

HOMEARAMA PREVIEW • THE OUTRAGEOUS DIRTY WOMAN

# RICHMOND

*Surroundings*

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# His Name is...



Richmond's Most Outrageous Character



# Dirt

By Frances Helms

**H**E ARGUED rationally with the saleslady: "This is an \$85 dress. I'm not going to buy it if it doesn't fit."

She argued back, just as rationally: "You can't try it on in the store. Our dressing rooms are for women. We can't let a man use them."

He and his cash money — and, probably, the fact that nobody else was in the shop at the moment — prevailed.

Giving in, she said, "Go ahead. But hurry up!"

He did, the dress fit, he paid for it and left. But he would be back. He tends to frequent a handful of shops where styles and colors appeal to him. And where he can find size 13-DD shoes to match.

"I shop on Grace Street sometime and I like to go way out in the West End, but my favorite store is Marguerite's Fashions," Donnie Corker confides. "They have really nice things there."

And what size dress does he wear? "Queen-size," he says, smiling at his own pun.

Because the rotund Corker is a queen: a drag queen.

He is Richmond's own Dirt Woman. But, to look at him, you'd never know it.

Fridays and Saturdays, weather permitting, will find him on the corner of Grace and Harrison streets where he sits, a solitary figure surveying traffic from half-closed eyes, occasionally munching on a store-bought cake, in the shade of a large green umbrella.

"Four dollars, three dollars and two dollars," he says, turning his head to answer a passer-by, pointing, in turn, to the containers of tissue-wrapped, fresh, cut flowers lined neatly at the curb.

Choosing a \$2 bouquet, the customer proffers a \$10 bill. Corker, without moving from his seat, painstakingly counts out three one-dollar bills, then five more, totting up the numbers on his fingers to be sure he's making the right change.

"I don't know how to read or write, but I can count a little," he confides as his customer walks away.

His voice is soft, deceptively cultured in tone. Dressed in a gray sweat shirt and blue workpants, sporting a couple days' growth of beard, he needs only a hardhat to resemble a member of one of

Richmond's many construction crews. Surely this is not the flower-throwing, epithet-screaming, bump-and-grinding, heavyweight female impersonator who has proved alternately the darling of the media and the pariah of the establishment.

But he is.

"Hey, Dirt!" A teen-ager waves, leaning precariously from a van careening around the corner.

Corker smiles and waves in return. (If he likes you, he waves his whole hand; if not, just a finger.)

Every few minutes, he hears it again: "Hey, Dirt." "Hi, Dirt." "How's it going, Dirt?"

Most of the greetings are given and accepted good-naturedly. "More people call me Dirt than Donnie," he admits, a grin transforming his previously Buddha-solemn face.

The flower business isn't his, he says. "I don't really sell the flowers. People pick out what they want and I just take the money."

He is rarely cheated and nobody has ever tried to grab the flowers and run. "If they do, they can just have 'em. I ain't gonna chase 'em," he says, indicating a



DAVID STOVER PHOTOS



disinclination to quickly raise his girth from his seat.

It's not really a job, either, he insists. "I do this to help out a woman I like. Sometimes she gives me five or six dollars, or buys my dinner. I don't want any money for doing this."

But it gets him out of the house on Floyd Avenue where he still lives with his mother and father, a sister and brother. It gives him something to do in addition to the "dirt grams" he occasionally delivers and the drag shows he more or less regularly arranges for local bars.

"If you don't like somebody or you want to get even with somebody, you can hire me to dress in drag, go there, sing a song and give them flowers," he says of the dirt grams. The cost? "Oh, \$50 to \$75. I don't do many of them."

He is much more enthusiastic about his drag revues which primarily comprise men who dress in women's clothing and pantomime to records. "We don't do nothing dirty, nothing nasty on stage," he assures. "Lots of straight people — heterosexuals — come to see us. Even my mother has come to my show. We just have fun, make people laugh."

But his life hasn't offered much to laugh about.

Born at Grace Hospital, Corker was one of nine children — he has six brothers and two sisters — all of whom still live in Richmond.

"We lived on Oregon Hill five or six years. We've been on Floyd about 20 years."

He thinks he was in the seventh grade when he dropped out of Park Junior High School but he isn't quite sure. "I didn't learn anything," he says with remembered discontent. "All they wanted to teach me to do was make tables. They didn't learn me to read and write."

He won't talk about why he was in a program aimed only at vocational training, but he admits that he draws a monthly Supplemental Security Income check. According to a Social Security Administration spokeswoman, only mentally or physically disabled adults qualify for SSI payments.

After Corker dropped out of school, he did what most kids in that situation would do: He stayed home and watched television or wandered out to play in the park.

He was playing alone in Monroe Park when he was attacked and raped by six men.

At 13, his life was changed forever.

