



ORCHIDS: MY INTERSEX ADVENTURE

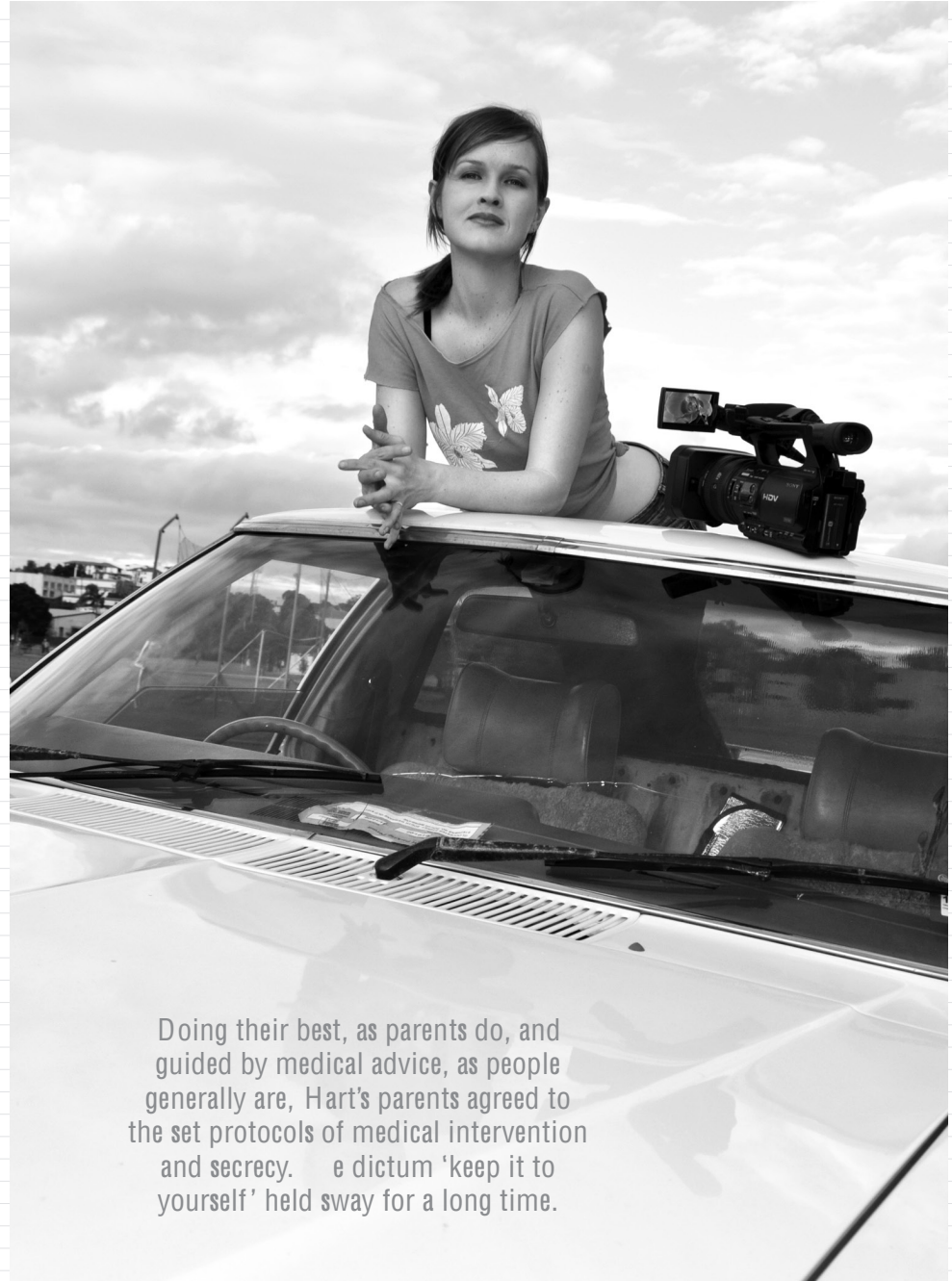
INEZ BARANAY

Do you ever think about how many times you are asked to tick either male or female and wonder why it matters? Nearly every time you book a ticket, fill in a form, make a purchase, enter a competition, join a group or submit an application the question is posed. Who wants to know? What difference does it make? I've begun to ask these questions, and the usual answer is, of course, marketing. Eventually it all goes into a network of statistical data: do more women than men request an aisle seat, buy black cars, attend writing courses, prefer X to Y, vote A or B?

