

elle
interview

ADÉL ÓNODI

A SELF-ASSURED AND ATTRACTIVE YOUNG GIRL WHO FOR A WHILE HAS BEEN BUILDING HER ACTING CAREER IN BERLIN, WITH A FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIP IN HER POCKET. THUS, SHE IS STARTING FROM A FAVORABLE POSITION FROM MANY ASPECTS, BUT HER POSITION IS STILL "DIFFICULT AS HELL." WE TALKED TO A TRANS WOMAN.



Left:
Tulle skirt
and top,
Navona.
Right:
Blazer, Gerry Weber

I AM ADÉL
AND A WOMAN



ELLE: How long have you been able to say wholeheartedly that you're a woman?

When I saw myself in a shop window in the street months after surgery and I didn't believe it was really me. I stopped and looked at myself for minutes; yes, that's what I always wanted: a feminine face, a slim body. That's when I first said out loud that I was a woman, and a good-looking one at that. Meanwhile, the outside world doesn't want me to forget for a minute that it doesn't consider me a woman. Yesterday, in the party quarter, two guys came up to me saying how good I looked, and then a third one came up and said, "You're a man, a gay faggot." Then I met a young couple who didn't want to believe that Adél isn't the name on my birth certificate. So in just one night, I went through the entire spectrum; everything an average transgender person experiences every day happened to me. It's incredibly exhausting.

ELLE: Why Adél of all things?

I wanted a name that best expresses me. I tried several in my head, and in the end this is the one I was able to identify with the most. The name Adél is feminine and hard at the same time, but it is also laid back. Two years ago, on International Women's Day, I got the result of my request for a name and sex change, after which I could have it entered in all of my personal data that I'm Adél and a woman.

ELLE: At the age of 19, you decided to embark on gender-reassignment surgery, and at the age of 20 you were done with it, while others delay the decision for many years. How were you able to make such a difficult decision at such an early age?

I didn't "decide" to "become a woman" - and I don't even like this formulation; I felt that my body was wrong and had to be fixed. I cannot find a better way to illustrate the extent to which this is not a matter of decision than banal examples, such as that from the time I was little, I was only interested in Barbies; I always wanted to put on make-up, and when I was treated as a boy, I had terribly dissonant feelings. By the age of 19, I had experienced all the burdens of being trans; I was always doubting my own feelings, and like the majority of transgender people, I also believed that I was a monster who was not worthy of love of family. So I wouldn't call the intervention early. And it's very important that in contrast to many

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other transgender people, I was emotionally and financially supported by my family.

ELLE: Everybody?

I don't keep in touch with my dad, but my mother, my sister, my seventy-year-old grandmother, and my great-aunt were all on my side. And my mother's new husband provided the financial backing for the surgery. This family background is really exceptional, because many young trans people are thrown out from their home, which leads many of them to fund their surgeries from sex work.

ELLE: Then, after all, you were spared the really tough teenage struggles?

Recently, a movie titled The Girl was shown in Hungarian cinemas, which is exactly about this. It shows the everyday life of a 15-year-old trans girl who has a perfectly supportive family and friends, but this condition is still very hard to survive - she is struggling not with her environment but with herself. Her father and her teachers ask her to be patient, but how can she be patient when she cannot be herself and cannot become complete until she receives the body in which she can finally be in equilibrium? It's terribly difficult to stay mentally sound in this condition. I go to a psychologist even now because it's still important for a professional to confirm that I'm okay.

ELLE: Do you think the Hungarian medical community is prepared to treat transgender problems?

In my experience, most doctors have a fairly superficial knowledge of being transgender. And it's common for feminine boys to get permission from psychiatrists for the transition more easily, while they create many difficulties, for example, for a family man. Yet they are both transgender women. Incidentally, based on international standards, there is no need for a psychiatric diagnosis, since this isn't a mental disorder. Among the doctors performing the surgery, there are few who are friendly to trans people. Urologist Dr. Noémi Bordás, who performed my castration, is one of these doctors.

ELLE: But your gender reassignment surgery was done in Belgrade. What's your most memorable memory after surgery?

Obviously everyone is expecting me to tell you about the time I woke up after the operation. But that was followed by a painful three-month period filled with struggles until I was fully healed and finally was able



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to live a complete life. And only six months after the intervention did I have a vaginal orgasm. For which I am very grateful to medical science, considering that it doesn't happen for a significant portion of women.

ELLE: By the way, did you have a definite image of what kind of a woman you would like to become?

Before my transition, my ideal female image was what the world conveyed to me. In my childhood, for example, I tormented my mother and my sister why their hair wasn't styled, why they didn't wear makeup, why they didn't wear skirts and high heels. After hormone treatment, of course, I started with these, too, but I soon realized that high heels were not only very uncomfortable, they often carried a very false message. Femininity doesn't depend on makeup and clothes.

ELLE: What do you think it depends on?

On the way a woman defines herself. On her self-knowledge, self-assuredness, and self-identity. I firmly believe that nothing has more identity than a trans woman, because for her it's hard work every day

ELLE: But you surely feel the advantage that you are less subject to discrimination with your attractive and feminine look than others whom people can see are transgender.

Of course, and this shows how the world runs on stereotypes. I'm aware that because I'm in the babe category, I have it easier. But a woman starts with a handicap in society in the first place. I watch how men sprawl on the subway, or how they scan women walking down the street. So when the number on my address card was changed from 1 to 2, I told myself, well, here we go. If you're a woman, that's one disadvantage. If you're a transgender woman, it's already double. And if on top you come from a small Hungarian town in the countryside, you have largely accumulated as much disadvantage in life as you can. I recently told a man that the housewife role doesn't suit me, and he said, "you're the one who wanted to be a woman."

