



STYLE SWAP

Would you wear another woman's clothes?

The assignment: for two women with wholly different personal styles to swap their head-to-toe looks for five days.

The participants: Paula Reed, *Condé Nast Traveller's* style director, far left, and Christa D'Souza, left, freelance writer and *Vogue* contributing editor. Paula is married to architect Alfred Munkenbeck, has three children and a wardrobe full of smart, simple pieces by Helmut Lang, Jil Sander and Eric Bergère in every shade of black, grey and navy. Paula is based at *Traveller's* offices during the week, though much of her time is spent out and about in London on fashion appointments or shooting stories abroad. Paula's polar opposite stylistically is Christa, who works from the home she shares with her partner Nick Allott, Cameron Makintosh's executive director, and her year-old son, Flynn. A party girl by night, Christa favours colourful shrunken cardigans, scanty Tocca dresses, chunky shoes and just about anything by Dolce & Gabbana

Christa D'Souza

I was a bit wary of the idea at first. Paula and I swapping wardrobes? We're such total opposites when it comes to style. There, on the one hand, is one of the most soignée, pared-down-to-the-point-of-austere women in London, and here, on the other, is me – the woman who goes to Michaeljohn once a week in lieu of using a hairbrush and has a thing for push-up bras and platforms. As a colleague at *Vogue* puts it, I'll look exactly the same when I'm 70, wearing shrunken cardigans and little dresses, but instead of having long brown hair, I'll have long white hair.

My editor tells us categorically that this assignment is not a competition, but I can't help feeling that Paula, who is in the fashion business, may have the upper hand. But then again, perhaps not. After all, we're not so very different when you actually put it down on paper. True, my favourite outfit at the moment is a fluorescent pink Tocca frock worn with a nine-year-old's jean jacket over the top, stiletto boots from Sigerson Morrison and fishnets, but at the same time we do both like black, we both shop at Prada and we both wish we had straighter hair. Besides which I've always quite liked the idea of whooshing around town in a black suit, red lipstick and a cloud of Fracas. If ever there was a look to get oneself upgraded to Business Class, this is it – and I just happen to have to go to New York later this week. I wonder how Paula's going to cope in Agent Provocateur and GapKids. This may be fun.

On the first day of the experiment, 10 minutes before Paula is due to arrive at my house to look through my wardrobe, I suddenly remember what chaos my closet is in. In an attempt to at least look organised, I lug all my partner's shirts, which are mixed in with my things, somewhere else. As the doorbell rings I spy dried baby food embedded into the lacy front of a recent Tocca purchase... Oh, well.

We've been told not to fake anything, so I'm in true freelancer/haven't-been-to-the-gym-yet mode this morning wearing my age-old Nova USA judo pants and platform Velcro sneakers. Naturally I haven't brushed my hair and, if truth be told, I don't think I took last night's mascara off, either. Paula, in stark contrast, is looking as groomed as ever in a vintage grey Dolce & Gabbana trousersuit and black eyeliner, her hair scraped back into a thick straight plait, with a Kelly bag in one hand and a cappuccino for me in the other. Why is it, I wonder, that the less time you have to get ready, the better you invariably look?

I find myself pulling clothes out of my wardrobe like Woody Allen pulling records >



out of their sleeves in *Play It Again, Sam*. Soon a huge, messy mound of Rigby & Peller corsets, Dolce & Gabbana bra dresses and fake fur stoles forms on the spare bed as Paula mentally nixes everything. Triumphant, I chance upon a little black Anna Molinari skirt and top which I think will look fabulous on her, but as I hold it up to the light, I suddenly realise we must have moths.

We've both got smart dos to go to in the evening so I hand over my black-tie "uniform": a black satin Dolce & Gabbana dress with plunging neckline (and a detachable bra that's meant to show), a brown taffeta knee-length coat with a mink collar (the most expensive piece of clothing I own) and a feather boa from Tomasz Starzewski. We then drive in my car to Paula's. As she gets out I notice with horror that her grey-flannelled bottom is covered in dog hair. Her custom-made walk-in cupboards, meanwhile, are so organised – with black graduating to off-black graduating to brown, to maroon to beige to ecru to cream – I could weep. I am somewhat galvanised by the sight of some chunky-ish red Versace platforms, but as I reach for them Paula swiftly tells me that they're very last season. She ends up picking out a black jersey column for me to wear and a stiff black brocade coat to go over the top by a designer called Eric Bergère. It's not exactly my style, I think to myself as I lay it out to wear in the evening – I'm attending a gala performance of *The Blue Room* followed by drinks and dinner at The Ivy – but how far wrong can you go with basic black?

