

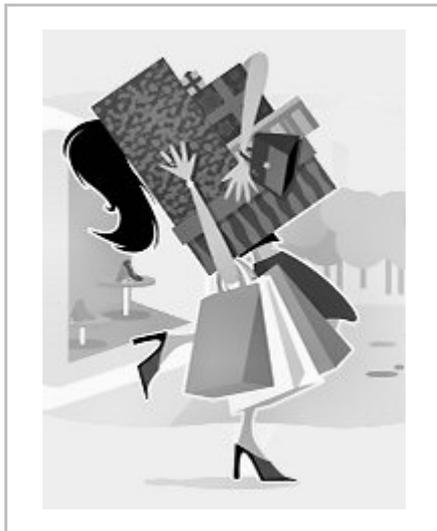
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Shopping with Marika

Determined to Reduce Those Unfortunate Clothing 'Mistakes'

by Marika Jackson

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During the three or four years of my gender-realignment, I think I can honestly say that I was never deluded into believing that my physical appearance in the eyes of others would ever entirely match my idealised feminine self-image. I'm tall, wide-shouldered, have a cleft chin and a voice that will always be problematic.

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Nevertheless, I was determined not to make the mistake I'd observed in some others, of over-compensating and presenting as some kind of "dolly-bird" or "femme-fatale". Besides being entirely inappropriate for someone of my background and advancing age, I soon learned that over-presenting is invariably counter-productive and a sure way of attracting negative or uncomfortable attention. I'd also observed that, out and about with a small group of "trans" friends, it only takes one such individual to draw attention to the whole group.

Now, before I go any further, please understand that what I'm expressing here are my early experiences and sentiments. It wasn't long before I was faced with the reality that I'd made the mistake of going too far the other way. For quite some time I avoided make-up, skirts, heels, elaborate hair-styles and anything else that could be regarded "over the top", preferring to rely on my natural deportment and mannerisms which, ever since childhood, would have been regarded by most as being effeminate anyway.

In short, my presentation, although to me quite feminine enough, was actually rather more androgynous to others. It took me some time, immersed in the joy of my true gender, to realise how unfair this was to the many strangers I'd encounter in the course of a day shopping, conducting business or passing in the street.

Occasionally, people would get it wrong, addressing me as "Sir" or "Mate". Apart from perhaps being a little disappointing, it never really bothered me too much at first. Their mistake was understandable. However, I soon came to realise how embarrassing it was to some of them when they realised their mistake.

Worse would be their pained apologies leading to my own discomfort. It became clear to me that the only way to avoid causing others such confusion and possible embarrassment was to make more of an effort to present in such a way as to remove any doubts as to my gender. Although I don't think it will always be so in the future, the reality, right now, is that society requires us to be unambiguous, whether we like it or not.

I discussed this with my counsellor and she was, as always, very helpful in advising me how to go about achieving the kind of balance of presentation that is neither too extreme or so low-key as to be ineffectual. The first, and I now realise, most important thing she taught me was the importance of discreet make-up and the value of investing in product that is always correctly matched to one's skin-type and colour.

It's so easy to over-do it and, unfortunately, this is a common mistake, the basic rule being "less is best". I've found the girls at my local pharmacy to be delightfully helpful and I much prefer to be guided by them rather than being influenced by glossy ads in magazines and then, belatedly, discovering the shade or quality of an over-priced product doesn't match the promise.

Girlfriends encouraged me to seriously start looking for feminine clothing with an emphasis on understated quality and style, rather than the frilly, lace and chiffon which, they observed, has many of us in early transition looking as our mothers may have done in earlier decades.

At first, this was quite a challenge because, as a pensioner, my resources are somewhat limited. Shopping at David Jones, Country Road, Ralph Lauren etc. was depressing. So many beautiful things, but invariably beyond my means or not in my larger sizes. However, I soon learned that it is possible to put together a decent "mix and match" wardrobe fairly cheaply by shopping around. Something I now really enjoy doing.

We're fortunate, right now, to be going through a time when the "rag-trade" is being flooded with some pretty decent fashions from

China, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. It's a very competitive market, which keeps the prices down.

Following is a list of retailers where I've found decent quality clothing at a fair price.

Target: A wide range of always contemporary ladies' fashions of decent quality and value. Good for quality lingerie and swimwear. I especially like the "Moda" range for "fuller" figures, up to size 26. There's also a good range of shoes up to ladies' size 11. Watch out for their seasonal sales. I've picked up some real "end of line" bargains from the sale racks.

Autograph: A stylish range up to size 26 at a fair price. Again, some real bargains to be found at their sales. Membership benefits. They're also online and offer free shipping on most items.

Millers: A good range of budget clothing for the older woman looking for the smart and practical rather than high fashion. Take time to browse. I've occasionally found a little surprise or two tucked along the racks. Membership rewards.

K-Mart: A really good range of casual skirts, tights and slacks up to size 18. All under twenty dollars. Their "Now Plus" range to size 26 is good for blouses and dresses. Although the range tends to be limited at any one time, the turnover is good so it pays to drop in fairly frequently. I bought a couple of versatile tops for only five dollars each almost a year ago. I wear them a lot, and they're still good.

Crossroads: Similar to Autograph, and may even belong to a shared parent company. A good turn-over, so worth dropping into occasionally. Slightly better than average quality, but not significantly more expensive. membership discounts.

Big W: Always a good range of casual day-wear and beach-wear towards summer. Their "Avella" range has some quite nice dresses up to size 26. The range of ladies shoes go up to size 11 and they are, generally, quite well-made, comfortable and durable, especially those bearing the "Grosby" label.

Myer: For something a little more up-market for a special occasion, I've found their "BB" and "ts" ranges for fuller figures not to be quite as pricey as David Jones and their occasional "sale" racks are well worth scouring for a bargain or two. During the early stages of putting together a wardrobe I made many mistakes, but rarely the same mistake twice, thanks to candid advice from women friends. My most costly mistake, I soon learned, was to trust size-labels, without trying them on first. "Vinnies" did very nicely from me during that period!

Women will rarely buy clothing without trying and, furthermore, tend to take as many alternative items into the changing rooms as is allowed.

It makes sense, testing though it may be to partners patiently waiting outside. Especially so when the lady declares that her final choice rests on something she tried on in another store an hour or so earlier, and wants to go back there to try it on again.

I also learned that the first and most important criterion, when it comes to dressing, is to understand my shape and its limitations and to always be mindful of this when buying a new item. It's all too tempting to go for something that looks wonderful on the rack or draped around the stick figure of a mannequin.

Because of my small posterior, tight-fitting skirts are out of the question, as is anything showing my knobby knees. My broad shoulders, strong arms and wrists are best draped in loose fitting tops with generous sleeves.

Because of my height and posture, heels anywhere above "wedge" are out. I tend towards neat court-shoes or ballet-flats. For "mature age" comfort, I recommend "Homy-Peds", stocked by some of the better pharmacies.

My hairdresser has been very helpful in advising me as to what to avoid and those hairstyles that would be better choices. I do realise, of course, that, sometimes, advice may not always be the best, but I guess that's why it's important to be especially mindful of how those giving it present themselves.

Oh, and before I sign off, in *Polare 93*, I suggested I was about to test my intestinal fortitude. I did so in September by jumping out of an aeroplane at 14,000ft. If we should happen to meet out-and-about, I might just bore you with the details over a coffee or two!

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