never *quite* credible as a female, always wobbling on the edge of passing. Anything more convincing would backfire; it wouldn't get him the attention he craves. "The look is just—to get a look. Just—look. Hey! Look!"

This tension, this edge is what animates his comedy—and Doris is a stellar comedienne, as anybody who's seen him in *Blonde Sin* or *Naked Brunch* or the unfinished *Vegas in Space* can tell you. "Intellectually, I know that I'm not fooling anybody. But the character that I present on stage—she thinks she's fooling everybody. So it's a complex level of things, and that's sort of an underlying gag—the audience obviously knows."

Ten years ago, Doris the new San Franciscan slipped into a cocktail dress and a soft blond wig and entered the Tubes' Talent Hunt. The band found him sufficiently aberrant to sign for their three-week stint at Bimbo's, and Doris has been ornamenting San Francisco's stages ever since.

Along the way he met Tippi, a frail transvestite who at that time was operating under the sobriquet Miss Leading. (He took the name "Tippi" later from Cyril Magnin's cairn terrier.) Seeing Tippi onstage, where he's a tiger in stilettos, you'd never guess how fragile he really is. He doesn't deal easily with the world; he needs sheltering. Soon after they met, Doris took him under a maternal wing, and they've been roommates ever since.

In 1979, Doris met Miss X at a come-as-your-favorite-Fellini-

character party: instant concord. At that point Miss X was only half-serious about doing drag, but by Halloween the three of them were staging *Sluts a-Go-Go*, a tatty, funny show that eventually evolved into a romp called *Blonde Sin*. *Blonde Sin* ran, off and on, for a year, on the minuscule stage of the Hotel Utah south of Market. Dressing room facilities were cramped: "Six people," says Doris, "each of us with fourteen costume changes, in the ladies toilet. You actually had to put your head out the window if you wanted to smoke a cigarette."

Doris played Doris Poisson, a cheap French showgirl and the mother of Tippi, or rather of Lois Standard ("the very lowest"). Miss X was Miss X, heiress to the Brand X fortune. The numbers included a James Bond medley; "The Star Spangled Banner" done to a go-go beat, with bikini flags; and a rousing version of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" sung by a chorus line of Marilyn Monroes. Eventually Jane Dornacker joined the cast; since she towered over everybody else and wore almost as much makeup, it was hard to guess exactly who were the drag queens.

One particular guy would haul friends down every weekend and effervesce over the performances, no matter (Doris says) how awful they were. Soon he was inviting them all to dinners at his flat on Oak Street—an act of charity, since six shows a week were barely earning them cab fare. Somehow, before long they were all paying rent; their host, who hadn't done much serious drag before, had metamorphosed into Ginger Quest; and the house had become Casa Drag.

In 1983, director Marc Huestis invited the four of them to join the group of actors and assorted weirdos he'd gotten together for *Naked Brunch*, the campy Beat-era soap opera he was staging at Club 181. *Naked Brunch* became a hit, with enthusiastic notices in the *Chronicle's* Sunday pink section and *California* magazine. The 181 was so jammed that people were actually fainting. In the second episode, Doris, the slithering villainess, had an onstage drag change—all the way down to bra and panties and back again—that was so audacious it left you dazed.

Even if you haven't seen any of Doris's myriad personal appearances, there's a good chance you know him from the series of West Graphics greeting cards (more than 50, so far) on which he's featured. The drag queen of a zillion faces: from neon bitch-goddess to bag lady to powder-blue Martian ("Nine planets in seven days, never again!"). Also a couple of Marilyns and a Lucille Ball. But his bread and butter is his slew of not-quite-on-top-of-it females worried over thinning hair, encroaching fat, crow's-feet: "Let's face it... You're not a well woman," which Doris sometimes sends to friends with the "well" crossed out.

"We've tried to make every shot with Doris very vulnerable," says Randal West, the president and art director of West Graphics. (Like all of Doris's friends, West habitually refers to him as "she.") "Actually, in a lot of cards Doris is the victim. There's heart in that character, and people relate to that." Since the real Doris is anything but a victim, getting him to do humbleness hasn't been easy. "She wants to do glamour—we want to do greeting cards." Doris really quailed, for example, at the bag lady character—"It was not the look she was going after." But the bag lady caught on, and so far West has cajoled a reluctant Doris into doing seven versions of her.

Doris had no idea he had all these personalities floating around inside him before he started doing the cards; they've honed his chameleon skills. Two years ago, the company sent him to the New York Stationery Show and to in-store promotions in Denver and Salt Lake City. (T-shirts proclaimed, "Doris Fish—1984 U.S. Tour.") Doris loved it. "I met a lot of people running stores who said, 'If it wasn't for your cards, I wouldn't have made my rent last month.' Which was great to hear—that I was a product selling for people. I got tons of credibility."

Doris relishes credibility; it's a word he uses all the time. He knows that when many people look at him, they don't see talent or creativity, and you can bet they don't see brains. They just see *drag queen*.