Little did I know. Paula says she wears this dress out at night so much it's beginning to fray at the edges, which makes me wonder if she has just a teeny-weeny bit of a cruel streak. Not only does the shape of it make me feel about 50, but it's got two great big slits in the side which mean you can't wear any underwear with it. No pants I can just about manage, but no bra? No way. My nanny, who does my ponytail for me, suggests I just go ahead and wear one and keep my arms tightly pinned to my sides at all times. As I walk out the door I feel like a Dalek. "Cheer up, chuck," she says kindly, "you don't look *that* bad."

My partner Nick is not exactly the most gratifying person in the world when it comes to noticing new looks – I once dyed my hair black from streaky blond and it took him three days to say anything – and his initial reaction when we meet in the foyer of The Donmar Warehouse is one of gentle puzzlement. First he mistakes the jacket I'm wearing for one I bought him from Favourbrook last Christmas, and then he spends the entire performance trying to slip his hands through the slits

in my dress, which is obviously not the point the avant-garde designer was trying to make at all. Let me tell you, it is definitely not such a sexy sensation wearing no pants and a seamless Sloggi in place of my normal Aubade push-up bra, and I feel strangely billowy with my stomach so exposed. Oh, I've got plenty of good points, it's just that my tummy doesn't happen to be one of them. I cannot believe Paula gave birth a mere five months ago.

I suddenly realise how being all trussed up in a corset or skin-tight Dolce & Gabbana (corrective clothing, as a gay male friend of mine archly puts it) isn't necessarily a ploy to attract the attentions of the opposite sex, but satisfies a need to feel "contained". I don't feel at all contained or safe being Paula tonight, and my unease is compounded by not being able to hide behind the security blanket of my hair. I feel like everyone is fixating on my sideburns. My friend Marianne tells me that with my hair tied in a ponytail I look exactly like Barbara Eden in *I Dream Of Jeannie*. I wonder if she means the original or the one on now in which Eden is approaching 70? My friend

Tim Rice, meanwhile, passes his opinion by telling me I definitely do look different, but he's not quite sure why. When I press him, he says I seem more knowing. Hmm. What does *that* mean? I keep glancing wistfully at Rachel Weisz and Tamara Beckwith, both of whom are in tight little strappy dresses and cardigans. I want to shout, "Yes, I'd wear that *too* if I were being me tonight." In the taxi on the way home I ask Nick if he thinks I still looked sexy. "You always



Paula Reed

In the Joseph press office, above, where no one recognised her. "My perfect ponytail has been totally deconstructed." At *Traveller*, below, "You look so brave... I mean cool," gasps the art director





Christa D'Souza

"How far can you go wrong with basic black?" thought Christa in Paula Reed's favourite dress by Eric Bergère, above. At Fifth Floor at Harvey Nichols, Christa's lunching partner did a double-take when she saw her, below



a white man's shirt and a pair of black brogues from L.K. Bennett. I feel a bit of a nutter going down to the paper shop for an *Evening Standard* wearing black eyeliner and carrying a Kelly bag, but at the same time I can see the point of a ponytail. Not only does it give you a temporary face-lift if you pull it tight enough, but it's also fantastically practical if you have a savage hair-puller for a child.

