

RUTH ROSE

Extract 1: 0.06 – 5.52

BEING TRANSGENDER IN LONDON in the 1950s and '60s

I'm transgender and I'm 81. So, I've got a long memory of what has gone on in London since before, before the last war. And I can relate some of the things that come into the category that we're talking about, and I'm going to divide it up into sections to start with. I'm going to talk about how the transgender community began in London, and how I got a little bit involved in it. To start with, it was during the 1950s and 1960s, it was against public decency to appear in the wrong clothing in London on the streets, or anywhere like that. The police would run you in, keep you in the cells overnight, and then recommend you for psychiatric treatment the next morning in the Magistrate's court, which usually meant that you were given what's called Aversion Therapy, which was something where they actually er, subjected you to painful things and associated it with dressing up in clothes not of your own gender. The gender trans ... the transgender people that went from female to male weren't so exposed as those that went from male to female, and mainly these were people who were so scared of going actually through a transgender process and living as women that they just remained as what we call transvestites, people who dressed up when they could, met when they could, and then went home and lived lives as male people.

And the ... there was a society which I think in essence is still going, called The Beaumont Society, which was rather proprietorial about these things and very, very careful about sexuality - didn't want to discuss sex or anything like that about it, just wanted to discuss the fact that some people dressed up and had alternative names, and they used to publish letters and things like that, used to come out once a month and was sent in a plain brown envelope to an address of your choosing, which was usually some sort of postal drop box address.

C: Do you know when The Beaumont Society came about?

R: Well, it came about because there was a need, and one or two people said "Look, you know, we've got to get these people in some sort of form of order so that they can get together," and it was the first little bit of campaigning, if you like.

C: What sort of era was that?

R: This would ... it's ... The Beaumont Society started in the late '50s, early '60s. I've actually got one or two from the mid '60s I think, or early '70s, um, copies of the magazine myself, which I found the other day, purely by chance and they're a good example of the sort of letters and articles that went on in there. It promoted in London a once a month dinner, if you'd like to call it. We used to ... drive our cars, get dressed and ... if you like, take the covering clothes off, um, outside the restaurant which was usually in Fulham Road somewhere, in some little back street, and we had about two or three restaurants that tolerated us, and then we would buy a meal, have some drinks together, exchange stories and then creep off home. And that was to the extent of pretty well what anyone did and it was very, very carefully under wraps.

One or two younger people came along and er, who were, if you like, made up and dressed up very much better than the rest of us by their sisters or whatever who came in cahoots with it, and would daringly travel on the underground or on buses to get there, and we considered them very brave. So, there was a gathering of people that gradually grew bigger and bigger, and there was more and more correspondence. The Beaumont Society covered the whole country but London seemed to be the place where er, people could expose themselves in this particular sort of way and just about get away with it.

And of course homosexual laws and all those sort of things were such that it was against the law to be a homosexual and any policeman that saw you dressed up assumed that you were a homosexual, so it was all part and parcel of the persecution, if you like, of people who actually felt that they had a different gender. And then along came one or two cases, Avril Ashley and one or two people like that, who changed attitudes slightly by going publically, having had an operation somewhere in the world, and that said "Right, I'm a woman now, I've had the operation and you can't do anything about it." And that opened out eyes a bit to the possibilities that might come along, but most of us just endured our lives the way it was, and didn't think that anything could be done about it.

Extract 2: 19.00 – 24.18

GROWING UP AND MARRYING, BEING TRANSGENDER

At around about the age of nine I was quite conscious of the fact that I didn't like being a boy very much and I wanted to ... the feelings of a girl. I ... I couldn't easily find ... *know* at that time what these strange feelings were, but I dressed up in my sister's clothes occasionally in private, or wherever it was, just to get the feeling that "Ah, this is what it's like to be a girl". And it was pleasurable. I felt there was ... some sort of pressure inside me to do this, and that never left me. I went through boarding schools and things like that where everything had to be repressed obviously, but there was always that feeling that I was not satisfied with being a boy and it was much more desirable to be a girl. And as soon as I had the freedom of being away from home - I did a five year apprenticeship in Lincolnshire when I left school - and of course I was in digs on my own and things like that. I could have a secret suitcase and, you know, I could dress up on my own and I felt so much more relieved. It's a way of relieving a tension that was growing within me.

C: While you were growing up was there anyone ever that you could speak to about this?