"You don't have to be hurt to be gay,

but a lot of homosexuals were hurt. I was hurt," he says, struggling for a tone of matter-of-factness against obviously painful memories.

He doesn't know if it was people's general knowledge of the attack and their subsequent attitudes towards him that made him adopt the gay lifestyle, but he did.

He notes that his mother, fearing for his safety, kept him confined to the house for a long time after the attack. But, in his mid-teens, ignoring all protestations, he began working the streets.

As a male prostitute, he serviced strangers and acquaintances, some gay but some primarily straight, some single but most married. "I couldn't get a job. I did it for spending money," he says. "But I didn't make much."

He doesn't bat an eye as he discusses sex habits and haunts. And some of the episodes he recounts about his life on the streets are amusing: "I was arrested in Virginia Beach in '71 — for prostitution. They put me in a women's cell. They thought I was a real woman. But when they told me I had to take a shower, I said, 'I can't undress in front of all these women!' They freaked when they found out I was a man!"

Other recollections are not so funny: "I've been beaten and raped and cut," he tells.

Pushing up his left sleeve, he shows an ugly, curving scar, about seven inches long, on his forearm. He was down at "the block," near the homosexual hangout of 2nd and Franklin streets, when a man pulled a knife on him. "He didn't like gays," he explains, shrugging and covering his arm.

He also was shot once. "In the chest," he specifies. "It was somebody who wanted to show off. He picked me up and shot me. He was a maniac." The wound hit no vital organs and necessitated about a week's stay in the hospital, Corker says. After that, he was more careful.

"I've been arrested three or four times. Or four or five times. For prostitution," he says.

From one of those arrests came the name that has become his cult identity: Dirt Woman.

"It was back in '76. The vice men threw me in the back seat of a police car and I accidentally made a mess — how do you say it, a 'boo-boo' — in the back seat. They called me dirty, a dirty woman. That's really how I got my name," he confesses with some embarrassment.

Word got around and, eventually, instead of being enraged by the teasing, he took the name as his own, defusing his detractors. And he quit working the streets. It wasn't the fear of AIDS that made him quit selling his body, although he was aware of the dangers of the disease.

"It got too dangerous," he explains. "My family didn't want me to get myself messed up or get killed. That's why I quit working the streets. People don't care about nobody no more in this city. They are killing each other. Doing crack cocaine."

Gesturing disdainfully at the street before him, he spits out the word: "Cocaine! That's all you see on the 900 block of Grace — people selling drugs!"

At that moment a middle-aged man pauses at Corker's street-corner seat. His blood-shot eyes glare with suspicion. "You better be careful what you say," he warns in a hostile voice.

Corker ignores him.

When the man begins a rambling discourse about never knowing who you can trust, Corker waves him away. "Don't pay him no attention," Corker says. "He's crazy."

Mumbling to himself, apparently intoxicated by alcohol or other drugs, the man weaves across the busy intersection and disappears into the street crowd.

Looking after him, Corker harangues drug use and drug users. Then he compares drug lifestyles to homosexual lifestyles. "If they'd give us jobs, we'd go to work. They [the general public] think it's a sin to be a female impersonator, but we don't harm nobody. We don't fight. We don't rape women or hurt children."

He may not be the area's most eloquent spokesman for gay rights, but he is ardent about the inequities, the social injustice often shown to them.

Pulling a black zippered bag from beneath his folding chair, he rummages through its contents until he finds what he is searching for. Holding out, upside down, a photocopied page from the Virginia Code of Laws, he says, "We don't have no rights. That's why we can't find jobs." The code to which he refers addresses transsexuals and the rights of employers to refuse to hire them.

As he refolds the paper and returns it to his bag, a slender, blond male stops on the corner to light a cigarette. After listening to Corker's complaint, he agrees with him. Saying that he doesn't want to identify himself, he notes that



work is one reason not to.

Corker is more forthcoming: "Her name is Kitty — she's been a queen for years."

The young man nods confirmation of both the name and the label. "I've used several names, but Kitty is what I go by."

Kitty, a long-time acquaintance of Corker, says he has been gay since he was 12. Work, when he can get it, primarily is valet parking. But he, too, participates in local drag shows.

"I need you and two more girls to be in a show I'm having Monday night," Corker says, discussing a performance planned for Twisters, a straight club on Grace Street.

"I like to play straight clubs," Corker confides. "Straight people tip better."

And the shows are popular at straight clubs. Kevin Whitt, owner of Twisters, where *Dirt Woman* variously has appeared in drag revues and as a Jell-O wrestler, says, "We've had as many as 500 people in here for one of Donnie's shows."

Whitt considers himself Corker's friend. "He's really a sweet person, a people person. A lot of people have talked bad about him, done him dirty, but he helps people, gives money to the blind. He's a real sweet-heart."

