

## books

## Both Sides Now

Trans author joins his mother for a spectacular conversation about maleness and femaleness

by Glenn Scofield Williams

**W**hat *Becomes You* is the best memoir I've read in a decade. It is close to the bone, poetic without an ounce of sentimentality, full of humor and humanity, and excruciating in its self-examination.

Written by Portland writer, curator and performer Aaron Raz Link and his mother, editor and poet Hilda Raz, this book is what happens when two extraordinary writers share intimate tales of self-discovery in prose that's both exquisite and accessible. The first section of the book is Link's poignant tale of his search for self-identity and his transition from the female the world thought him to be, to the gay man he always knew he was. The second section is Raz's view of the same matters from outside his transition, from inside her own family history and through the eyes of a poet, mother and modern feminist.

The result is this two-part invention: a spectacular conversation on the nature of maleness and femaleness and how these forces clash with and inform each other. It is the story of how generations affect the way we engage in liberalism. But most of all, it is the story of the titanic struggle trans people must endure, even today, for the simple right to be who they are. Through the languages of science, performance and poetry, Link and Raz have created a unique look inside a family desperately trying to understand each other and the nature of identity.

I was privileged recently to sit down with Link to discuss *What Becomes You* (University of Nebraska

Press, 2007; \$24.95 hardcover). He was, in person, as candid, funny and eloquent as he is in his book, and we talked for several hours about identity, transsexualism, the dialogue (and lack thereof) between men and women, sex, love and theater. Following is a short excerpt from that conversation.

**Glenn Scofield Williams: How did the dual memoir come about?**

**Aaron Raz Link:** I needed to understand why the world saw what it saw when it looked at me. I needed to know why people thought I was lesbian, for instance. Being in the world is to be in a conversation: Part of it is mine and part of it is yours, and the real story is what happens in between us. Because for me, the world had a sex change—everyone changed but me. But for the person looking at me, I changed and they stayed the same. It became the central question for my mother and me around my transition. How can the same thing look so different from different points of view?

**GSW: How did your mom get on board?**

**ARL:** She found a quote which was attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, and it says, "Whoever can write a book and does not, it is as if he has lost a child." We were both desperate to understand, because the official story of transsexualism makes no sense—makes no literal sense. If you ask a doctor, a psychiatrist, an insurance agent, a GLBT activist and a performance coach what transsexualism is, they will tell you not only different things, but

mutually exclusive things. I was told the mythology; I wanted to know the story.

My background is the story through science, and my mother's background is the story through poetry. Our work, I think, informed each other a lot. And that's the structure of the book. My section of the book ends with a question which her section of the book then attempts to answer: "If being a woman is what matters, then I want to know why."

**GSW: How has writing the book affected your relationship with your mother?**

**ARL:** It's been good because we continue to work closely together. You can't have a working artistic collaboration unless you communicate really well. Getting there can be horrible. They don't call it drama for nothing. But my teacher used to say, "You paid for it, it's yours." And it's true in respect of paying the cost of understanding each other's experience and point of view. And it makes for a wonderful chance to have an adult relationship of peers with somebody who's also a family member. I got lucky in my family... I think statistics are 90 percent of trans people can't say that. So I had that privilege. It gave me the room to write.

**GSW: In your opinion, is "transsexual" a temporary assignment, or is it something you'll always have to be? And is there a "how it should be" that we should be working toward?**

**ARL:** I don't think I should have a lifetime major mental health diagnosis. I am mentally ill,

officially [due to the transsexualism diagnosis], and will be, as gay people were until 1973, until they change the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] or until I die. On the other hand, I do think that I should have had some access to medical care, but without some kind of diagnosis, you don't get treatment.

We have a history in America of seeing people behaving like we don't understand and first deciding that it's demonic possession, then that it's moral evil, then that it's mental illness and then that it's physical illness. Right now, transsexualism is legally categorized both as a moral deviance and as a mental illness. So I think we could be further down the road with that. But I'm also a gay man, and as a gay man I can say that I'm no longer categorized as mentally ill, and that was something that happened in my lifetime.

**GSW: In your book you point out that gay men can be as harsh as straight men toward transsexualism. Why is that?**

**ARL:** It's because we're carrying around, as gay men, society's prejudice that because we love men, we must be women—which is a huge tension. If we love men, are we more like men? If we love men, are we more like women? We were just starting to have this discussion in the gay male community when AIDS hit us. Because I looked female in the '70s and '80s, I am alive now when many of the best and brightest men of my generation are gone. So part of my responsibility is to make space to imagine a world that has better things to say about men and women and weakness and strength and sex and love than the stories that were given to us. Our generation of gay men need to step up to this. I'm part of restarting that conversation. That's my fondest hope. 10

AARON RAZ LINK reads 7:30 p.m. July 3 at Powell's Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.; 7:30 p.m. Sept. 25 at Kennedy School, 5736 N.E. 33rd Ave.; and during the fifth Gender Odyssey, which will be held from Aug. 31 to Sept. 3 in Seattle ([www.transconference.org](http://www.transconference.org)).

GLENN SCOFIELD WILLIAMS writes poetry, prose, plays, periodica and porn in Portland.



"I got lucky in my family," says Aaron Raz Link (with Hilda Raz in the 1980s). "I think statistics are 90 percent of trans people can't say that."



Aaron Raz Link uses the language of science to complement his mother's poetic background in the dual memoir *What Becomes You*.