

# No regrets

Marcus Lindeen changed from being a radio journalist to a director. Other changes are more difficult and more enduring. Like those for the two men featured in Lindeen's film *Regretters*. Two men who changed gender – and regretted it.

WORDS NIKLAS ERIKSSON PHOTO SANDRA QVIST





**C**an you go through a sex change and then, well, regret it??

What happens to your identity? How do you come to terms with your choice? And what does society think?

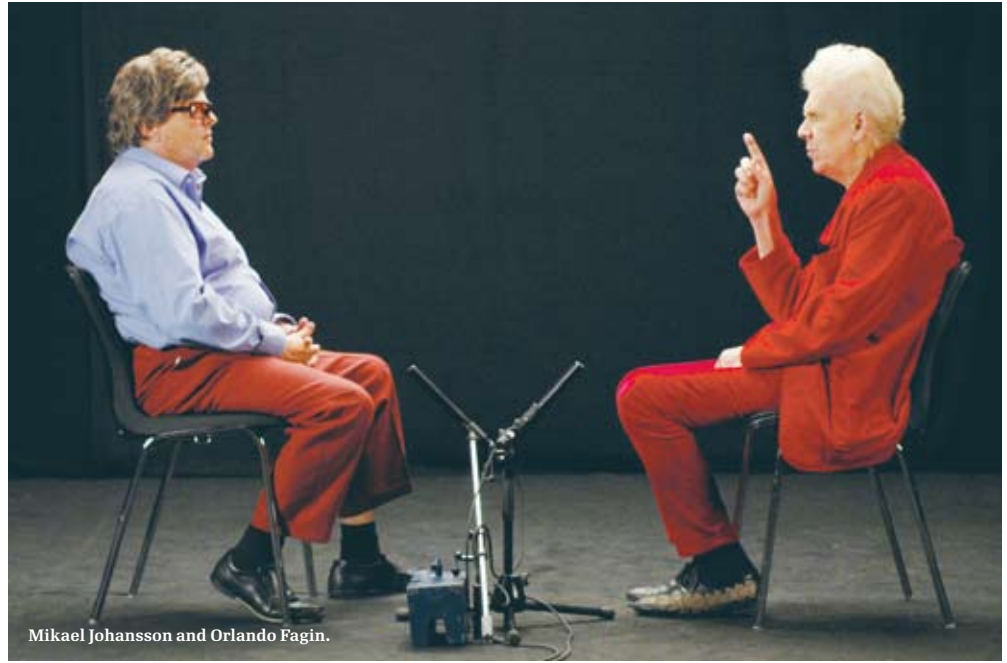
These are questions that the radio journalist, now writer-director Marcus Lindeen has been researching for the past few years.

“For me, it’s an interesting metaphor. It’s such a defining thing to lie on the operating table and dream that it will be better on the other side. And then to realize that it’s not: I can’t think of anything worse,” says Marcus Lindeen.

The documentary *Regretters* features two men, Mikael and Orlando, who have done exactly that – regretted their choice. The film is based on a conversation between the two of them. They talk of love, dreams and their relationship to their own bodies in what might be best described as a gender-political chamber play. In Orlando’s case the situation is ambiguous. He still wears a flamboyant red outfit and a diamond eardrop, talking about himself as the third sex. But Mikael definitely wants to press the cancel button. During the time the film was being shot he had his new breasts surgically removed and no longer wanted to identify himself as a woman.

**THE FILM HAS** been a long time in the offing. It started when Marcus did a radio interview with Mikael. After the programme, Orlando called in to say that he recognised himself for the first time in his life. For eleven years he had been married to a man who had no idea about his anatomical secret.

Marcus realized this was a story that needed →



Mikael Johansson and Orlando Fagin.

ERIK PERSSON

## “You can’t just think about the ethics of publicity, you have to follow your heart”

telling. But how? One problem was how to maintain Mikael’s anonymity, since he was unwilling to be filmed. The solution was a play in which the men’s lives were portrayed by actors. Filmed for television and translated into English, French and German, the success of the play finally convinced both Mikael and Orlando to get in front of the camera and tell their stories themselves.

Marcus Lindeen describes the entire project as an ethical tightrope:

“Just because people want to tell all doesn’t automatically imply that doing so will be good for them. I have my own motives for this, I want them to take part. But after three years I hope they understand that I don’t want to hurt them. And that’s the right way to do it. You can’t just think about the ethics of publicity, you have to follow your heart,” says Lindeen.

It’s no coincidence that Marcus Lindeen is so sensitive to press ethics. Although he’s only 29, he has had a taste of all kinds of media. While still at school he won a major journalism award for a current affairs magazine that he had published, and he was only 16 when he landed a job as a reporter on Sweden’s biggest-selling daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter. Three years later he moved to New York, where he got inspired by the host of cult radio series *This American Life*, Ira Glass, who greatly influenced his own subsequent weekly arts programmes on public service broadcaster Sveriges Radio.

Not even 25, Lindeen already felt constricted by journalism. He enrolled at Dramatiska Institutet to study directing, declaring that he wanted to “re-discover himself as a director”. He even contemplated changing his name.

“My second name is Folke. I wanted to become the artist Marcus Folke. But after a while I calmed down and realised what my true driving forces were. I *love* journalism, its basis in the real world. I’m not the kind who could sit in his room and think: ‘a father, a mother, an uninvited guest – what happens next?’

Maybe everyone cannot relate to a sex change that brings regret. But Lindeen’s latest film touches on questions of how we live our lives that everyone can share. For his own part, Lindeen sees it broadly in terms of a dramatic relationship to life choices. The myriad life-defining choices that all of us face fill him with “enormous anxiety”.

**GIVEN HIS LOVINGLY** compiled collection of newspaper cuttings, I ask Marcus Lindeen a question worthy of any qualified psychiatrist:

### **Are you a completist?**

“Yes, it’s my secret Achilles’ heel. It slows down my work more than anything else.”

By way of example, he cites the extensive research he did prior to the film. He got in touch with the German transsexual society. He talked to more than thirty elderly gays to gain access to private video material from the 50s and 60s. He borrowed heaps of research material from a university in Finland, and tracked down clips from the Italian *Mondo Cane* films from the early 60s. But none of this was used in the final film.

“It’s just that I go crazy if I don’t have the whole picture. So yes, what a relief, I can finally now come out as a completist,” he laughs. ■

### FACTS **MARCUS LINDEEN**

**Born:** 1980, lives in Stockholm.

**Background:** In 2008, Marcus Lindeen graduated as a director from Dramatiska Institutet in Stockholm. Before going into film and theatre he used to be a journalist, hosting cultural shows at both Sveriges Radio and SVT.

**Currently:** With his first documentary feature *Regretters*. His debut play was a stage production of the film at Stockholm City Theater, where actors portrayed the two men.