

USA TODAY

Life Section D

Tuesday, November 22, 2005

Cover Story:

http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-11-21-huffman_x.htm

Felicity Huffman is sitting pretty: Emmy-winning 'Housewives' star ignites Oscar talk for transsexual role

By William Keck,
USA TODAY



By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

Has it all: An actress for more than twenty years, Felicity Huffman has an Emmy for her role on hit *Desperate Housewives*, a critically lauded role in the film *Transamerica*, a famous husband (*William H. Macy*) and two daughters.

WEST HOLLYWOOD — Felicity Huffman is on a wild ride.

Her ABC show, *Desperate Housewives*, became hot, hot, hot last season and hasn't lost much steam. She won the Emmy in September over two of her *Housewives* co-stars. And now she is getting not just critical praise, but also Oscar talk, for her performance in the upcoming film *Transamerica*, in which she plays Sabrina "Bree" Osbourne, a pre-operative man-to-woman transsexual.

After more than 20 years as an actress, this happily married, 42-year-old mother of two is today's "it" girl.

"It couldn't happen to a nicer gal," says *Housewives* creator Marc Cherry. "Felicity is one of those success stories that was waiting to happen."

Huffman has enjoyed the kindness of critics before, particularly for her role on *Sports Night*, an ABC sitcom in the late '90s. And Cherry points out that her stock in Hollywood has been high. "She has always had the respect of this entire industry," he says.

But that's nothing like having a hit show *and* a movie with awards potential, albeit a modestly budgeted, art house-style film.

Huffman shrugs off talk of her success. But her husband of eight years, actor William H. Macy, seems to revel in her accomplishments.

"The tides have shifted," says Macy, 55, who starred in *Fargo* and *Seabiscuit*. "Now we walk out on the red carpets, and I'm basically invisible. But, boy, does she deserve this. I think since she was a little girl she wanted this kind of success."

Still, he says, "her schedule is just beyond belief. She's getting in hair and makeup and fancy clothes four times a week. When you're a little girl, you fantasize that that would be great, but when the reality hits, you think, 'This is a giant pain in the (butt). I really don't want to go, and I'd love to stay home today.' "

He says he told her: "If you work during your hiatus, I'm going to spank you! I need that time."

Right now, Huffman has no projects on tap. And she concedes that the demands of her career have been hard. "Motherhood," she says, "has been an exercise in guilt."

But both Huffman and Macy say daughters Sofia, 5, and Georgia, 3, are adjusting well, and Macy enjoys his Mr. Mom status.

"I've rolled up my sleeves and been a stay-at-home papa to a large extent," he says, "and I think that's good for the kids."

A tough road early on

Though Huffman now wows Hollywood red carpets — most notably at the Emmys in a pink Kevan Hall gown and at the AFI *Transamerica* screening in lacy brown and turquoise Dolce & Gabbana — she reveals that she didn't always have a healthy body image.

Starting in her teens, "I was bulimic and anorexic for a while, just hating my body," Huffman reveals. "As an actress, I was never thin enough, never pretty enough," she says. "My boobs weren't big enough."

The bulimia continued on and off into her 20s. At one point, "I was throwing up all the time — figuring out what foods you can throw up and what foods you can't," she recalls with little emotion.

The bulimia evolved into anorexia. Huffman's weight dropped to 98 pounds, and her periods stopped.

With her family growing increasingly concerned, she sought the help of a therapist. At that time, she viewed herself — as she told the world in her Emmy acceptance speech — as "a chunky 22-year-old with really big pink glasses and a bad perm."

She has a different view now. "Having two kids and turning 40 is what made a difference," she says. "I think I've always had a 40-year-old body, and now that I'm actually there I'm like, 'Hey, pretty good, huh?' "

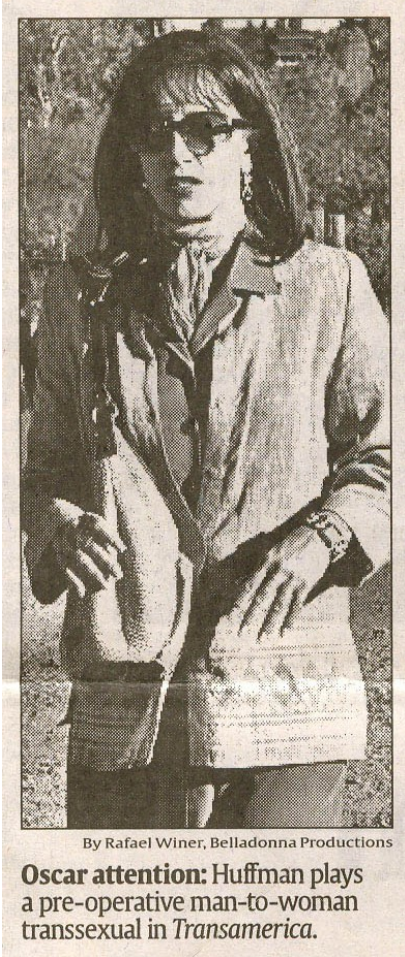
Healthy inside and out

She thanks Macy, who was her teacher at New York City's Atlantic Theater Company, for helping alter her negative perception.