Paula has to do day-into-cocktail wear all the time – a bit of an alien concept to someone whose day look often consists of pyjamas – so I wear the same outfit to supper with some friends at Soho House that night, with one exception... The brogues make me feel 4ft 2in, so I've been a bit of a cheat and swapped them for a pair of high-heeled Mary-Janes from Prada. Sorry, but there are some things even I won't do for the sake of a story. I've also discovered that if I wrap the jacket around myself tightly and cross my arms I have at least one point of indentation. I suppose that's one of the major problems I have dressing up as Paula. It's not that I'm

insecure with my femininity, it's just that the androgynous look – flat shoes and crisp white shirts with just a solitary button left undone – tends to make me feel dykey. Not only do you have to be very pretty to carry this look off, but you also have to be tall, and Paula towers over me even when I'm wearing heels.

One of the people I'm having dinner with hasn't seen me for several years. I wave frantically at him across the bar at Soho House (feeling like a cross between Harry Hill and k. d. lang). It takes him a good half a minute to recognise me. "Gosh," he says admiringly after clocking it's me, "you look like you've stepped straight off the

pages of French *Vogue*." So far so good, then, but I have no idea what to do with the Kelly bag. It's much too expensive and pristine-looking to leave by my feet and I end up putting it in the middle of the table, a bit like an Essex girl who dances round her handbag in a nightclub. After a couple of bottles of wine, meanwhile, the writer friend who was so complimentary decides he's not

so sure. "The thing about ponytails," he pronounces loudly enough for the people at the next table to hear, "is that you can only get away with them if you're either very young or very old, but not in between." It's giving me a dreadful headache anyway so I decide to take it down while we're having coffee and pudding. "Ahh," says everybody appreciatively, "that's *much* better, you look so hard with your hair up." I leave feeling pretty good about myself, only to discover I've left my bloody pashmina behind. As I go back to retrieve it from under my chair, my friend Kimberly says, "Shhh, everyone... Christa just walked back in." Ha, ha.

By the third day I decide to take Paula's advice and go to Michaeljohn to have my ponytail done professionally. Kevin is like a surgeon with all his implements, giving me a subtle root lift in the front so my head doesn't seem so light-bulb shaped. Michael Rasser, meanwhile, suggests a roller under the switch, a trick he used during the Sixties on Raquel Welch.

Today I've got on a black cashmere coat from Burberry (Burberry! Who'd have thought?), a grey Agnès B pencil skirt and a black John Smedley twinset in my exact size... which, of course, feels far too big. What I simply cannot get used to, however, are these sling-back kitten heels. My feet are flipper-shaped anyway, and flat shoes with pointy toes only serve to exacerbate the problem. The pashmina, needless to say, has become rather grubby in the past 24 hours and is moulting like mad. As I leave the salon Michael tells me he's going to give me a lint brush for Christmas. I head for Fifth Floor at Harvey Nichols where I am having lunch with my friend Claire. She does a double-take when she sees me and then says I remind her of a doll she used to have when she was a little girl whose ponytail grew if you pushed her tummy button.

On the escalator down I keep sneaking looks at myself in the mirror, and I don't like what I see. It's not so much the clothes themselves as the way I'm wearing them – I'd probably be fine if I had my hair loose, a pair of pull-up stockings on instead of tights, and if the twinset was two or three sizes too small for me.

Pretending to be Paula makes me realise that the way one dresses is a kind of idiom, a language if you like. One's sense of style is deeply ingrained, something that has evolved from years and years of trial and error, and the slightest deviation from the norm can throw you. What Paula does automatically, like tucking one's shirt into one's trousers, is completely alien to me, as is wearing lipstick in the daytime and knowing how to tie a scarf just so. As for fastening and unfastening an Hermès bag in a hurry...

It seems obvious to say that you are what >

look sexy," he says diplomatically, and then asks the driver to turn up the radio so that he can listen to the football results. I wish we could call the whole thing off, but I am committed now, aren't I?

I'm only slightly less gloomy the following morning when I realise what I've got to wear today: a trousersuit by Ann Demeulemeester (a designer I confess I've never worn),

you wear, but I may have underestimated the extent to which clothes act as a semaphore for our inner psyches, and how the way we dress so accurately reflects what we do for a living. In other words, there's a reason why I look the way I do when I interview people. It's a kind of *Colombo* thing – my job is to catch people off their guard and I worry that if I look too polished it might frighten them off revealing their deepest, darkest secrets. And it sounds obvious, but if I had to sit in the front row of all the collections three or four times a day looking authoritative, you can bet I wouldn't dress the way I do.

