



IN THE GENDER BLENDER

Transparent by Tristan Taormino

As a student at Bennington College, Julien Rosskam made an ambitious mini-documentary about the construction of sex and gender in Western culture from the 1900s to the present. He did a lot of background reading, and the experiences of transgendered and intersexed people resonated most with him. All the research piqued his interest in making a film about trans people, but he'd seen several at queer film festivals and didn't want to make "another trans 101 doc." Then he received a long letter from one of his closest lesbian friends from college; it ended with a startling revelation: "I'd like to have a child before I'm thirty, and then I want to transition."

"It just blew me away," says Rosskam. "I never thought the two things could both happen. I knew at that moment I had to make a film about FTM parents." After sending emails to every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered group he could find, he and co-producer Anat Salomon set out on a five week cross country driving trip in his parents' '98 Jeep Cherokee to interview twenty transmen with children. They went to New York, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, Alabama, Texas, Nevada and California. Rosskam was mistaken for a teenage boy several times, and assumed to be Salomon's son, which afforded them a discount rate at Motel 6.

Interviewing transmen from all over the United States, then watching the over 150 hours of footage was an intense experience for Rosskam, who then identified as a lesbian. "I had never talked to many trans people, so this was a very big deal. They were happy and settled down, some old, some young, and all these guys' stories were so fucking amazing, just as people, and as parents. Every day of the interviews, someone would say something that would rock my world, but I had trouble dealing with it — I didn't have anyone to talk to. It forced me to deal with my issues, which was really hard." Besides the literal journey Rosskam took to produce the film, it became a deeply personal journey as he came to terms with his own identity, and during the editing process, he came out as trans.

Transparents, the film Rosskam, now 25, has created is a smart, compassionate, compelling portrait of FTM parents. It's a truly remarkable, groundbreaking work. All the interview subjects, who range in age from twenty to sixty, are or were on testosterone, and about half have had one or more surgeries. Each one carried and gave birth to his children. Some identify as gay, some straight and others queer; some are partnered, others are single. Most were poor or working class growing up and did not get pregnant by choice, although about one quarter of the participants identified as transgendered before they had children. These brave guys discuss their notions of gender and parenting

roles, how they reconcile their identity as male and mother, how it felt to be pregnant, how they relate to their children, and how having kids had impacted their trans identities.

One of the most fascinating elements of the documentary is how truly diverse their experiences and opinions are on each of these different topics. Some have very clear and distinct definitions of mother (female, nurturing caretaker) and father (male, breadwinner), while others consider the roles to be much more fluid. Some seem quite invested in strict categories, while others work hard to fight stereotypes. Some identify as mother, some as father, some as both, some as simply parent. When asked if he would have preferred to have fathered his child, interviewee Jay says, "That would have been nice, but then again maybe I would not have been such a great dad if I hadn't known what it's like to be a mother. I'm glad I know both sides of it."

Roskam says his interviewees challenged his own assumptions: "Most of the guys' kids still call them mom, and they don't have a problem with that. At the heart of all of this are gender roles and stereotypes, and what these words mean: man, woman, mother, father. Making this film made me realize that they are just words. What's more important is the relationship between the parents and the kids. And I wonder what the children's notions of gender will be when they grow up." Ironically, Rosskam, who had strong parental instincts that fueled this project in the beginning, says that now he does not want to have kids. "I'm not sure about it. I am re-assessing my life, but I could change my mind again."

Roskam hopes to have a final cut of the film finished this summer, so it can premiere in October at The Reel Affirmation Lesbian & Gay Film Festival in Washington, D.C. He plans to submit it to other queer film festivals, but strongly believes that it has a much broader appeal: "Everyone I talk to about this, gay or straight, is really interested." No wonder: for the people in *Transparents*, the path to parenting may be different than your typical mom or dad, but the themes that emerge are absolutely universal. Says trans parent Nick, "It's just a parenting thing. It feels really fluid and comfortable to me to be kind of male and be a mom and to be kind of female and be a dad for me. That's one of the things I love about being genderqueer: I can do that."

For more information about *Transparents*, visit www.mamsir.com