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Carmen Rupe: Transgender Icon

Rest in Peace

by Katherine Cummings with thanks to [GayNZ.com](#) for much of the historical information
Article appeared in Polare magazine: January 2012 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Carmen Rupe, Transgender Icon

Carmen Rupe has left us. Often referred to as a transgender icon on both sides of the Tasman, this remarkable woman died on 15th December 2011, following some months

of ill-health after a fall earlier in the year. Cause of death was given as kidney failure. After a period of vigil during which she lay in state at Redfern's Te Warua Tapu Church a service was held on Wednesday 21st December 2011, well attended by friends and admirers from the drag, Māori, straight and L.G.B.T.I communities.

She was carried to her hearse in a brilliant red coffin decorated with floral arrangements and a red feather boa. A small pounamu stone had been placed

in her hand before her last journey, after passing through the hands of a number of her friends and well-wishers. This is a gesture allowed for only a few, a gift from the people of Katiwaewae on the West Coast of New Zealand. Carmen had a long and distinguished career as a drag performer at several of Sydney's seminal impersonator nightclubs, including Lés Girls and worked in the sex industry, both as a professional and an entrepreneur. She also opened nightclubs, brothels and cafés in Wellington, clubs that were openly gay-friendly when this was considered to be outside the law.

In 2008 Carmen led the 'Decade of the Divas' float in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. She will be much missed.

Carmen was born into a family of thirteen children and was named Trevor but it did not take her long to start kicking the gender barriers apart, and she is said by her sister Tessie to have been 'borrowing' skirts from her mother and grandmother before she was ten.

After leaving school she gave up life on the family farm and explored the bright lights of Auckland and Wellington, having fun by performing in drag while she carried out her National Service military training and worked in restaurants and as a nurse.

By the time she arrived in Sydney in the 1950s and started working in Kings Cross she had set her course to be as exotic as she could in every direction, and to fear nothing. She vowed never to wear men's clothes again. She did a belly dance with a python in tow, and joined the Lés Girls troupe as the first Maori female impersonator, as far as we know, performing in Sydney.

She returned to New Zealand and in 1977 ran for the post of Mayor of Wellington on a campaign that included hotel bars being allowed to stay open until 2:00am, prostitution to be made legal, sex education in schools, nude beaches, the drinking age to be lowered to eighteen and abortion to be decriminalised. She was not elected but all of her reforms are now legal in New Zealand.

Carmen's legal guardians, in cooperation with her executors and family, are establishing a Memorial Trust to commemorate her memory and her legacy as an L.G.B.T.I cultural icon and to continue her charitable work (you can be involved in the Trust by emailing [The Carmen Rupe Memorial Trust](#), or visiting the Trust's [Facebook Page](#)).

Carmen Rupe

From Wikipedia:  Carmen Rupe, born Trevor Rupe was a New Zealand-Australian drag performer, brothel keeper, anti-discrimination activist, would-be politician, and H.I.V./AIDS activist.

Born in 1936 in the small rural town of Taumarunui in the central North Island of New Zealand, Rupe had twelve siblings. She relocated to the urban centres of Auckland and Wellington. After doing drag performances while doing compulsory military training and periods working as a nurse and waiter, Rupe moved to Sydney's Kings Cross in the late 1950s. Taking the name of Dorothy Dandridge's role in Carmen Jones, Rupe became Australia's first Māori drag performer and from that time on lived as a woman. A whole range of work followed, including snake work, hula dancing and prostitution. Carmen never formally worked at Lés Girls but over the years did some extremely exciting, well received guest spots. She described how local police treated her: "I was locked up in Long Bay prison about a dozen times. But it made me a stronger person today". An arrest in New Zealand failed to produce a conviction, because drag was legal there, unlike Australia.



In 1988 an autobiography was published, outlining her escapades "from school boy to successful business woman". *Having A Ball: My Life* was written with Paul Martin and published by Benton Ross.

In Wellington Carmen ran "Carmen's International Coffee Lounge" and "The Balcony" strip club. Despite the fact that the law criminalised homosexual acts, Carmen challenged the overt discrimination and prejudice against people in the gay and transgender communities. She was not afraid to speak to the press and was summoned to appear before the Privileges Committee by Prime Minister Rob Muldoon for suggesting some M.P.s were gay or bisexual.

In 1977 she ran for the Wellington mayoralty, with the support of local businessman Sir Bob Jones, with a platform of gay marriage and legalised brothels, though neither of these are local government matters in New Zealand.