By Friday, I am itching to get back into my own dear clothes and let my hair down, but there is no get-out clause – I've got to last just one more day. And besides, it will be interesting to see not just whether my upgrade theory works but also what my ex-husband, whom I am going to visit, thinks. Unlike my partner, my ex-husband, who used to be a stylist, lives and dies by clothes and I trust his judgement implicitly. When he asks me whether I've had plastic surgery, he's never seen me look so well, and where did I get that

Paula Reed

I knew from the beginning that there was going to be more to this assignment than met the eye. *Vogue's* editor cornered me in Milan when I was wearing my favourite winter outfit: a long, slim, double-faced cashmere Prada coat over black wool, boy-cut Miu Miu trousers, a John Smedley fine gauge sweater and men's lace-up shoes. Would I, she wondered, spend five days in a style swap with Christa D'Souza? "Yeah, what a blast," I thought. But, in a prescient moment, my hands went clammy against my oyster-grey cashmere: visions of Christa's kittenish femininity began circling in my imagination – all slip dress, lacy cardigan and international hair – and my heart started pounding in the panic of separation from my Helmut Lang.

You see, there is a basic and possibly irreconcilable difference between myself and women like Christa; one that I learned to live with at a very early age. Purely in terms of how we look, we are opposites: Christa has loose hair and tight clothes; I have tight hair and loose clothes. But what reams of subtext

WHAT PAULA DOES, LIKE WEARING LIPSTICK IN THE DAY, IS COMPLETELY ALIEN TO ME, AND AS FOR FASTENING AN HERMES BAG IN A HURRY...

fabulous pashmina, I realise this hasn't been such an unmitigated disaster and that I could probably learn a few tricks from Ms Reed. It's funny, today's my last day of being Paula, but knowing I'm going to be able to wear whatever I want tomorrow is a lot less of a relief than I expected it to be.

I know that I'll always prefer skirts to trousers, I'll always have a problem tucking in my shirt, and I'm not going to get an awful lot of use out of the Mason & Pearson brush I bought expressly for this story. But I'll be sorry to say goodbye to the Hermès bag and the earrings Paula was given by her husband. For some reason, pearls give a girl much more natural authority than diamonds. And I'm *definitely* having second thoughts about the bosoms-as-balcony look for evening. Is it really appropriate for someone just shy of 40 and a mother to boot – with bosoms that, frankly, have seen much better days – to be quite so on display? Meanwhile I've got a black-tie do at the V&A tonight. I'm looking in my now fastidiously organised, freshly dry-cleaned and de-mothed wardrobe and I can't find a thing to wear. Perhaps Paula has something I could borrow.

there are in that rather-too-neat nutshell.

As a child, I worshipped girls with long curly hair who looked good in frilly dresses and patent-leather shoes. I never did. I was the tall clumsy one who got to carry their gym stuff back to the locker room because they could somehow never quite manage it. I walked with a stoop to disguise my height, and was painfully thin and pigeon-toed. But I learned to live with and even love all that. The stoop straightened when I went to university and I worshipped Siouxsie Sioux instead.

Over the past 15 years I have learned to do the best by what I have with masculine suits and brogues, minimal dresses and spiky heels. I have specific dos and don'ts. I would risk life and limb in a burning building rather than leave without my Kelly bag or pashmina, while frills, ankle socks and floral prints on grown women make me nervous.

At first, however, I was excited by the idea of dressing as Christa. Her clothes "spoke" to the little girl in me – the one who willingly carried Mary Whelan's lacrosse stick just to be in the presence of such a paragon of dainty girliness. Until Day One, that is: straight in at the deep end with Dolce & Gabbana. I love Dolce & Gabbana, but two

sorts of women coexist on their catwalk. I'm the one in the masculine grey flannel suit (I've worn one almost constantly for the past five years); Christa is the one in the corset dress, straining cardigan, fishnets and feather boa.