R: No. I ... I had a secret cache in the attic in my early teens and things like that, which I'm quite sure my parents probably knew about, but never mentioned, never approached me about, and so I think they were quite aware of my feelings, but ... I suppose if I'd spoken to my mother certainly about it, she would have been able to discuss it with me. But somehow or other the relationship between children and their parents in those days wasn't quite the same as it is now. It wasn't sort of open discussions. You regarded your parents as authoritative and not er, consultative and so - my mother was a bit of a crazy person

anyway! And this just ... it ... I felt ... you've got to remember that as you grow up these feelings don't focus, they're just feelings, and you respond to them, but they're not sort of saying "I know what I want to be. I want to have a sex change and be a woman." You just say "This is something that I can't put out of myself. I can't get rid of. I'm always drawn back to it." A day doesn't go by without ... you didn't think about it somehow or other. And then I thought "Well, I'll get married soon and when I get married it'll all go away because it's some sort of sexual frustration, or something like that." You know? Of course it didn't!

And ... so, I mean I took on the responsibilities of marriage and accepted them, but there was still this feeling, and eventually I was keeping a suitcase somewhere quiet in a garage somewhere, or whatever it was, dressing up occasionally, and it was then that I got in touch with the ... with The Beaumont Society.

C: So you never mentioned it to your wife?

R: Not until I was in my forties. That was when I was about forty-one, forty, forty-one. I had to go to hospital for a hernia operation, and the usual junk was in the back of my car, and she was looking for something in the back of my car and she found a photograph of an attractive looking woman and came dashing into the hospital and said "Who's this?" I had two alternatives, saying "It's a lover, or it's me." And I had to explain it was me and so there was ... oh yes ... a row.

C: What was her reaction?

R: Her reaction was horrified. But then gradually she accepted that this was in my mind and it was a long long time and the children were small, we couldn't sort of discuss things like that in front of the children, but eventually we moved – that was when I was living in Durham, we moved down to London. Eventually she said "I know you keep your clothes with somebody else's house so that you can go and dress up." She knew that, and she knew that I occasionally went, and I had friends who were supportive, and that we would go out to dinner sometimes or something like that - in London, and er, she said "It's no good being all that secretive, you can keep some of your clothes there. But don't let me see you dressed up. If you want to go out, tell me, I'll lock myself in a room, you can get dressed up, and you can get in the car and you can go out." So, that helped a bit.

Extract 3: 40.26 – 44.05

GOING OUT ON THE TOWN AS TRANSGENDER and SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS

R: ... three of us paid a ridiculously low rent on a room at the top of some little garret in Hornsey somewhere, where we could keep our stuff and go just occasionally and dress up and go out, and that was nice because we could go out and about in London.

C: And where would you go then?

R: Oh, not far away. Finsbury Park and places like that, it wasn't far. But it was an opportunity ...

C: Restaurants? Bars?

R: Only with my social friends who were supportive. They weren't the same friends. These were people who I'd known for some time who were ... who knew about all this and were real friends and said "We're going out to dinner" or on one occasion one of them said "We're going to the circus, Cirque de Soleil circus, come with us." You know? And they said "Dress up and look good and come with us." And that was a real encouragement. And of course when you're with a crowd of four or five or six people erm, you feel protected, so, you know, it was fine.

And it wasn't ... it was only after a while that I felt that I could go into a shop and buy things and talk and be at the counter and all that without feeling embarrassed and for most people that is the most awful stage. Getting over this feeling that everyone's looking at you, and I did get over it though.

C: So, in that respect it must have ... the clubs and bars, even though you didn't make that many friends, must have helped? Just being in a place....

R: Helped enormously. And not mixing with other transvestite people who all suffered the same problems of, you know, looking over their shoulder and worrying and all that sort of thing and self-regard. I didn't want to have that sort of feeling that I was admiring myself. I wanted to *be* myself! So, I started dressing in less flamboyant clothing - I mean most of them were into rather flamboyant clothing, you know, exaggeration of femininity - and be more acceptable and encouraged by my normal friends, some of whom were homosexual, some weren't, and it grew from there and they're still great friends. And I go to, you know, house parties and things like that where they absolutely wouldn't have it with ... unless I was there, sort of thing, you know? They're lovely people, and one of them used his flat in central London to just throw my 65th birthday party, or 60th birthday party, I forget which one, both I think. He's had parties in my honour there, you know, and made the place up for *me*! And it has been so, so nice. They've been so, so supportive.

And they all knew that one day I would transition, even though I hadn't suspected it myself. They knew that I had that feeling in me that would eventually just come out and I couldn't stop myself. And they've told me since, you know. They've said, you know, "That's why we supported you. You weren't like people dressing up and prancing around. You were genuine."