What if there were a box for 'neither' or 'either' or 'both' or 'it's complicated'? If the answer to 'M or F' were 'other' a little more often, would the question still be so routinely asked? Can we begin to imagine a world where 'other' is a standard option? A world where those born with an intersex condition were not so hidden, so denied?

I remember challenging someone when they used a word like authoress or poetess, only to be told, 'I like knowing if it's a woman'. I get the sense that dissuading or even proscribing the practice of asking the gender question would arouse widespread anxiety. Why would it be so disturbing? Why are we so attached to this simplistic notion of a single gender binary?

These questions are likely to arise from any viewing of the new documentary *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2010), in which filmmaker Phoebe Hart explores the history and meaning of her intersex identity. It is engaging viewing, even endearing, and feels like a quietly important film that ought to be widely seen. Even if, or perhaps because, it doesn't really go into all of the questions above.



Doing their best, as parents do, and guided by medical advice, as people generally are, Hart's parents agreed to the set protocols of medical intervention and secrecy. The dictum 'keep it to yourself' held sway for a long time.

As both maker and subject of her film, Hart begins with a clear and frank statement of her purpose and identity: 'The time has come to come clean about who I am.' First, she demonstrates the normality of her life: the relationship, the loving family. She appears fresh-faced and sincere, relentlessly turning the camera on herself, and even leaving in incidental disputes about the camera itself. She's got nothing to hide, which means that you're going to know what she knows. Such candidness defines the film, as it is based on the fact that Hart was born with androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), which means, she says, 'I'm part male; I'm a hermaphrodite.'

We are told that as many as one in a hundred babies are born with an intersex condition; AIS is but one of several. No sooner is one of these

conditions diagnosed than it is made into a secret, even from the person born that way. 'I'm on a journey to change that,' Hart says. One suspects that she will succeed, if only because secrets want to become general knowledge – they just need the right person to open them up.

Although Hart's condition was diagnosed when she was five years old, it was only when she was twelve, entering puberty and failing to menstruate like her friends, that her mother finally told her that she never would. She had no uterus, her mother explained, as she was born with what was then called 'testicular feminising syndrome', later renamed AIS. We now know that AIS occurs in one of every 20,000 births.