Ken Towler/West Graphics

If you can get anyone who reads the article to realize... it's not a sick thing for a man to dress up as a woman." Miss X is an inch or so short of six feet and weighs something under 120—brittle. "They're only clothes. It's not a big thing." He's talking in italics. "Even to wear makeup—it's not a big thing."

Miss X has gotten defensive about transvestism since he moved out of Casa Drag and in with Sandal Hebert. Sandal is a sumptuous dancer, a sparkling actress and—as it turns out—a more than proficient drag queen, despite what some might perceive as the stumbling block of her being female. She and X met in 1983 while both were appearing in *Naked Brunch*. Everyone always took it for granted that X was gay—he shared the Oak Street flat with Doris and Tippi and Ginger, who are all gay, and he'd had several boyfriends. But it wasn't long after he met Sandal that friends began referring to them (mostly behind their backs) as Miss X and Madame X.

Drag—in the sense that Sandal does drag—obviously means more than cross-dressing. It has to do with camp and with glamour and, as Sandal views it, with anachronism. (Doris, X and Tippi all cite their childhood infatuation with old movies as what-started-it-all.) "We're satirizing ourselves—our yearnings to be big glamour stars," she says. "Because it's impossible, it's past the time, we were born too late, some of us were put in the wrong bodies." Sandal does a formidable Marilyn Monroe, and her Ann-Margret striptease was the highlight of *Naked Brunch III*. For a while people were viewing her as Yoko to Miss X's John, but after some initial friction she was absorbed by the troupe and everything became copacetic again. Seeing Sandal and X do drag together can be a little disconcerting if you know their relationship, but the presence of a female adds a certain which-is-which piquancy. And sometimes it makes women who might be uneasy with the cartoon side of drag more relaxed with the shows.

Though X is concerned that drag not be regarded as an exclusively gay phenomenon—because it isn't (and he isn't)—he's also bitter about the flak they all get from the gay community. "In the hierarchy of the world, gays are at the bottom. And in the hierarchy of the gay community, drag queens are on the bottom. Which puts us right at the very bottom of everything."

This certainly wasn't always the case. Pre-liberation drag shows were a point of coalescence for homosexuals. In the 1960s, plenty of gay San Franciscans used to cheer on Charles Pierce at the Gilded Cage, or Michelle at the Village Club. The Tavern Guild of San Francisco, which is the local association of gay bar and restaurant owners and employees, started sponsoring elections for Empress of San Francisco in 1967. That tradition, along with elections for Emperor and Grand Duchess and Grand Duke, still continues in fine health, and it has produced, in addition to excellent parties, a large number of elaborate gowns. And it should never be forgotten that the 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, which many regard as the beginning of gay liberation, started off as a confrontation between New York cops and a bunch of drag queens.

But the atmosphere changed sharply in the mid-'70s. Eric Garber, a local historian and a founding member of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, sums up the shift: "Something happened in the collective politic of the gay community, which decided to emphasize masculinity. It was obviously a reaction to perceived stereotypes. And it worked. We created a new image for ourselves. There was a whole new standard of behavior that had to do with very aggressive sexuality and masculinity, for good or bad."

For men who thought being sissy was the only way you could be gay, this new masculinity was a revelation, another liberation. But not everybody benefited. Doris remembers going to the Stud in drag circa 1975 and being told, "Don't you know what you're doing went out in 1969?"

Rifts in the community deepened in 1977, the year Anita Bryant savaged gay rights in Dade County, Florida. A lot of gays felt that it was time to win straight support—and that the way to do that was to turn "respectable." That year several gay leaders put out the word:

Tippi (right) and Doris backstage at a recent show.



Photography by George Stennett



"The look is just—to get a look. Hey! Look!"

No drag on Gay Freedom Day. To which the drag faction of the community responded with a barrage of angry leaflets (oppression was a major theme) and an outrageous presence in the gay parade.

Controversies die hard. This year, Doris et al. have been doing Tuesday night spots for the Gay Cable Network program *The Right Stuff*. In March, a disgruntled viewer fired off a letter to the *Bay Area Reporter*, the gay weekly: "Having Doris Fish and Muffy"—for some reason, he blanked out on Tippi's name—"reporting the news of the gay community is akin to having Aunt Jemima anchor the news of the black community! This type of programming undermines all of our efforts and merely strengthens every negative image held against us by the straight community."

Doris, drawing himself up, wrote back: "I am not interested in acceptance from the straight community if it means I have to pretend to be something I am not. What is the point of our years of struggle if people who present a 'negative image' are to be hidden and excluded from our community media and full rights as citizens of this planet? Freedom and equality are not just for those who present a positive image. They are for all."

The *Bay Area Reporter* ended up running several weeks' worth of angry letters from both sides of the fence, with the result that a lot of people who'd never heard of the Gay Cable Network tuned in to see what all the bitching was about.