Corker's shows at Twisters begin every Monday night about 9:30. The usual audience is 100-150 people but, Whitt says, "Donnie is getting bigger and better all the time."

Meanwhile, as Kitty and Corker discuss dates and times and share tidbits of gossip, squealing over a recent national tabloid report of actor John Travolta's supposedly gay love affair, they sound like any two women friends who meet on the street.

When the conversation turns to clothes, Kitty says that his favorite dress is a very short, purple and black lace model, worn with matching fingertip gloves.

Corker agrees that those colors flatter Kitty. "When she wears a red dress, everybody thinks she's a whore."

"Oh, you!" Kitty protests with a giggle.

Kitty mail-orders his dresses, which actually are more like lingerie, from a

company in Massachusetts. And he sometimes dresses up to "cruise," to ride around town in his car.

"That's my car over there," Kitty says, pointing to a sub-compact model with what looks like a pair of bright green feather boas adorning the windshield wiper blades. "I'm not too subtle. You can spot me coming a mile away."

While Kitty does cruise around "the block," he doesn't stop. "Only troublemakers go there any more," he says. Corker agrees.

Corker says that he wears dresses only on stage these days. And then he insists that he looks like Elizabeth Taylor. "On a bad day," he amends. "But, hey, Liz Taylor can't beat me at anything! I've had 50,000 lovers!"

Kitty and Corker have performed



Donnie Corker presides over his court at one of Twisters' recent drag shows.

together or separately at Scandals, Pyramid, Upstairs Lounge and Fielden's, as well as at Twisters. Mostly they lip-sync to records, but Corker recently has assembled a band called "The Dirt Babies."

"Five musicians who had been in other bands," he says. "They're good. And they're straight. The vocalist is a real good-looking young man."

As a couple of young men wearing Virginia Commonwealth University T-shirts pass after offering the ritual "Hi, Dirt," Kitty turns his head to watch them. "Ummmm," he murmurs with a theatrical leer. "Some of these straight people really look good!"

Corker dismisses them with a wave, drawing Kitty back into talk about the gay revues.

Kitty has performed to some of Ol-

ivia Newton-John's songs but Corker prefers country artists. Among Corker's favorites are "Satin Sheets," "Don't Come Home A Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind" and a second Loretta Lynn hit sure to draw laughter from the crowd: "You Ain't Woman Enough To Take My Man."

But another song recently raised Corker's celebrity status even more in the Richmond area. Corker, singing "Dirty Richmond," was a finalist in the WRXL Radio "Song for Richmond" contest.

"Somebody else showed me how to do it and I sang the song," Corker says. "It was like a Batman theme in the background."

His May 12 performance at the invitation-only song finals at the Flood Zone was as outrageous as the audience could have hoped.

"When the winner was announced, *Dirt Woman* went on stage and started cussing the sponsors and everybody. She said she knew her song was best and she should have won, so she wasn't going to perform," a member of that audience tells. "But, later, she thought better of it and came out and did her song. Of course, the audience loved the whole thing — except for one redneck band that was real uncomfortable with *Dirt Woman*!"

The fourth-place rap song told of Corker's most recent brush with

the law. "I had been out of trouble about 10 years," he tells. "The last time I was arrested [for prostitution], the judge talked to me like a father. He said, 'Look, Donnie. I don't want you doing this any more. You could get hurt.' And he put me on probation. I haven't been in trouble since ... until they arrested me at the Capitol."

The incident mentioned in "Dirty Richmond" was Corker's arrest by Capitol Police for impersonating a reporter at the inauguration of Douglas L. Wilder as governor of Virginia. The actual charge was a Class 1 misdemeanor for possessing a "document for the purpose of establishing a false status, occupation, membership, license or identity."

Corker recalls that he arose early on Jan. 13, eagerly anticipating the day's events. By 8:30, he had showered and

LES DERBY PHOTO



dressed, by 9:30 he was on a bus on his way to the Capitol. Shortly after 10, he was in his appointed place, credentials in hand, waiting to see the inauguration of the first black elected governor in the United States. History was in the making and he was privileged to be part of it.

But he wasn't.

At 10:30, two Capitol Policemen recognized him and challenged his right to be there. Despite his possession of a press pass which had been given to him by a local radio station manager, he was arrested and escorted from the grounds.

He had never been so humiliated in his life.

"That really upset me," Corker says with a sensitivity which belies his notorious reputation. "I'd been here all my life and I couldn't see my own governor make history!"

Shaking his head, his brown eyes glistening with remembered tears of embarrassment, he confides. "I almost considered suicide."

Instead, he swallowed his tremendous hurt and, back at home, watched on television what he had hoped to see in person.

"In his speech, Doug Wilder said all men have equal rights," Corker recalls. "But I don't believe that statement."