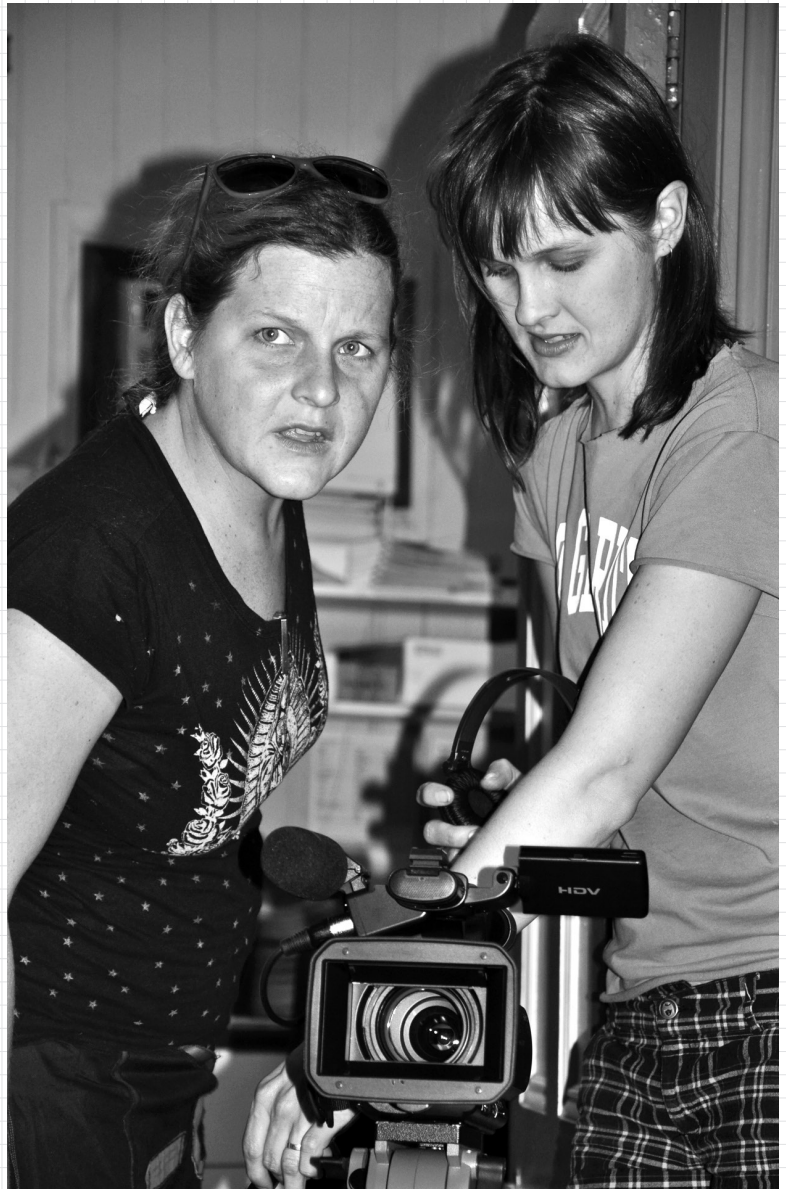
Experimenting at a sleepover with her school girlfriends, Hart discovered



that even something like inserting a tampon would not be simple for her. Naturally enough, considering that she had just discovered that her sense of adolescent difference was based on something so profoundly disturbing, she went through a period of feeling lonely and isolated. She did not know for a long time that her younger sister Bonnie was born with the same intersex condition. Bonnie appears to have a more irascible temperament, furious over her treatment by the medical profession: 'Nothing in nature is *normal*,' she insists.

'Bonnie expresses her rage onstage,' Hart mildly points out, and we witness the creation of some metal machine music. Bonnie, a musician and artist, joins Hart for much of this film as the sisters go on a literal journey to meet others of their kind, and eventually to film their initially reluctant parents talking about what they'd always found difficult to even acknowledge. Who can blame them? What models did they have to influence them to be open, which seems as much part of their essential nature as the instinct to conform? The family embodies a kind of quintessentially Australian normality. Perhaps it is one that is statistically unlikely and not necessarily in your orbit, but it stands for what is commonly understood to be typical: white, evidently Anglo, horses, verandah, gum trees and a country Aussie diction. And with all that they emerge as modest paragons of a genuine decency that

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OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOEBE HART PREPARES TO EMBARK ON HER PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL JOURNEY ALL OTHER IMAGES: PHOEBE AND HER SISTER, BONNIE HART

had my eyes prickling. Doing their best, as parents do, and guided by medical advice, as people generally are, Hart's parents agreed to the set protocols of medical intervention and secrecy. The dictum 'keep it to yourself' held sway for a long time.

It is comforting that Hart had been given this solid and unsophisticated foundation from which to set out on her journey. And what was the greatest single factor in Hart's ability to break through the ignorance and prohibition? The internet. One day she types in 'AIS' to Google and in a few seconds she finds information and a support group.

Another initially reluctant participant in the film is Hart's partner, James, who became her husband six months after they met. Total acceptance of who she is and what this means for him is almost immediate. The film took six years to make, and I'm not sure where in that six years the marriage took place, but some time after the marriage they begin the process of adopting a child. The couple have some wobbly moments as their friends become pregnant, as it vividly illuminates what they cannot have.

