Conceal Me What I Am: Gender-Defying Costuming in Theatre And The Experiences of a Teen Performer

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"I prithee—and I'll pay thee bounteously—
Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent."

— Viola, *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare, 1.2. 56-59)

When I was fifteen years old, I was cast as the lead in my school play: *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie. This was nothing new to me, as a few months earlier I had finished a run as Alice in an operatic adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.* The difficult part to grasp, initially, was that I was playing a man.

Theatre, especially young people's theatre, is an incredibly female-dominated field. Between the many troupes, programs, clubs, and production companies that I had the pleasure of working with in my childhood and teen years, we always struggled to bring in male members. Scripts, however, suffer from the opposite problem: a gender ratio that skews to the masculine. And so, the common solution was casting girls as boys.

This phenomenon is highly ironic when placed alongside the long history of theatre (and other theatrical art forms such as opera, musical theatre, and pantomime) and the ways in which Shakespearean cross-dressing, breeches roles, and drag were utilized over the centuries. Women were not always permitted to perform on stage, and so in the early modern period, young men donned dresses and accepted women's roles without hesitation. Opera struggled to cast the male roles that were sung in the treble range (mezzo-soprano, alto, and counter-tenor) and turned to

women to don “breeches” (nowadays called pants) and take to the stage in their place. Elsewhere, the LGBTQ+ community began a counter-culture movement that blended gender criticism, unconventional gender performance, and a safe space for transgender people to present however they pleased, all in the name of art: drag.

There was undeniably a rich history and culture surrounding the world I was being thrown into; the problem, however, was that I was struggling to identify my character in the midst of all my normal “teenage girl” insecurities. I had to find some way to bridge this gap between my own identity and my character’s. As an actress, my preferred method to become my character is to get into costume.

So, how does the theatre take someone like me, who identifies with and presents herself as the gender she was assigned at birth, and convincingly flip the script? Pardon the pun. How does a teenager, still awkward in her body and concerned about the sound of her voice, adjust to such a taxing role?

It began with a grey pinstripe suit, my great-grandfather’s black tie, and a short brown wig, recycled from an old Halloween costume. *The Mousetrap* is set on a winter’s day in the mid-twentieth century and so these choices were constrained by the parameters of historical accuracy. I had to put my costume together myself, as we were a high school play running on a high school budget of next-to-nothing (arts programs, both in public schools and beyond, are atrociously underfunded). I soon added some black oxford shoes, a period-appropriate hat, and heavy stage makeup. I was covered head-to-toe, concealing everything from my waist-length curls to my figure to my facial structure. In order to become Detective Sergeant Trotter, I had to erase everything about my appearance that made me *me*.

This is a common struggle when it comes to designing costumes for gender non-conforming roles and actors. Society's views of gender presentation are still very strict: we are taught to read certain features as *male* or *female*, and even from a distance (such as an audience member from the stage), these gender cues are nearly instinctual. In the case of my production of *The Mousetrap,* no matter how many layers of makeup and men's clothing I hid behind, everyone was going to see that something was wrong with this "twenty-two-year-old man" in front of them: his suit jacket flared out to accommodate hips; his voice was strained from trying to sound baritone; despite his broadly padded shoulders, he was barely average height. In short, he was a fifteen-year-old girl.

In opera, breeches roles are commonly assigned to mezzo-sopranos (adult women of a middle vocal range) to play pre-pubescent boys. This is to achieve the expected treble sound while maintaining a certain level of maturity in the voice that a child would not yet have developed. In cases such as these, the singers wear clothes associated with young boys, don the appropriate happy-go-lucky demeanor, and do not have to alter their voice at all.

In Shakespeare, there are many instances of women's characters dressing up as men to maintain autonomy or freedom in the public eye. We see this most prominently in Viola, the protagonist of *Twelfth Night,* as the entire play's plot hinges on her masquerading as a young footman by taking on the likeness of her brother whom she had presumed to be dead. Other characters such as Rosalind in *As You Like It,* Julia in *Two Gentlemen in Verona,* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* use similar tactics. The irony in these Shakespearean examples is that during the Elizabethan era, women's roles were portrayed by men. Therefore, there is a double farce within the original historical context: these roles used to be men playing women playing

men, and therefore, there was no struggle to conceal male actors in men's clothing. Once women were permitted to take up roles such as Viola, Rosalind, Julia, and Portia, a new challenge arose: how does a woman effectively present as a man?

While costuming is undoubtedly a large part of this battle, there are other aspects of gender presentation that are important when considering cross-gender casting. Simply wearing men's clothes will not make a woman come across as a man: she must move and sound like one, too. Sometimes this can be used for comedic effect: in *She's the Man,* a 2006 film which re-imagines *Twelfth Night* in the present-day, Viola's feminine mannerisms are absurd when she is disguising herself among a crowd of male athletes. However, if the actress' inaccurate gender portrayal is not a part of a joke, this will rip a hole in the illusion. While rehearsing for *The Mousetrap*, I walked a kilometre every day while artificially lowering my centre of gravity. I used the joints in my knees instead of my hips to propel my steps. I took up more space while I stood and sat, employing (and enjoying) the colloquial "man-spreading" phenomenon. I was confrontational with my co-stars, scowling and squaring my shoulders. Part of this was about my character, who is a harsh and determined young detective, but part was about breaking away from my usual movement patterns. It was a liberating experience: for a few hours a day, I would become someone who did and said whatever he felt like doing or saying. I imagine that the countless Shakespearean women who had to similarly disguise themselves felt that same freedom.