ELLE: You told me that in your teenage years, you drowned your anger in compulsive cleaning. How have female hormones changed this?

Since then, my cleaning obsession has disappeared. By now, the qualities I have suppressed have intensified, so I'll immediately react to things that annoy me; if someone knocks me, I'll talk back and won't let myself be humiliated.

ELLE: And is Berlin really an island of tolerance?

I love Berlin, but don't think things are completely unproblematic there. As a young East-European trans woman, you can easily become a sexual resource in the eyes of the locals. But for career building or subletting, in contrast to Budapest, being transgender may be less of a disadvantage in Berlin. And my planned book is about a Hungarian Roma transgender girl living in the countryside who was hurt so many times after coming out that she had to hide again.

ELLE: I really understood how complex a person's sexuality might be when I read the artist El Kazovsky's definition of himself that he was a gay man living in a female body who was attracted to girly boys and looked at them as women.

Yes, but I'm the simplest case on the trans palette. I was always present as a woman in my relationships with men, and when I once tried sex with a woman, I also experienced it as a lesbian relationship. There are many combinations of gender identity and sexual orientation; there are many people, for example, who consider themselves transgender but don't transition, or don't identify either as a man or as a woman.

ELLE: Am I right that for a transgender woman who wants a hetero man, self-disclosure is one of the most sensitive issues?

Absolutely. I have an idea for a movie about a love story between a transitioned trans woman and a heterosexual man, where the woman reveals her secret only during the relationship. When I told a man I was trans after the fact, in the best case he said that was okay, but it wouldn't work for him, and in a worse case, that I was disgusting. I went out with a guy who told me, after I disclosed to him, that there was no problem, but after a few moments it struck him, pulled his hand away and said, good lord, what would his family and friends say. So men are also affected by this social burden. But even if this is the more difficult way, I disclose myself at the beginning of the relationship, because I want my partner to accept me with it.

ELLE: But aren't there formal opportunities for transgender people to meet people?

There are, but such clubs and dating sites are used by men who want to have sex with a transgender person as an adventure or perversion, but I want to avoid them from afar. I want to meet people just like any hetero woman.

Photo: László Emmer, Styling: Melinda Csik, Makeup: Dóra Somogyvári, Hair: Ábel Telenkó, Assistant Stylist: Zita Fodor

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I'd like this, too, to make the world be more open and accepting

ELLE: When you came out publicly, did you expect to have to talk about such intimate affairs?

I didn't expect anything, I just didn't want to be silent any more. When a village guy in 2017 threatened to kill me, beside making a complaint and asking the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union for legal assistance, I decided it was time for me to stand before the public. That's when I was told about the fellowship competition for an LMBTQ fellowship by the Open Society Foundation, which I won, and that's when the idea of a sensitizing lecture occurred to me. When I contacted people with the idea, everyone quickly refused, saying that such a project cannot be successful. Then, in Berlin, I met actress Hermina Fátýol; she was the first to believe in me, and in the end, together with the writer and dramaturg Lili Horváth and director László Göndör, we created the *Dear Future Me* performance.

ELLE: Which is actually a fairy tale about a girl named Írisz. Why did you choose this format?

Because I had to steal the story, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to talk about the feelings and pain that were almost inexplicable. This way, however, it is therapy for me, too. Next time we'll put on the performance in April, and if it works out, it will be put on during summer festivals and later in major cities abroad. I'd like this, too, to make the world be more open and accepting

ELLE: I'm convinced, though, that projects like yours are largely ineffective in terms of social sensitization, because the audience is either affected or already openly interested. So they're not going to get to those who need to be sensitized.

Recently, after a performance, I got an email from a guy who wrote that he went to the performance greatly prejudiced, and he doesn't yet understand the whole thing, but he promises to think about it. I think this is a big deal. But a girl cried during the performance because it also speaks of the sadness of loneliness. When we wrote the piece, it was important that as many people as possible could relate to it beyond LGBTQ people. For example, when I sing, the songs do not say anything about transgender issues; they're about themes of love, affection, and being unloved.

ELLE: When do you think we will get to a point that your significance on stage is no longer determined by being transgender?

Today this significance is still very important, but I don't want it to be in five years. And if I can prove myself professionally by then, it will be time for classic female roles. For example, I'd love to play the youngest sister, Irina, in *Three Sisters*, because I feel I have a lot in common with her. Our generation was born into a very saturated world, so I keep asking myself what I'm doing here, what the hell should I do with my life? And it would be great if we could get to a point where I could play a pregnant woman or a mother and people would no longer laugh.

ELLE: The idea of Dominic West, the star of *The Affair* series, that he would like to see a trans man as the next James Bond, has just induced laughter in certain circles. But think about it: ten years ago, the idea itself would have been unimaginable! Today, there are gay characters in movies, even in cartoons. It's true, however, that today even I get fewer casting calls, and people are embarrassed in my presence. Like two years ago, at my entrance exam to the Academy of Drama and Film, a famous theatrical expert sitting in the committee quietly asked the person next to him, "is this a boy or a girl?" True enough, I wasn't good either. Since then, however, I've been training as an actor in Berlin.

ELLE: You're outspoken enough; do you have any political ambitions?

Politics is a field of ego and power; I'm not interested in that. I'm an actress, and I want to tell through art something that perhaps the whole world will pay attention to.

ELLE: The whole world?

Why not? We're working to get into important foreign media with *Dear Future Me*. And I have things to say not only about being transgender, but also about the situation of women, or about physical and mental health. Because I'm not just transgender, but a young woman who has a firm opinion on today's society.

DÓRA PATAKFALVI

ADÉL ÓNODI