Kitty nods in sympathetic agreement as Corker expounds his views quietly, eloquent in his simplicity.

Corker protests any wrongdoing. "I had been hired by WANT to go to the inauguration. John Gallaway gave me the papers."

Gallaway, managing director of WANT Radio, subsequently confirmed Corker's story. "I thought I had the right to hire anybody I wanted to," Gallaway was reported as saying in a Richmond Newspapers account of the episode.

Corker says he was fined \$50 in Richmond General District Court, but he appealed. According to court sources, the case subsequently was nol-prossed, which means the suit was abandoned, reportedly for a technical error in language in the summons.

"I had to pay a lawyer \$450," Corker complains. The money came from family and friends.

And Corker is unforgiving. "I'm thinking about suing for false arrest," he says.

He wouldn't go the Capitol again even if Wilder himself invited him. "I wouldn't go if 10 people were being sworn in!"

But most of his days are more mundane than the misadventure of Jan. 13.

A late sleeper, he generally eschews breakfast, preferring to take a walk around the Fan, returning home in time for lunch and a little TV viewing. "I always watch the channel 6 news at 12," he says.

Once in a while he will stay tuned for the soaps but, if he has a favorite program, it's wrestling on Saturday night. He'd rather get out in the real world than watch television.

Dinner, quite often, is at the Village Cafe.

"I never have bad days," he says. Well, except for inauguration day, he clarifies.

He says his family loves him. "They accept me for what I am." But he doesn't tell whether they have difficulty dealing with Dirt Woman's notoriety.

Corker has been what he calls "married" several times, but never to a woman. Seven months was the longest time he ever lived with another man, though. "It just didn't work out," he says.

And the briefest of his "marriages" lasted less than a day.

Recalling the event with laughter now, although he admits that it hurt then, Corker tells, "We had the wedding in a Baptist church — a straight preacher married us — in Washington, D.C. and a reception at the Chesapeake House."

After the festivities were over, however, the "bridegroom" disappeared. "He said, 'Honey, I'm going out for a walk. I'll be back in about an hour.' At midnight, he still hadn't come back," Corker recalls.

"So, I put my wedding gown back on, packed all my clothes and went down to the bar. There he was. In the bar. Hugging on another drag queen! That faggot!"

"I can call him a faggot. I was mad. Wouldn't you be, too, if your husband left you on your wedding night?"

Furious, Corker stalked out, taking with him almost \$2,000 which his "husband" had left in the hotel room.

"And there I was, in a white wedding dress, a blonde wig and a veil, hitching down the highway. An old man in a truck picked me up, and I appreciated it."

Corker doesn't know whether his rescuer ever realized that the damsel in distress wasn't a damsel. "We stopped at a restaurant and he bought me a steak and the waitress wanted to know if we had just gotten married. I told her no, that my real husband had left me. And I didn't even get to throw my bouquet!"

Kitty laughs. "I've been 'married'

three times in the past 15 years, but I'm not looking for a husband any more — just a boyfriend. Husbands get on my nerves. They always expect you to be home at night!"

Kitty confesses that he tried sex with a woman once. "But I didn't go back for seconds."

Corker has a different attitude. "I love women. I love both [men and women]. Some day I might find a nice girl, get married and have dirt babies."

But, at 38, he knows that possibility is not a probability. "Too many people know me; I can't change now," he says, a touch of regret in his voice.

After Kitty waves goodbye, Corker becomes reflective.

Of course his biggest dream is to become famous, following in the high-heeled footsteps of Divine, the late female impersonator who starred in such movies as "Polyester" and "Lust In The Dust."

But other dreams are more prosaic: "I want to learn to read and write — I was talking to a lady the other day about that — and I want to own my own home."

"If I had the money, I would help the homeless — give them a place to live. And I want to prove to Richmond, Virginia, that gay people are not bad people."

As he talks, earnestly baring his soul in a manner foreign to his public persona, Dirt Woman is a character separate from Donnie Corker; their dreams are not necessarily the same.

He was born and raised in Richmond and he loves this city. "On the whole, people treat gays pretty good here — well, not as bad as they do other places. In Norfolk the police will scream 'faggot-this' and 'faggot-that' at you and tell you you have till they count five to get off the street. Here, they just tell you to move on. If you're not causing trouble, they don't bother you."

Not being bothered doesn't seem too much to ask and Corker doesn't seem to ask for much. But he knows that he really doesn't fit in.

Dirt Woman is nowhere in sight when he says that if he had life to live over, he'd make one big change. "I'd come back normal," he says. "And I wouldn't be gay."

His sincerity is obvious, and heart-breaking.

But, lightning quick, the facade is back in place. "Come to my next show," he blithely invites, rising and extending his hand in farewell. "You'll love it." ■