Doris is five feet eight inches tall, 135 pounds, has dark green eyes, close-cropped brown hair usually dyed something else, and the Body of Doom. Nobody can say he has to get dressed up as a woman because he isn't a pretty man. People meeting him out of drag are surprised, sometimes, that he's so elfin; it takes heels, cosmetics and a certain amount of padding to make him larger-than-life. His strong jaw is his bane, giving him a distinctly Birgit Nilsson profile in makeup. He compensates by painting his lips larger. He's been working out with weights since he was in his teens, partly so he'll have cleavage when he gets into a push-up padded bra. Strapless gowns can be a problem, owing to his pumped-up shoulders and biceps like small fists. (Boas help.)

Doris takes care of himself: He's a vegetarian, he avoids white sugar, he makes himself daily wheat-grass juice cocktails. He fasts a lot. His coffee table features current issues of *The International Journal of Holistic Health and Medicine* and *Australian Wellbeing*

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BULLFIGHT

(Continued from page 26)
scatter—except for one

showing three marks on his pant leg. He goes in to take a shower and change.

Later, his friends and drink the vinho verde. reviewing fruit. I ask Doris's waist. says. "I've that's all." "I was but I was er when I I started I fought a bull." Are you

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And, the one you need to win over to become an *especial* in Spain, is Madrid. It's like the Olympics. If I get in there, get a good bull, do well...," he leaves the thought unfinished. "But they're mean in Madrid. They want you to die."

I ask Borba if he had ever lost it in the ring, become afraid. He looks straight at me with his clear eyes. "Sure, I've been scared in the bullring—terrified. It happens to everyone. I just went back out."

Borba tells me about a boy who was killed in Spain last year. "His heart was cut in half by the horn." He is silent for a moment. I ask him if, knowing the danger, he really want to make a career of this. He nods quietly. "I'm going to keep trying."

I thanked the Borbas for their hospitality and left. Outside the big house crickets were chirping, and the sound of children's laughter came across the yard. I drove past the silent arena. The road stretched out straight ahead, the Milky Way was hurled exultantly across the heavens, and the cool valley wind, as it blew in from the west, carried more than a faint taste of glory. □

DORIS

(Continued from page 31)

("Test Your Glandular Needs," "How Bad Is Coffee?" "Herbal Pesticides"). He'll take a drink at Christmas, but no drugs—"Once you put on makeup, you don't need any other drug."

Marc Huestis calls Doris's makeup routine a masochistic ritual. ("If it doesn't hurt," Doris once wrote, "it isn't glamorous.") There are some twenty separate operations and a battalion of ointments, depending on what look he's going for. First the eyebrows are waxed down with mustache wax. Flesh-colored base and camouflage cream, to mask the beard, are blended on. Next, powder and rouge, followed by an array of eye shadows, mascaras and eyeliners, then lipstick, lip liners and glosses. Finally, the arcane and slightly demented step of painting the teeth to make them whiter. "Face it," says Doris, "if I could paint my eyeballs, I would."

In the end, it's hard to credit Miss X's contention that drag's not a big thing. It just doesn't jibe. Audiences wouldn't be so startled and shocked and cracked up by not-a-big-thing. Moreover, Doris & Co. wouldn't be so profoundly and utterly obsessed by it.

But why? Why drag? Doris's answer is typically reflective.

"There are so many different kinds of drag queens. There are some that just do it—party drags. There are some people who do it for a fetish, though most of the people for whom drag is fetishistic do it in private, and don't generally do it as a career-oriented thing. There are some people who do it because they really want to be a woman. They turn away from their own maleness and the maleness of others. Each person who does drag does it for different reasons.

"There is really no one particular reason why anybody does any kind of thing. Everyone has a duty to be themselves and maintain what they feel they want to do—just to keep life nice and rich."

So what makes Doris tick?

Marc Huestis: "Drag is her armor. I think she can create her character—which is a complex blend of everything, sweetness and bitchiness, intelligence, dumbness, vanity and self-mockery at the same time—and never let anybody really realize who she is."

Sandal Hebert: "It's just a supreme self-confidence. She doesn't doubt herself. 'I'm doing the right thing because I'm doing it, so it must be the right thing.'"

Miss X: "Bigger is better is her bottom line. Her whole thing is to stand out like a sore thumb. There's nothing wrong with wearing a white ponytail pinned into your black hair."

Tippi: "She's a saint and a goddess!"

Doris: "I have a pathological need for attention."

Randal West: "What makes Doris tick? About three pounds of makeup." □

Image

The Magazine of Northern California

Bullfight in the Valley
The Sweep of the Cape,
The Rush of the Bull



latin, little. That first bull wasn't too steady—he didn't take a straight line. This is where it hurts the most." He points to the outside of his thigh. "He hit me here and here with his horn," he says,

IMAGEWORD SOLUTION

This is the solution to last week's puzzle.

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