

The accidental male

MODEL



Richard Barr gets a public makeover

The last week in September was Norwich Fashion week. Now normally such events will wash over me and have about the same impact as a bird pooping on my windscreen. Despite the valiant efforts of two wives (in succession - I don't do bigamy) I have remained resolutely unfashionable throughout my entire adult life.

If ever I did make a faint effort to respond to the trends of male fashion I generally got it wrong and ended up wearing something loud when everyone had gone quiet or baggy when skin tight was the vogue.

Eventually as the years rolled by I gave up even the hint of an unequal struggle and, as was recently pointed out to me, became invisible and grey. And that is how I expected to remain.....until a chance encounter on a sofa brought me into contact with Carol Spenser.

In reality, it was not even a sofa. I had been invited back to BBC Radio Norfolk (see my radio tales from previous P&Fs) to appear with Helen McDermott - a well-known face because for years she read the news on Anglia TV. She now hosts a mid-morning programme on BBC Radio Norfolk.

I was about to find out how well known her face was. The idea of that part of the programme is that you are chatting on a sofa - about a few chosen topics. I had been happily discussing the activities of Gerald Depardieu and the legal position if you are caught short in a public place, when into the studio swept Carol Spenser who is a Radio Norfolk regular and an expert on fashion.

As the conversation developed, it became clear that no one thought that I looked the best in the clothes I was wearing and that perhaps I ought to be taken into a decent clothes shop and shown how to dress. I shared in the laughter and then forgot about it, because most people forget about the things that are said on the radio about three minutes after the end of the programme.

This turned out to be an exception, because a few weeks later I received a call to find out when I might be available to have my makeover.

Having run out of excuses I agreed to allow Helen and Carol to do their worst. I was wearing what I considered to be innocuous and inoffensive clothes - a greyish shirt (Rois of Wroxham), a pair of greyish-brown trousers (Sainsbury's) and some brown trainers (Lidl).

Their combined verdict was that with my grey hair I was doing a good John Major impression and was so colourless that I would be mostly invisible when I walked down the street.

Eyeing me up and down Carol

chequered shirt - a colour I almost never wear - and blue jeans without the faded knees that most of mine acquire within about 30 minutes. I had to squeeze into a pair of ornate brown shoes that had an uncanny resemblance to what were called wrinkle pickers a few decades ago.

She then chose a cardigan with leather buttons and a huge man-bag. To cap it all was.... a cap that was perched on my head and (at last) a grey scarf. I was told to wear the shirt not tucked in - 'a lot of older guys tuck their shirts in' - but I apparently would look slimmer with it out to emphasise the vertical and make me shed the pounds - or at least appear to do so.

Then she ruffled my hair,

Although I cannot stand my face, I could see what she was getting at: I was certainly beginning to stand out from the background.

I was then sent back into the changing room to remove the shoes that had squeezed my feet into the shape of bananas - but not for long. I had to try on black pointed shoes instead. Through the curtain I was handed a pristine white shirt, a dark blue single breasted suit, a mauve and lilac tie and some more pointed shoes - this time in black.

I emerged some minutes later (having had to amputate several toes to get my feet into the shoes); this time with what I was told was the power dressing look of the confident court advocate.

I was told that I now looked a million dollars. I am not sure about the million dollars - though I would have been happy to be paid that sum. I had to concede that I did look better. I even practised addressing the small group of shop assistants as though I was appearing in court. It seemed good....

In the euphoria I bought the suit, the pink shirt and the jeans, but not the shoes, the scarf, the cardigan or the cloth cap: there is a limit to the number of new tricks you can teach an old dog.



Before



After



concluded that my colouring is 'cool' and that I have a pinky complexion (pink being a cool colour). I then was marched into the brand new Marks and Spenser store in Norwich where the staff looked on benignly as Helen processed through the racks of clothes. Almost everyone knew her. The Queen would not have had a much more enthusiastic reception.

In the meantime, Carol (who had decided that I needed to avoid yellows, oranges, browns and creams) disappeared down the aisles only to return some minutes later with a pile of clothes for me to try on.

First there had to be the casual look. For this, she chose a pink and white

straightened me up and stood me in front of a mirror.

'I can't wear that cap. I will look like a pillock,' I complained. She agreed that I did and off came the cap.

Carol and Helen briefly complimented me by saying that I looked younger. The cardigan was exchanged for a Reefer jacket to give me the outdoor look. I was told that this is the kind of jacket that sailors wore. Pause for a moment while Helen and I sang a hornpipe (out of tune).

Startled shoppers had the microphone thrust into their faces and were asked if I looked any better. Most of them were polite and agreed that I did.

Helen McDermott hosts the mid-morning programme on BBC Radio Norfolk.

Carol Spenser has been running Style Directions for 20 years (www.styledirections.com). She will be launching a men's fashion advice section in 2012 (inspired no doubt by her Radio Norfolk experience with Richard).

Richard Barr has decided not to give up the day job and will not be taking up fashion modelling as a career. He will continue life as a grey lawyer (but now with a blue suit and pink chequered shirt).