

DOX

WINTER 2010/11 #88 EUROPEAN DOCUMENTARY FILM MAGAZINE

LEIPZIG DOC FILM FESTIVAL

346 films, Animation program, Dvortsevoy

VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

The strength found in essay films

DANCE AND FILM

Between politics and dance - unique works

BERLIN DOC FORUM

Who is documenting what reality, and why?

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

The question of truthfulness

PITCH AS A DYING STANDARD?

Networks dwindling due to cutbacks



Regretters

A film about wanting to change your life

Conversation refined

Whoever gave talking heads a bad name should bow their head in shame when confronted with *Regretters*. A film about wanting to change your life and fit in.

TEXT VIBEKE BRYLD



REGRETTERS

Director: Marcus Lindeen, Sweden, 2010, 58 min, www.atmo.se/film-and-tv/regretters

Orlando and Mikael go under the knife in the hope of finding their true selves, only to realize that life on the other side doesn't turn out to be how they imagined. Now, well into their 60s, the two meet for the first time to talk about their lives as well as the one defining regret they both share: their sex change. The film is composed solely of Orlando and Mikael's conversation, which is played out on a theatre stage, and the occasional use of archive photos and individual interviews.

"Real men don't beat women"

"It is exactly real men who do."

It seems fitting that a film which reinvents the talking head documentary and refines the play with realities is featured in this year's CPH:DOX in the New Vision Award competition. Marcus Lindeen's sensitive portrait of two men in conversation is a stunning testimony to the magic of a face, a meeting and the potency of sharing your life story.

There has been no lack of documentaries on the transgendered personality. But there is a very good reason why this topic is so attractive. Besides the obvious visual benefits of observing characters lingering between the conventional sexes, the topic is ideal for examining fundamental aspects of identity: sexuality, gender, authenticity, performativity, and social convention. But many documentaries on the issue have fallen short of iconic classics such as the 1980s New York documentary *Paris is Burning* by Jennie Livingston and *Southern Comfort* by Kate Davis from the rural American South at the turn of the century. You can't help thinking: how can anyone make yet another documentary on the topic? Hasn't it been exhausted by now? That is – of course – pure nonsense, because no topic is ever exhausted. It all depends on the take. And *Regretters* isn't so much about transgender as much as it is about wanting to change your life, fit in, and eventually regret the dramatic route chosen.

The horror of regretting having your gender irreversibly changed serves as the striking point of departure for the depiction of two very different men, who share this unusual fate. Director Marcus Lindeen uses a highly refined, and dramatically concise, constructed conversation between Orlando and Mikael in his storytelling. Both men are now in their 60s. Orlando went through his sex change at a very young age as one of the first in Sweden, whereas Mikael waited till the mid 90s when he himself was middle aged. The two men are placed on a theatre stage and their conversation is only interrupted by slides, archive footage, and interview bites – everything seamlessly woven together with their conversation. The conventional Mikael is wearing a blue shirt, dark glasses and a brown wig. The tall, blond Orlando is wearing an outrageous red velvet suit. The well-structured, emotionally and intellectually charged conversation between the men, who gradually reveal themselves to each other, takes us through all the emotions and turns of a dramatic play. Their attentiveness and questioning of each other's tales are both sensitive and poignant, the expressiveness of their faces and gestures is engaging. Together with the slides and Super 8 footage of their now past lives as women and the lovely archive clip from 1961 where we meet the first woman by operation, the glamorous Dane, Christine Jørgensen, their conversation forms a complete and highly intense film.

When I first saw the film I was taken aback by the men's talent for conversation and the focused intensity of their conversation. I then attended a seminar with director Marcus Lindeen, where he explained how he developed this conversation and made use of the dramatic skills of Mikael and Orlando.

The film began as a radio show on regret, where Lindeen interviewed Mikael. After the programme Orlando called in and shared his similar experience. Lindeen let the two men meet, but Mikael was not willing to participate in a film. He wanted to remain anonymous. Lindeen then decided to bide his time and turned their stories and conversations into a very successful stage play. Before the making of the film, both men had seen themselves as stage characters, performed by actors in a play. And eventually Mikael agreed to participate in a slightly concealed manner, thus the wig and dark glasses.

The relationship between reality and performance is thus highly complex and the conversation was distilled through several media. This does not in any way threaten the authenticity of the portraits, quite the opposite. Nothing could be more appropriate than this staged version of reality when the people, whose lives we are entering, are defined by role play and a very thin line between reality and performance. In the conversation, Mikael reveals a certain perception of masculinity that he himself didn't quite feel he could live up to. So here we meet a heterosexual man, who actually changes sex for conventional reasons. In other words, he believes he can play the part of a woman with more credibility than he felt he performed as a man. Orlando also changed his sex in order to improve his life. As a homosexual, he was an outcast, and after watching the luxurious life of Christine Jørgensen, he decided to transform himself into the lovely "Isadora". (S)he fell in love, realized a whirlwind romance and a marriage, which – after 11 years – ended abruptly.

The conversation between Mikael and Orlando is mostly defined by openness and a willingness to understand, but ideas of gender and convention easily turn into questions of right and wrong, and the moments of resistance, the moments where the men meet their limits are the most moving of all. At a certain point Mikael speaks of his violent father and states that "real men don't beat women" and Orlando replies "it is exactly real men who do." Mikael cannot accept this. This quiet, but firm conflict, is a beautifully intelligent and true conflict of realities. Unsolvable, since both statements are true.

Vibeke Bryld is assistant editor of DOX, vibeke@dox.dk