Meanwhile, the sister's journey takes them on three significant visits yet



to be told in this film. This does not account for the entire journey, as there were deletions and withdrawals along the way. The DVD extras confirm that there's quite a story in what does not appear – but there is beautifully handled material in what does.

We meet Aleyshia, who was born as both male and female, and who also has congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). The doctors 'decided' her gender at birth, and she was brought up as a boy until she asserted her desire to live as a girl. Her first job as a stripper had her exhibited as a freak, and she has been brutally bashed. 'I've seen the ugly side,' she says.

This is not a film about people being broken by the stupid cruelties of this world, of which we will hear more, but rather a film about people who almost miraculously do more than survive – they transform and evolve to a hard-won certainty about their right to their choice, and the rightness of their choice.

'These days, with pre-natal screening, some babies with intersex may not be born at all,' comments Phoebe in passing, a realisation that makes the need for a film like this suddenly seem rather urgent. It's as if society now has the opportunity to decide to allow nature's wonderful multifarious manifestations to survive and be embraced as part of the human family or to use medical technology to ensure strict conformity to the binary we all know.

The DVD extras include a shorter documentary in which several doctors are interviewed about intersex. The doctors explain the biological mechanics of the condition, and offer what must be the most progressive and sensible view: babies born with intersex ought to be allowed to be what they are and to make their own decisions when they are ready. Though this would not solve everything, it seems the only right view, especially in contrast to another doctor interviewed who is all for assigning a sex at birth. Making the baby male or female will ensure it will 'grow up with a normal healthy life', he says, but he seems not to have given any thought to the essential dishonesty of this approach,



nor to the actual results such decisions have previously engendered.

Take the case of Tony and Andie, the next subjects of the filmmaker's investigation. Tony had been raised as a girl until he decided to become the male he long knew himself to be. Like all the film's subjects, past anguish is related with a matter-of-fact understanding; mere bitterness has been transcended in the process of constructing a new authentic self for which models are rare. Tony understands that he is still going through a process. Hart articulates the viewer's experience when she comments, 'I feel I can learn from Tony about being honest and fearless.' Tony's close friend Andie was also born with AIS, as Hart and her sister were, but she was raised as a boy and is now living as female. The two companions' bond is based on a curious mirroring that is depicted with tenderness and respect, as well as a sharp eye for telling moments.

Hart also drives across the continent to visit Chris, who had been one of her high school teachers at a time when neither knew of this unpredictable connection. His intersex condition is of the XXY type. The tortures he was

made to endure in his youth should not be possible in a world where this film has done its part to create a new common understanding about these matters.

Deviance from the norm is actual normality, as outstanding sex advice columnist Dan Savage points out. That's as true about sex or gender as it is about sexuality or sexual expression. While writing this, I went to change my address on my driver's licence and noticed that the VicRoads website offers an option for 'change of gender'. It seems that as a society, we are becoming more accustomed to transgender, transsexual, bisexual and queer.

The extent that transgender overlaps with intersex is not addressed in *Orchids*, nor are the disputes in queer and women's communities about gendered identity and who can belong to what group. *Orchids* is not a film that embraces queer as an identity or culture; this is not a world that celebrates playful gender-bending or assertive deviance. The endless mysteries of gendered identity will no doubt be illuminatingly explored elsewhere, including in works of fiction and imagination. Indeed, *Orchids* might well stimulate some of these creations.

What is lacking in *Orchids* is a sense of a larger world. It's rather as if the imaginary normality were being unproblematically asserted as central and universally desirable. However, appeals for inclusion into normality, rather than defiance of it, have their polemical and political place. As a piece of persuasive storytelling, *Orchids* frames the progression in a narrative of heteronormativity that makes it perfect material for family viewing – sometimes subversion needs to have good manners and conventional attire.

In the documentary's happy ending, Phoebe and James' laughing new baby embodies the best hopes of all, affirming the right of anyone to claim normality if they can enact it.

Inez Baranay's most recent novel, With The Tiger, is her ninth book and is a retelling of The Razor's Edge. She also writes essays, screenplays and memoir. •