The dress that Christa lends me for my first evening of the assignment falls predictably into the latter category and, worse still, it's accessorised with fishnet tights and clumpy wedge sandals. What's more, I haven't been to the hairdresser and my hair is past its bouffant date. It's hanging limply around my face looking more eco-warrior than wild chick. Normally I have a hairdresser dry it straight and brush it back into a high ponytail. It takes 30 minutes every week and it's what my hair does best. Depressed, I resort to her (and my) fall-back technique. In the absence of a hairdresser we both tie our hair back in a knot, only mine is tight, hers is loose.

So, there I am tugging at my usual do in a desultory way, trying to loosen it up, when a colleague comes into the loo and offers to help zip me into my dress. "It won't go," I sulk, silently happy that I might be let off the hook. Then, *whoosh*, she manages it, and the two of us stare in amazement at the heaving *embonpoint* straining at the yoke of the dress. It's an effect I haven't seen since I invested in a marvel of mammary support in a transvestite shop in New York – the seven-foot blonde behind the counter called it the 10-dollar boob job. But that was for a Hallowe'en party and I was 25.

Tonight I am 36 and I am going to a fundraiser for Gilda's, the cancer charity of which I am the chairman.

I am nearly in tears. I have to make a speech in front of 100 people, I need to persuade them to support our cause, and my anatomy has gone all good-time girl. I clutch at the shrug but it barely covers my shoulders.

Christa's feather boa becomes my last resort. As I make my way through the building to meet my husband in the foyer, people I know well gawp at me with their mouths open. "Are you going to a fancy-dress?" says one. "Can you breathe?" asks another. "Frankly," says yet another in a superior tone, "I'm rather concerned for your health."

In the foyer, my husband looks blank and then amazed. He's always trying to get me to jolly up my wardrobe a bit. He reckons a few wild and crazy things wouldn't go amiss. I tell him (a rather minimalist architect) that I'll do wild and crazy clothes when he does chintz curtains. "Wow, what are you wearing?" he says. "Oh, I get it, you're doing Christa tonight." "What do you think?" I ask, limply. "Well you certainly get more bounce to the ounce," he laughs, and I beat him with my beaded Dorothy bag.

At the cocktail party there is a podium from which I have to make the welcoming speech. I feel I ought to declare myself like they do in cheesy Californian group therapy. "Hello everyone. My name is Paula Reed and tonight I'm... wearing someone else's clothes." I am tugging at myself and repeatedly checking myself in mirrors (at home I don't possess a full-length mirror). I'm hot and uncomfortable and I can't take off my coat. My husband keeps singing "She was afraid to come out of the water in her itchy-teeny-weeny yellow polka-dot bikini" under his breath and grinning.

Next to walking, men are the biggest challenge that night. Almost as soon as I take my coat off there is this short, greasy bloke in a polyester suit never more than 12 inches from my side. After I make my speech (spitting feathers all the way through) he asks my bosom if it fancies coming out for a drink with him next week. I feel vulnerable, which with more wine turns into aggression, but my clothes are saying "Look at me!" so I also feel rather helpless and hypocritical.

My own look is not male-predator friendly. It's too severe for that. This is probably on purpose. I've never been good at handling predatory male attention. I love clothes with sex appeal but my favourite dress is by Eric Bergère – a knee-length, black jersey, long-sleeve, slash-neck shift that looks perfectly demure, until you see the side splits from hip to underarm, fastened only by shoestring ties at the waist. I wear it with high-heel Manolos. It has a rather debilitating effect on some men, but usually I'm walking away by the time they have noticed it. Christa, on the other hand, blooms under male attention. At any gathering, social or professional, she is usually surrounded by groups of men in a state of hyper-excitement. At a party not long ago, a doting admirer, completely transfixed by her, absent-mindedly mistook me for the wine waiter as I passed by in my grey suit, and handed me his empty glass.

Probably because my childhood attempts at flirtatious behaviour failed so miserably, I opted for a look that spoke of efficiency. When I started working, it became even more important for me to dress in a way that helped me relate to women, because dressing for men only ever seemed to make things complicated. Then my life got busier: I had to travel more for work, my family got bigger and I had to perfect my style formula in order to save precious time. In the end I have, I admit, probably become compulsive.