My voice — that was a considerably less fun aspect of the transformation. I've always been insecure about the sound of my voice (ironic for a semi-professional singer, I'm aware). It wasn't that I thought I sounded *bad,* but more that I thought I sounded like a boy. As a small

child, my peers occasionally made jabs at my deeper tone, even though it wasn't actually all that deep. Still, these experiences stick with you. From the age of eleven to eighteen, I was speaking with an artificially feminized tone, because I was sick of the comments that I'd been getting for as long as I could remember. Again, my voice isn't even all that deep. But this made the changing of my voice to be even *more* like a boy's a difficult task, both physically and mentally.

It's in this way that I envy the opera singers. I'm trained as one myself, as previously mentioned, but despite also fitting the mezzo-soprano voice type, I have never played a breeches role for an opera. If I had done so before I tackled *The Mousetrap,* perhaps I would have felt more comfortable with the role, having eased into gender-bent casting. It's also in this way that I am fascinated by drag kings, the lesser known counterpart to drag queens in which a woman performs as a man in a campy or exaggerated style. They are not playing a character, but rather embracing another facet of themselves, still under the umbrella of performance. If I had known to approach Detective Trotter with a drag king mindset, perhaps I would not have battled as much with my own inner demons and accepted this masculinized persona as someone I could become, rather than a mask to hide behind.

When combining each of these examples into a single monolith of women-as-men performance art, new worlds of stylings are unlocked, both in the theatrical and costuming senses. Drag kings formulated innovative techniques to disguise the female body as a man's even in layers of undress, such as modern binders decorated to look like a natural chest, or glue-on body hair. These are superior to outdated methods such as ace-bandage chest binding because of the lack of medical risks, such as rib deformities. Opera assigned women the roles of young boys rather than grown men so that the gender differences between performer and character would be

less stark. Shakespeare buried gender under so many layers of costuming and writing that it stopped mattering who was playing whom. Young people's theatre, with its overabundance of girls, just accepted the fact that gender roles could not be strictly enforced, and made space for learning and growing within the art form, gender be damned.

It is this combination of interpretations which in my own mind, built from years of compiling anecdotes and experiences, from years of reading and writing plays, creates something beautiful: a trope made out of a broken mould, be it accidental or purposeful, where there are no constraints when it comes to physical appearance. It is a safe place where I am allowed to be tall, and to have a low voice, and to saunter around a room like I own it. Much like how it is a safe place for Viola when she lands on foreign shores, because in 1602 a single woman had almost no rights at all. Much like how it is a safe place for LGBTQ+ performers to rebel against the heteronormativity that has been forced upon them since birth. This heteronormativity that has been forced upon us all, which frankly should have no place in theatre. If an actor's job is to become someone else for two hours, why not encourage actors to break out of their gender more frequently? Because of my experience as a fifteen-year-old girl in 2016 playing a twenty-two-year-old man in 1956, I am a more balanced individual, no longer entirely constrained to traditional femininity. Some part of Detective Trotter still lives in me, and I am not afraid to let him out when the time is right.

The history of women dressing as men dates back farther than I have had the opportunity to discuss, as have the traditions of theatre and gender. What I have outlined is merely a simplified case. At the centre of it all is presentation: you are not a convincing man until you have examined masculinity from every angle and applied it to yourself like stage

makeup. You must study the clothes that your man-character would wear, and you must wear them as he would. You must adapt your posture, your mannerisms, your voice, and your presence to become him. You must face the masculinity that lives within you and confront it head-on. This is a battle that *you must win*. You must tame the roaring expectations placed upon your gender and actively subvert them. If not for yourself, do it for the audience. Someone out there needs to see you in those breeches in order to embrace this broken-mould trope. Maybe they will learn something about themselves. If not for yourself, do it for the women who never could. The aspiring actresses who could never take the stage because their gender was barred from it, forced to watch men in their place, wishing that they could masquerade just like Viola.

While it was difficult to grasp, initially, that I was playing a man, I rose to the challenge and grew to love the person it made me. Somewhere along the journey, while I was layering on clothing and makeup, it stopped being out of necessity to conceal myself what I was, and it instead blossomed into a liberation, an outlet for me to declare to the audience that I didn't care how they perceived me. I was a teenage girl and I was a grown man, simultaneously. I was a performer and I was a detective. By that point, nothing else mattered. The costume served its purpose, it was my stepping stool into a new world, and it was a flashing sign for the audience which read "This Is A Man". Beyond that, a character is a mindset, and mindsets have no bodies.

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