

JUSTIN PEMBERTON - Filmmaker

We spend our formative years experimenting with anything and everything in an esoteric quest to form our persona – that is, how we define ourselves and how we wish the world to see us. However they're mutable, these personalities of ours; we bend and mold to our environment; we remain in a state of flux. Yet there is one, seemingly omnipotent, identifying characteristic that many of us tend to take for granted: our gender.

Imagine, if you will, feeling you were born into the wrong body; the wrong sex altogether. Imagine being homosexual and finding that so transgressive, so at odds with your concept of 'normalcy' that you would consider transforming yourself into a member of the opposite sex in order to conduct a stereotypical heterosexual relationship. These are themes explored in *Is He Or Isn't She*, a new documentary from filmmaker Justin Pemberton.

Made over the course of five years and shot predominately in the environs of Whangarei – not exactly a small town, yet still somewhat parochial – the film introduces us to Graham: a transgender man transitioning to living as a woman, whom Pemberton met through a stroke of fate. "I had been researching eunuchs, as I'd heard that sex offenders in America are being chemically castrated, so I started doing some research, though it was never going to be funded in New Zealand as they only fund New Zealand stories," he says. Eventually, he changed tack. "At that point I was looking at pitching some ideas internationally. Then a friend of a friend told me about this guy who wanted to become a woman but hadn't told anyone yet. I wondered if that was really boring compared to castration. Then I thought that was interesting that he hadn't done anything yet (surgically). I hadn't seen a documentary before that had started when the person was still a man."

The project began with Pemberton interviewing and filming his subject, until it gained momentum when funding was secured. Graham, who soon assumed the name Ashleigh as she transitioned into living as a pre-operative female, quickly struck up a rapport with Pemberton as he documented her journey. "Five years is a really long time, though I wasn't there all the time; I'd have a break of nine months or something and then I'd feel really guilty, like I'd abandoned it. So I'd go back and pop up four or five times over three or four months. My life was changing as well and Ashleigh was really interested in that. We

definitely developed a friendship; she would ask me for advice.” Over time, as she struggled to raise funds for the operation that she maintained would make her ‘whole’, Pemberton began to doubt Ashleigh’s commitment to a full, reconstructive surgery.

“I think the financial burden was significant in things not happening, but it just didn’t quite add up, because I was talking to other people who had been in difficult financial situations themselves who had managed to achieve it.” By this stage, the lines between documentarian and friend had begun to blur. “I had a fundraising event for her, a documentary film festival. I thought that would be a good way to get it started. I think I raised 1500 bucks for her, through that. Then nothing else happened; nobody else followed through; nobody seemed motivated except for me. Everyone else was just happy buying this moratorium that she had boxed herself into.”

The film’s pivotal scene is arresting, to say the least: Pemberton shows Ashleigh graphic surgical photographs of male genitalia being transformed into a vagina. “I don’t think anyone had actually confronted Ashleigh about what was going on, and I think Ashleigh is a bit of a fantasist. At that point, I was thinking, ‘Am I going to have to pay for this?’ Which obviously would raise some serious ethical questions. I got to a point where I was feeling quite stressed; I’d been following someone for four years and they weren’t going anywhere.”

It’s fascinating to note that Pemberton completed a degree in psychology before he made his career in film. “Interviewing people, hearing their stories, finding out what makes them tick is something that I’m really drawn to. A lot of the people that I’ve filmed have really enjoyed that opportunity to sit down and talk about themselves, to work things out. I’m usually filming people who are going through some kind of crisis. It is a lot like a very public kind of therapy.”

Pemberton was ultimately surprised by Ashleigh’s true motive: “I think she just wanted to be normal, which is a strange kind of thing really, from where I’m coming from: that there is something exciting about being original and different. You have to remember that a lot of people don’t like that; a lot of people want to blend in and not be noticed. To be normal is a virtue for some people.”

Interview Rebekah Davies