

## ● REALLY BIG SHOW

## 'Normal'

## A heartland struggle



Tom Wilkinson has a change of heart — and sex — when he plays opposite Jessica Lange in 'Normal,' which airs on HBO Sunday at 10 p.m.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**T**O be frank, actor Tom Wilkinson is ugly as a woman.

"We did the best we could," laughs the 54-year-old.

"I have to admit, I do look like one of my old aunts."

Luckily, Wilkinson doesn't play a female role in "Normal," the new HBO film debuting Sunday at 10 p.m. after "Six Feet Under."

Instead, he plays Roy, a stolid, Midwesterner who stuns his wife (Jessica Lange) and small-town community by declaring he is a woman trapped in a man's body, and who's quietly and determinedly preparing for a sex-change operation.

The British Wilkinson is best known for his lead roles in the comedy smash "The Full Monty" and the Oscar-nominated drama "In the Bedroom," which began as a small, observant film about grief that takes on the trappings of high drama thanks to a driven Sissy Spacek who is desperate for revenge.

The strength of "Normal," however, is its low-key intimacy. As Irma, Lange is confused, wickedly funny and practical. But above all, she is loving towards the man she thought she knew and still wants to believe she does.

Their children have varying reactions: from their young daughter who shrugs off

the news with aplomb, to their rock-band roadie son who can't handle it.

While coworkers at the manufacturing plant he works at hassle Roy, there's no real villain. His boss (the terrific, underrated Clancy Brown) does right by him. The scene where Roy shows up at work wearing earrings — intended as the first step in getting himself and everyone else used to the coming change — is one of the most quietly courageous and amusing moments of the TV season.

Even the misguided reverend at their church isn't set up as a paper tiger to be "defeated."

"Rev. Muncie is blindsided," says Wilkinson, although the movie clearly shows Muncie's befuddlement and ultimate willingness to abandon Roy, who is asked to leave services when he shows up in a dress.

At the movie's emotional peak, Muncie goes to Lange and tells her he's thought about it and gives her moral permission to leave Roy. She doesn't shame him or expose him as wrongheaded to others. Lange simply looks at Muncie with pity and says, "But he's my heart. He's my heart."

Despite small roles in everything from "Sense & Sensibility" with Emma Thompson ("I was dead before the credits started rolling") and TV's "Prime Sus-

pect" with Helen Mirren, Wilkinson insists the idea of playing opposite actors such as Spacek and Lange can prove overwhelming.

"It was rather intimidating in both cases to meet these legendary women," says Wilkinson, who lives in London with his wife and two daughters.

"And in both cases, it turned out to be bliss. But you never lose that [awe]. I'm still a fan. When Jessica and Sissy were winning their first Oscars, I was still scuffling for two quid in the north of England."

Wilkinson is working steadily, alternating lead roles — as in "Normal" — with smaller parts in "Girl with a Pearl Earring" and the next Jim Carrey movie "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

"A few years ago I had supper with Alec Guinness. And you didn't get the sense with him that he was sitting back on his stunning accomplishments. He wanted good roles."

Wilkinson isn't comparing himself to Guinness, but he feels a similar hunger.

"I remember starting off as an actor seeing people my age now who'd given up. They were quite happy to [settle]. And I'm not. I still think my best work is in front of me."

**NORMAL**  
Sunday, 10 p.m., HBO