



Refusing to be **OUTSIDERS...**

Denied full participation in the mainstream of social activity, disabled women become targets for the sort of 'benevolence' which reinforces their oppression, as Anna Rae found out.



As a congenitally disabled child, I went through the system – special school, special college, special clubs. My way of coping with the special school, with its oppressive curriculum of religion, rabbit-hutch cleaning, and steeping pounds of newspapers in buckets of gunge to produce endless mis-shapen objects d'art of papier mache, was to lock myself in any of the various lavatories to devour the books delivered by the travelling library. From all these wonderful books I learned about the world I would join and participate in when released from what I regarded as prison. Six years of reading gave me a pretty comprehensive vision, and it never crossed my mind that my disability was going to severely restrict my involvement in the cavalcade – that's how I saw it. Life. Exciting, frightening, lusty. My daydreams didn't include what effect my disability would have, or rather, as I now see things, I hadn't

any inkling that the society I would join would bestow disability upon me.

So, as a young woman, and as an older woman, I learned to cope with a society which devalued me as a woman and as a person, and I watched the same thing happen to other disabled women friends – it took years to understand the politics at work which made it possible for disabled men to often have relationships and marry within their peer groups, but not disabled women. We women didn't discuss or acknowledge the fact that our disabled male contemporaries, whilst having the odd affair with us, married the first able bodied woman they came across willing to enter that holy state.

Whilst my political awareness was developing, along with my understanding of feminism, I came across Tuppy Owens and The Outsiders Club. A friend who had had very casual dealings

with her thought I'd be very interested in what she was doing, running a club for disabled or socially isolated people in which they could meet in an uninhibited way in more sophisticated surroundings than the usual socials run by well meaning able bodied people for those less fortunate than themselves. Well, of course I was interested. The first lunch I attended in the West End was very pleasant - I met an old friend I hadn't seen for years, chatted to her and a table full of men for a few hours, and went home reflecting that Tuppy Owens seemed to be filling a social gap which desperately needed filling for some of us.

The club was set up by Tuppy Owens and some of her friends. Owens gives herself the respectability of professionalism by being termed a 'sexologist'. As a founder member she gives the club a lot of its publicity and gains publicity in return. She is the authoress of publications such as The Sex Maniac's Diary and The Male Chauvinist Pig's Diary. She is occasionally written about in the more pornographic Sunday press. She has also written a book which is subtitled 'A Guide to Feminine Psychology' - 'Take me I'm Yours'. This is on the recommended reading list for members of the O.C. and is one of only four books they have taped for the blind. It has been described most aptly by a UPLAS member as a manual of rape.

Di Beck

She phoned me to ask for help at the opening of the exhibition she put on at the Roundhouse - an exhibition of art by disabled artists called 'Emotions in Focus', and it's a measure of my residual naivety that the fact that the exhibition was opened by Victor Lownes did not ring any alarm bells. Pornography and Playboy magazine were remote facts of life, relegated to the darker recesses of the male mind - no interest to me. When the exhibition finished its run, Tuppy Owens asked me to be her secretary, and I agreed. During the exhibition she had run workshops for disabled people and interested professionals on sexuality, and I was so grief stricken by the awful loneliness

described by some of my fellow disabled people at the workshops that I couldn't pass up the opportunity to work with someone who seemed so 'right on' about the problems, and to learn more about how and why such problems existed.

It's hard to explain how or why I stayed around for the next eighteen months. On my first day I was demoted from 'secretary' to volunteer, on account of the fact that 'the Club had no money'. The office was so filthy that it needed a couple of hours work to make it bearable to me. It was an airless basement with no windows, and the whole flat was littered with the paraphernalia of pornography, which I just refused for a long time to connect with Owen's work with the Outsiders Club. I thought what she did with her private life was her business, and I just kept my head down and worked in the day to day business of keeping the Club ticking over; processing membership, sending out birthday cards to members, which I thought was rather nice, even if the cards themselves didn't seem the sort one could display openly on the sideboard.

Every six months the Club distributed a Membership List and eventually one came out with my telephone number in it, together with the information that I was looking for 'intellectual companionship'. For weeks the phone rang about three times a night; always men, always looking for sexual contact; it was terrible. One particularly obnoxious character phoned three times offering a 'free massage' . . . Owens denied all knowledge of who he might be, and her response to my complaints about all the rotten phone calls was that I was lacking in understanding and compassion! In the end my flatmate answered the phone for me and said I was out if it was anyone he didn't know. Even after three years I still have reluctance to answer the phone.

To go on making like an ostrich became impossible. I came to believe that those nearest to Owens, who helped to run the club, were involved

A UPLAS member has been present at an unofficial gathering which consisted very largely of O.C. members. One of those occasions a physically impaired woman was taken out of the room on three separate occasions by the different men and made use of. One could argue that she was perfectly in control of the situation and that it was entirely her own choice. I think, however, this would be to oversimplify, given the prevailing ideas in the club that sex is the primary objective and that the role of a woman is to gratify man's sexual urges - pressures were being put upon her, which would make resistance very difficult. I see here the logical role that women have to play in a club orientated towards men who are encouraged to regard them as sex objects. The women have to prostitute themselves as a substitute for the relationships they sought to alleviate their social isolation. Here they do not even get paid, but can be used for free.