I have perfected my look to the degree that I can reach into my wardrobe, pull out an outfit "blind" and know it will work. I don't even need to check it in the mirror. There's

not much room for spontaneity and my wardrobe is short on fun. When I went to Christa's house, exploring her wardrobe was like delving into a dressing-up box – endless drawers of stuff, shelves of accessories, cupboards bulging with feathers and fur trims and sparkly jewellery. The opening of every drawer was a mini-adventure. She couldn't remember what went where, and so the visit had the *frisson* of discovery about it.

Day Two, and I'm on my way to an appointment at the Joseph press office wearing a sugar-pink Anna Molinari slip dress, fishnet tights, high-heeled patent-leather Mary-Janes and a GapKids denim jacket. I look demented. My perfect ponytail has

VISIONS OF CHRISTA'S KITTENISH FEMININITY – ALL SLIP DRESS AND INTERNATIONAL HAIR – HAD MY HEART POUNDING IN PANIC

been totally deconstructed – an effect that is not unlike Kate Bush in a wind tunnel. There is hair everywhere: in my eyes, in my mouth when I try to speak...

I arrive at the appointment and no one recognises me. And when they do, they laugh.

By the time we're ready to leave I haven't seen a mirror for about an hour so I'm feeling more comfortable. Then, in walks Joseph, one of the nicest men in the fashion industry and a good friend. I say hello and kiss him on the cheek and he recoils. He's having a bad day, I think. I ask after his wife and daughter and he literally staggers backwards clutching his mouth and mumbling, "Paula, I didn't recognise you. You look so... young... so... trendy." I said he was a sweet man. Did he think it was a good look for me? "Perhaps... yes," he struggles. "At night." He means in the dark. I know it. I am gripped with panic again and have to leave.

I have been out of the office all day and have somehow to pack a day's work into the two hours that remain. So I go back to work as Christa with deadlines pressing on my conscience. Once again, but with my patience wearing thin, I am surrounded by people who know me reeling backwards in speechless amazement and maiming themselves on the corners of tables, while jobbing workmen in the building eye me up like I was on sale. "You look so brave... I mean cool," the art director gasps. I am desperate to get him to focus on the problems that need to be solved before the end of this day's business, but when he sees me he loses all concentration and eventually resorts to talking about me in the third person. "When Paula comes back,

ask her to check these pictures, will you?" By the end of the day I have lost my courage and, once again, am near to weeping. I am laughing along, but the laughter I am laughing along with is increasingly out of control. Some people are reduced to tears. If Christa were standing in my place I know they wouldn't laugh at her. Inside I am taking my hat off to her enviable *sang froid*.

Then, in a moment of clarity, I appreciate a subtle irony. My look is often described as high maintenance, while Christa looks spontaneously haphazard. The opposite is true. Mine is low maintenance because it is a uniform. Hers takes a lot of thought about what goes with what. My look appears aloof

while hers looks approachable in its girlishness. But hers requires real aloofness to deal with the attention it attracts.

Over the course of the next few days I trot about in teeny Tocca dresses and various GapKids items, borrowed from my eldest child, with a sense of increasing despair. At last the final evening arrives: another charity fundraiser. This time I have to face a Hugo Boss crowd in an Antony Price dress, what the designer himself has called "result wear". I have adapted the look a little with my own fishnets, a fine mesh made by Wolford called Fascination, and my own rather fabulous Calvin Klein high heels. Nevertheless I am so self-conscious, I have to be projected bodily into the crowd when it comes to thanking Meg Mathews for leaving her sick bed; she has been modelling the James Rosenquist paper suit on auction at the event.

Meg looks great in her mannish suit. I can only manage a stiff bow and a peck on the cheek in my corseted, strapless lace because the photographers – who are desperate to get a picture of Meg – would otherwise have the added and dubious bonus of my bottom, which is barely covered by the back split in this curvaceous dress. I have a Christie's carrier bag clamped to my rear and I can only hope that, since they are one of the evening's sponsors, they will be grateful for the product placement. As I emerge from the crowd, an architect friend of mine sidles past looking utterly gorgeous in her Ann Demeulemeester trousersuit and winks: "What does it feel like to be top totty then?" ■