"I've heard from her," he says, "that the biggest help I was is that I just adore her and think she's the sexiest woman. The first time I met Felicity Huffman, all I could think was 'yum, yum.' She was delicious. I love her body, and I always have. And if I liked it, maybe it was good enough for her, too."

These days, she and Macy work with a fitness trainer three to four times a week in their home gym. The trainer encourages the couple to eat healthfully.

The couple also go on runs together. And Huffman can say with confidence, "I love my body now."



Role of a lifetime

It's easy to see why over drinks one afternoon at a West Hollywood Mexican restaurant, where Huffman, looking ultra-feminine in a flowered dress and baby-blue sweater, and two female colleagues are talking about her role in *Transamerica* (opening in Los Angeles and New York on Dec. 2, nationwide Dec. 23).

But there are a few noteworthy differences between Huffman and her companions.

She's drinking a beer; they're drinking margaritas. She is wearing little makeup; her friends are fully done up. And the biggest difference: Huffman has been a woman all her life; her friends, not so long.

Huffman had absolutely no idea what it was like to be a transsexual. As far as she knew, she had never even met one. "I thought they were an odd minority at best," she says.

Coaching was provided by the transsexual women sitting across from her: Calpernia Addams, a former combat medic with the Marines during the first Gulf War, and her roommate, Andrea James, a TV commercial writer.



By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

Role models: Felicity Huffman, center, was coached for her *Transamerica* role by Calpernia Addams, left, and Andrea James.

"I thought the fact that she is already such a beautiful, petite, delicate woman would make it difficult for her to convince the audience that she was ever anything but that," Addams says.

Huffman says her eating disorder helped her tap into the pain of her character in *Transamerica*. Huffman's Bree (formerly named Stanley) is in an awkward stage; she is not comfortable with her still-male body. And her therapist won't sign her sex-change authorization form until she develops a relationship with a son she never knew she had.

"The self-loathing that goes along with bulimia or anorexia helped me understand Bree's internal journey," Huffman says. "I didn't think I could do it. It was a huge undertaking, and there was a long way to fall."

Macy, an executive producer on the film, says many who have seen *Transamerica* don't even recognize Huffman in the role.

"Your first image of her is so shocking — such a weird, unattractive person," he says. "But by the end of the film, even though the makeup is exactly the same, you've completely fallen for this woman."

'A revelation'

In the theater lobby after the AFI screening, Huffman's *Housewives* hubby, Doug Savant, said he was left emotionally "devastated" by her performance. "But I'm never surprised because I know the depth of that woman's talent. It's on display for me often at work, but I think it's going to be a revelation for the people who know her only for (*Housewives*)."

And Cherry promises that Huffman will have an opportunity next season to show off her dramatic abilities when, he teases, "something life-changing will happen to the (Scavo) family."

It is a testament to just how adored and respected she is on the *Housewives* set that the AFI screening was attended by almost her entire TV cast, including Marcia Cross, who had a 5 a.m. set call the next day, Eva Longoria, who flew in to attend, Nicollette Sheridan, who was nursing a flu, and Teri Hatcher, who had to find a last-minute babysitter and had already viewed the film as one of the judges at April's Tribeca Film Festival, where Huffman was voted best actress.

"She's going to win the Oscar," Hatcher says.

And she might be right. The Academy Awards have recognized gender-bending roles, from Jack Lemmon, who received a best-actor nomination for going drag in the 1959 comedy *Some Like It Hot*, to Hilary Swank, who won best actress for posing as a boy in 1999's *Boys Don't Cry*.

Huffman says awards are "completely out of my control. It's a tiny little movie. If we can get people in the seats, and it brings unity and creates understanding, then we're succeeding beyond our wildest dreams."



By Ron Tom, ABC

Success comes calling: Teri Hatcher, left, Felicity Huffman, Nicollette Sheridan and Eva Longoria were thrown into the spotlight last year when their ABC show, *Desperate Housewives*, became an instant hit.