



Close, Roberta (b.1964)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Roberta Close. Film still from YouTube video. Video by Youtube user ladygogol.

In 1984, the front page of the *World Weekly News* proclaimed that "The World's Most Beautiful Model is Really a Man." While the tabloid is notorious for its far-fetched and utterly absurd headlines, its claim was--in this case--amazingly true, at least at that time. Roberta Close, one of the most famous transsexual celebrities in the world today, had yet to undergo the male-to-female sexual reassignment surgery that would not only bring her even wider fame but also lead to an unprecedented challenge to Brazilian law.

Roberta Close was born Luíz Roberto Gambine Moreira, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on December 7, 1964 or, as she has sometimes claimed, December 12, 1965. Although born biologically male, according to some accounts (including her own, which are, at times, inconsistent), she was born with incomplete male genitalia.

As a child, Luíz felt as if she were female and began wearing female attire as an adolescent, and soon thereafter began to receive illicit hormone injections to enhance an already feminine appearance. This crisis of transgendered identity came to a head when, at eighteen, Luíz reported for military conscription wearing a dress. An exemption was arranged, but her father, a high-ranking army officer, disowned her as a result of the scandal.

For a period of time, Luíz joined the ranks of the *travestis*, a subculture of biologically male transgendered/transvestite prostitutes who habituate the Lapa district of Rio de Janeiro. Her remarkable beauty and physique (enhanced by silicone), however, brought her media attention, and she soon became much in demand as a model, adopting the name Roberta Close after the agency for which she worked.

At the age of twenty, Close won the "Miss Gay Brazil" beauty pageant and became the first transgendered model (still pre-operative at the time) to pose nude for the Brazilian edition of *Playboy*. In 1985, she had her first major film role in the comedy *Si tu vas a Rio . . . tu muers* (*See Rio and Die*), which made her one of the most visible celebrities in her native country.

Although Close says she was content to retain her original biological sex, she was pressured by her agents and other media brokers to undergo sex reassignment surgery, which was performed in 1989 in a London clinic. After recovering, she was the subject of an extensive photo spread in *Sexy*, a Brazilian men's magazine, and readers voted her the "Most Beautiful Woman in Brazil." Subsequently, she has played a recurring role in a popular Brazilian television soap opera, and she has been the hostess of her own talk show.

Close's career took a serious turn, however, when she challenged the legal statutes that prevented her from using her preferred name, Luíza Bambine Moreira, or declaring her sex as female on official documents. She took her case to the Brazilian Supreme Court, which, in 1997, ruled against her. She has nonetheless persisted in her self-definition, and, in 1999, she was arrested for using a passport with her proscribed identity.

Having completely accepted her female identity, Close married Swiss industrialist Roland Granacher in 1993. The couple separated after seven years, however, presumably as a result of Close's highly publicized romantic exploits with various notables.

In her sensational 1998 autobiography *Muito Prazer, Roberta Close (Much Pleasure, Roberta Close)*, she claims to have been involved with Eddie Murphy, George Clooney, Robert DeNiro, and Francis Ford Coppola, among others. While a best seller in Brazil, the book has not been published in the United States, perhaps for obvious legal reasons.

In 2005, Close finally won a court decision recognizing her as a woman and awarding her a new birth certificate. Following a ruling by a Rio de Janeiro court, a new birth certificate was issued, affirming that on December 7, 1964, a child of the female sex was born and was given the name of Roberta Gambine Moreira.

In part as a result of Close's long battle to have her identity legally recognized, Brazilians now have a much easier time transitioning from one sex to the other and then changing their names and petitioning for new birth certificates.

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