Di Beck

in the porn industry, and had absolutely no interest in the women members who were distressed, as I was, by the endless propositioning by telephone that they had to endure. A widow in Ealing told me that sometimes her children answered the phone, and said 'Oh, Mum, what have you got yourself into?' Women wrote angry letters asked to be taken off the membership list, but apart from the fact that lists went out only at six monthly intervals, which made cancellation of membership almost impossible, Owens ignored their letters. The ratio of men to women in the Club was so high that to remove womens' names would have rendered the list ridiculous. The numerous women who were upset were written off as prudes and neurotics. Male members who were distressed about anything had all the stops pulled out - conciliatory letters, phone calls, and even visits at home. Owens' attitude seemed to be that men were never to





blame for any problems amongst the membership — when one actually couldn't be overlooked as a damn nuisance, well, the poor chap had brain damage, hadn't he?

Without rose coloured spectacles I began to consider what I was shoring up with a more critical eye. The membership fee was £5 waged, £2 unwaged — most were unwaged. If ten membership applications came in in a week, the average income was about £20-£30. With my petrol expenses, postage, lunches, other volunteers' lunches and expenses, the Club obviously wasn't paying for itself.

In her report on the Club, Owens says that her publishing company subsidised the Club. She describes herself as a pornographer (*Oui* magazine, March 74), she's written the 'Sex Maniac's Diary', and is a sex photographer. The Outsiders Club is financed

[In 'Take me, I'm Yours']... Physical impairment is thought of as repulsive and something to be hidden or disguised when out to conquer your girl. In tune with this the O.C.'s policy is to try and match up people who can compensate for each others' inadequacies. This is an interesting euphemism. It means for example the matching of a blind person with someone who is considered very unsightly. It is a firm indication of the manipulative, reactionary, oppressive tendency of the O.C. organisation.

Di Beck

by her earnings as a pornographer, but the majority of the membership are completely unaware of this; maybe there are those who would perhaps wouldn't object to their social activities being financed by this trade, but ignorance of facts eliminates choice.

She is also the author of 'Take Me, I'm Yours'. This book has been described by Di Beck in Disability Challenge No. 2 (Journal of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) as a 'manual for rape'. In this book, Owens says 'Women do give you hard time and I'm sorry'. Later on in the book she writes on techniques for getting a woman who

does not seem willing to participate in the full sexual act to succumb. She advises copious touching and then 'turn her over and ram it in. Whilst she can't see you she won't fight too hard'. Owens has decided 'this is the sort of rape a girl enjoys'. Di Beck goes on to say 'It is deplorable that this woman is achieving credibility and respect from the establishment. This is probably partly because she has created a convenient dumping ground for the emotionally and sexually stranded'.

Owens has established a charity — the Social Habilitation and Integration Trust — to 'raise money for research'. The initials spell SHIT. This was deliberate, as became clear when I tried to discuss with her the contemptuous and degrading nature of this title for a charity. Is the mind of a person who can think up this kind of thing benevolent? It certainly isn't successful at raising money; having asked me if I'd like to attend a Conference on Sexuality and Disability in New York, it couldn't raise £500 for my air fare.

It must be made plain that I do understand that a lot of the work of the O.C. is done by the active membership trying to be mutually supportive. A lot of this is done on an individual basis teaching people ways of fitting into the environment. This sort of assistance can realistically be of little use as it is in an environment which excludes physically impaired individuals. It is not their personal problem but the problem of an oppressed group. However, it is important that the social needs of the physically impaired are not ignored, but that they are met through another structure. A structure which is not oppressive to women and not oppressive to the disabled. A reactionary group such as the O.C. can only do long-term damage to the cause of physically impaired people. It is a development of the disability scene against which we must put up a struggle.

Di Beck

Physically impaired people experience systematic segregation and isolation because they are denied full participation in the mainstream of social activity. I see as a predictable product of this the development of facilities such as the Outsiders Club, which describes itself as a social and contact club for socially isolated people, especially those who are physically handicapped. I have criticisms to make of the Outsiders Club, for the way it actually furthers the oppression of physically impaired people rather than creating a situation in which people can overcome their isolation. The Club has a clear objective that is to gratify people's desire for sex and also their desire to form loving relationships. It is my contention that because the former is such a strong prevailing influence that it works against the latter.

Di Beck

To return to the second paragraph of this article. For the club lunches, Owens finds it necessary to recruit able bodied women to attend for a few hours — obviously recognising that disabled women alone are not going to attract the attendance of the main body of Club membership — the men. So — far from liberating anybody, Owens is perpetuating the oppressions both sexes suffer; men must desire the beautiful, if unobtainable. Women, disabled women, must be 'resorted to' at the end of the day. The saddest thing of all, is that at the end of the day, there are still a few disabled women who have been so badly damaged that they still wait for the stale crumbs left. Owens counts on it.



Disability Challenge is available for 80p from UPIAS, Flat 2, Dane Rd, St. Giles Court, Ealing, W13