

Christine Jorgensen

Entertainer,
1927-1989

by David Rosen

In 1952, George Jorgensen, a 26 year-old former private in the U.S. Army, traveled to Denmark to undergo a gender reassignment procedure, what was then known as a sex change operation. Returning to New York as Christine Jorgensen, her daring gained a famous *Daily News* headline: "Ex-GI Becomes Beauty."^{*}

In popular "before" and "after" period photos of Jorgensen, it appears that a man was not merely transformed into a woman, but a butterfly was liberated from its caterpillar self. A reportedly meek, retiring guy left New York and a glamorous, sexy gal returned. The new Jorgensen appears with high cheekbones, long eyelashes, full, painted lips, stylish hat and often wrapped in a full-length fur coat.¹

Jorgensen was born on May 30, 1926, and – along with his sister, Dorothy -- grew up in the Bronx, children of working-class parents. Like many transsexuals, he was not a homosexual, but long felt he was a female living in a male's body. He researched scientific literature about people suffering similar conditions, including Paul De Kruf's study, *The Male Hormone* (1945). Jorgensen wanted to be a documentary filmmaker and went to Europe to ostensibly make a vacation film. While

in Denmark, he sought out medical assistance from Dr. Harry Benjamin and, over a three-year period, received hormone therapy as part of the gender reassignment procedure.^{**} Jorgensen began living as a woman following her second surgery.²



Returning to the Big Apple following the completion of the procedure, Jorgensen initially lived with her parents and received considerable media attention – not all of it favorable. The media was divided over the efficacy of sex reassignment. A handful of publications accepted Jorgensen's new femininity, including *Pose*, *People Today* and *American Weekly* (which

paid her \$20,000 for an exclusive profile); they often focusing on her relations with the men she was dating. However, most publications, especially the popular tabloid magazines like *Uncensored*, *Whisper* and *Confidential*, were contemptuous of her sex change, drawing pitiful attention to the apparent differences between her "feminine" legs and arms from her supposed "masculine" ankles and hands. *Quick*, a '50s pinup magazine, insisted she was not a "real woman" but a "mentally ill transvestite." But no publication was more critical than *Time*, which, in its April 20, 1953 issue, called her an "altered male" and a "male castrate," claiming she was exploiting her transition to make

* Photo: Transgender Library

** Benjamin is the author of the influential study, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966).

money. Nevertheless, Jorgensen took full advantage of her newfound celebrity, becoming a popular nightclub performer, entertaining her audiences with dancing, humorous commentary and chanteuse, singing "I Enjoy Being a Girl."³

In 1959, Jorgensen again got front-page headlines when the city refused to issue her a marriage license. She was engaged to Howard Knox, a Washington, DC, typist who was the only man she apparently had sex with. However, he lost his job when the engagement to Jorgensen became known. The city blocked the marriage on the bases that Knox could not prove he was legally divorced and Jorgensen's birth certificate listed her as a male; a New York court refused to reassign her birth certificate identity. Jorgensen never married.⁴

Jorgensen relocated to southern California in the early-60s and continued as an entertainer. She released her autobiography in 1967, a gossipy tale focusing on her show-biz career, name-dropping every chance she gets. The memoir led to a movie deal and *The Christine Jorgensen Story* was released in 1970 to poor reception. She was diagnosed with cancer in the late-'80s and died in April 1989.

In 2012, 60 years after Jorgensen returned to New York, Donald Trump, who owns the Miss Universe and Miss USA pageants, changed the organizations' official rules so that a 23 year-old contestant, Jenna Talackova, could compete in the Miss Universe Canada contest. Talackova, who'd lived as a female since the age of 4 years and had undergone sex reassignment 4 years earlier, was initially disqualified from the contest because she was born a male. And she competed.⁵

In 2011, the Williams Institute, a

research organization specializing in sexual orientation and gender identity issues, estimated that there were 700,000 transgender people in the U.S.⁶ Transsexual people continue to experience discrimination and social stigma with regard to employment, housing, health care, the juridical system (especially in prison) and simply using a public restroom. But the world has changed.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its classification as a mental disorder in 1973; four decades later, the APA's latest *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* reclassified "gender identity disorder" into "gender dysphoria," emphasizing a person's distress instead of disorder with regard to one's gender identity. Perhaps more significant, changes in federal policy formally changed the status of "trans" people. In July 2014, President Obama issued an executive order adding "gender identity" protections to federal contracting guidelines, covering some 200,000 federal contractors. Medicare now covers sex-reassignment surgery and insurance companies are covering transition procedures as medically necessary rather than merely a cosmetic option.

Chelsea Manning and Caitlyn Jenner are just two of a growing number of Americans (including children) undergoing gender reassignment.

Gender reassignment is but one of a series of significant technological breakthroughs that, over the last half-century, revolutionized human sexuality and social relations, contributing to remaking of the moral order. The work of Gregory Pincus and John Rock, initiated in 1954, culminated in the FDA's May 1960 approval of "the pill," an oral contraceptive that repressed ovulation in women, thus giving women greater

control over their reproductive options. Others advances in birth control involved artificial insemination (e.g., in vitro fertilization for "test tube babies") and the "morning after" pill (e.g., levonorgestrel, Plan B, and ulipristal, Ella). Drugs ostensibly designed to address male "erectile dysfunction" (ED) -- like Viagra and Levitra -- have become multi-billion-dollar commercial successes. But no aspect of technology's impact on sexuality is more significant than that associated with the war on terrorism, fought by the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq. Sexual prosthetics, particularly genital reconstruction for war-damaged male soldiers, represents one of the marvels of the U.S.'s 21st century military-industrial-medical complex.⁷

Technology revolutionizes personal life, eroticizes the flesh and changes what is understood as normal -- and the forbidden. Jorgensen's sex change procedure was one of 20th-century medical technology's greatest achievements: the transformation of a male into a female. It was a truly forbidden accomplishment, an act that reconfigured the most basic of human conditions, gender identity. And if nature was not fixed, immutable, what else about sexuality -- and modern life in general -- was open to change?

For more information:

Christine Jorgensen: *A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976).

Richard F. Docter, *Becoming a Woman: A Biography of Christine Jorgenson* (New York: Haworth Press, 2008).

¹ <http://www.christinejorgensen.org/>

² <http://kristinamayhem.blogspot.com/p/christine-jorgensen.html>

³ <http://www.christinejorgensen.org/MainPages/Publications/html.;> Time/April 20, 1953

⁴ "Bars Marriage Permit: Clerk Rejects Proof of Sex from Christine Jorgensen," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1959

⁵ <http://www.christinejorgensen.org/MainPages/Home.html>;
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2124818/Jenna-Talackova-Donald-Trump-spars-transgender-Beauty-Queen.html#ixzz3EuqjkMTU>

⁶ <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/how-many-people-are-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender/>

⁷ David Rosen, "Genital Casualties: Military Failure & the Crisis in Masculinity," *CounterPunch*, April 12-14, 2013.

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/04/12/military-failure-the-crisis-in-masculinity/>