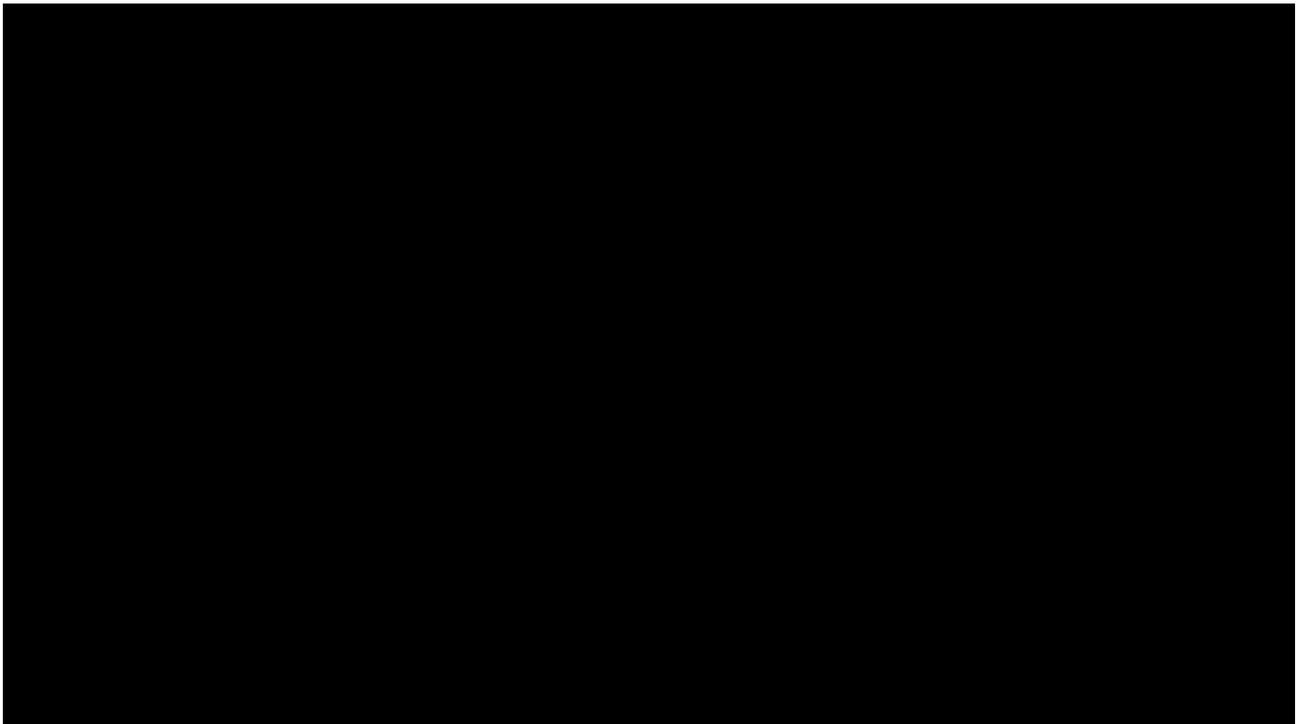
Rupe returned to Surry Hills, Sydney where she lived the remainder of her life. In 2003 she was inducted into the Variety Hall of Fame. In 2008 she rode her mobility scooter topless at the head of the "Decade of the Divas" float at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. She was also a prominent member of Agender, the New Zealand transgender group.

She died in St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney of kidney failure on 15th December 2011 after a fall and hip surgery earlier in the year.

She has been cited as a role model by M.P. Georgina Beyer, the world's first openly transsexual Member of Parliament. The Carmen Rupe Memorial Trust was established in Sydney to perpetuate Carmen's legacy as a Trans Tasman L.G.B.T.I. cultural icon through charitable work and community service.

In a heartfelt tribute, Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore stated that "Carmen Rupe was an icon for Sydney's Transgender community and a tireless advocate for L.G.B.T.I. rights. She was a quiet achiever who spent decades as a volunteer with many organisations who provided support to some of our cities most vulnerable people. I knew Carmen and was saddened by her passing. She will be missed by the people she touched and the community she was such a strong part of. It is heartening that, in accordance with her wishes, the Carmen Rupe Memorial Trust has been established to raise awareness of some of the issues faced by our L.G.B.T.I. community. This is a fitting tribute to someone who dedicated so much of their life to helping others".

Wellington Mayor Celia Wade-Brown supports erecting a statue of Rupe in Wellington: "I admired her strength in living her life on her terms and standing up against discrimination".



Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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