Trading Ages

For a BBC TV documentary, 29-year-old Karoline Bell and 32-year-old Nick Sydney experienced what it was like to be old...

It took five hours every morning to make Karoline and Nick look like elderly people in their seventies. They were given synthetic wrinkled skin, false teeth, and grey wigs. They also wore body suits to make them look fatter and contact lenses to make their eyes look older. The discomfort of the make-up, the heavy suits, and the contact lenses (which made their eyesight worse) gave them a small taste of the physical problems of old age. They were also coached to walk and speak like people in their seventies. Then they had to live each day, for a month, as an old person, with a video diary to record their experiences and hidden cameras to record how other people reacted to them.

Afterwards both of them described the ‘invisibility’ of being old. Karoline was astonished to be ignored by some workmen, who only hours before had been wolf-whistling at her when she had been an attractive young woman. Nick said ‘I learnt that how people (1) treat you depends on what you look like.’ On one occasion a bus driver treated him very rudely when he tried to pay his fare with a large note. ‘I was amazed. He wouldn’t have talked like that to my young self.’ Nick was also nearly robbed when he was taking money out of a cash machine.
There is a point in the documentary when Karoline breaks down and cries. It comes at the end of a day out with her two new pensioner friends, Betty and Sylvia, who she met at a day centre. It is partly because she feels guilty that she is tricking them, but mainly because she realizes that they are individuals, and not just members of what she had previously thought of as ‘the elderly’. ‘They were talking about real things and I felt unqualified. I didn’t have that life experience. They had been through so much. It made me realize how ignorant I was. It was as if I was seeing the young people inside them. Before I would have just seen the wrinkles.’

At the start of the documentary Karoline had said that old people scared her, and that in spite of loving her 86-year-old grandmother, who lives in a home, she had found it difficult to visit her.

Both she and Nick found making the programme life-changing. Nick said ‘I’d never thought about getting old before.’ Karoline said ‘The whole experience of living as an old person helped me to understand them far better and also to understand myself. One of the things that surprised me most was how important relationships still were to elderly people. I was shocked by the fact that older people could still have their hearts broken. After a while I felt like one of them. I felt in a way that they were just young people in an old body trying to deal with the problems of old age. I’m not ready to be 73, but I’m not scared like I was.’

Adapted from The Times