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Cross-Dressing in Modern Theatre

Why? Why Not?

by Katherine Cummings

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Neil Patrick Harris as Hedwig

Anyone who has spent any time reading about the history of theatre must be aware of the close connection between acting, religion and ritual.

Virtually every culture includes music, dance and drama in its structure, and in primitive times these elements were associated with magic and/or religion, and with the necessity to exert power over the elements, as well as over other humans who might have transgressed in some way, or were simply an obstacle to supremacy.

Because of the way religion works (basically one group asserting superiority over, and often suppressing, another) these rituals usually accumulated

irrelevant details such as the exclusion of certain groups within a society.

Sometimes this meant that women were not allowed to participate, sometimes it meant that only women could participate (or men who adopted the role of women). Often it meant that people who had not been initiated into the rites (women, children, foreigners) were not allowed to take part.

In English culture, the Middle Ages, followed by the Renaissance, saw women banned from the English stage as a matter of social standing. Actors were virtually at the bottom of the pecking order. Theatres did not exist and actors travelled the country in groups, living by their wits as often as they lived on the proceeds of their acting.

In Elizabeth Tudor's reign (after 1558) purpose-built theatres were constructed but males still played the part of women except in court masques, highly formalised productions based on costumes, singing, dancing and elaborate scenery.

It was not until after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, following the total banning of drama by the Puritan Commonwealth under Cromwell, that women were allowed to act on the public stage. Actresses were still not highly regarded and this lack of respect persisted until well into the 19th Century.

With the rise of great actresses like Ellen Terry in Britain and Sarah Bernhardt in France, and acting dynasties like the Barrymores and later on the Redgraves, Richardsons, Bennetts and Fondas (some better known for their cinematic careers than in the 'legitimate' theatre, gender roles on stage tended to revert to congruence with gender roles off stage.

There were, of course, exceptions, and some very successful movies and plays used gender-role reversal for comic or dramatic impact. *Some Like It Ho*; *Cage Aux Folles*; *Victor, Victoria* and *Tootsie* spring to mind, along with a number of less laudable movies that seemed to equate cross-dressing with serial murder (*Psycho*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Dressed to Kill*).

Of late, however, there seems to have been an upsurge of plays, musicals and films where female parts are played by men for no obvious reason.

Recent British productions of *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night* have used men for all the female parts (critics have applauded this as "being the way Shakespearean audiences would have seen them") and one actor, Samuel Barnett, was nominated for a 2014 Tony for his part as Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Similarly, but with more justification (if justification is needed, but we'll get to that later) Neil Patrick Harris was not only nominated, but won the Tony this year for his part as the transgendered person whose surgery goes amiss. Harvey Fierstein and Cindi Lauper's musical version of *Kinky Boots* is also running on Broadway, with one of the main parts being that of a transvestite entertainer named Lola. Again, since the part is presented as a transvestite there is logic in

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having the part played by a male performer, as there is in the recent run (beginning of April to end of June) of *Casa Valentina*, a play in which seven transvestite men show us their differing approaches to transvestism at a resort set up to satisfy their cross-dressing needs.

In Sydney an actor named Ash Flanders, who is said to have made a specialty of playing tragic heroines, is about to take on the part of Hedda Gabler in Ibsen's play of the same name. Hedda Gabler is a great part for a strong woman, and one of the recent productions featured Cate Blanchett, one of the most powerful actresses of our time. It will be interesting to see how Ash Flanders deals with it.

As a sidenote of interest, the Tasmanian artist, Wendy Sharpe, has painted a portrait of Ash as Hedda, for entry in the 2014 Archibald Prize Competition. It will be interesting to see if the Archibald judges like it. A few years ago there was an Archibald entry of a woman in a cocktail dress who was popularly supposed to be a trans-woman of some description, but I never heard whether there was any basis for the rumour and I don't think it matters.

There is a feeling among some people that only people who belong in a certain group should act the roles of people who are of that group. In other words, Caucasians should not play Asians or blacks and, by extension, women should not play men or vice versa. I understand there was some resistance to the fact that the part of Carlotta, in the recent telemovie of her life, was not, and should have been, played by a transwoman. There was a similar wave of criticism when Laurence Olivier played the part of Othello. Whether or not he played it well is beside the point (I have heard nothing but praise for Jessica Marais' playing of Carlotta) but the principle seems to be that if there is a person of the class being depicted available then that person should be given the part.

This, of course, is nonsense. The whole purpose of acting is for the actor to present an adopted role convincingly, not simply to provide a vehicle for someone who happens to belong in that subset of humanity represented by the role. This is what acting is, and always has been.

To suggest that only blacks should play blacks, Asians play Asians, women play women or transgenders play transgenders would set a standard that would cause no end of problems if one were casting, for instance, *The Lion King*. So hard to find giraffes with any acting talent these days.

What does one do (pursuing the question of who should play transgenders) when a person changes her/his persona in the course of the action? Various plays and films have adopted various solutions. When *The Christine Jorgensen Story* was filmed (1970) a male actor (John Hansen) was used for both George and Christine Jorgensen and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) used a female actor (Hilary Swank) as the F.T.M. whose rape and murder sparked a reaction that resulted in prosecution and conviction of the perpetrators.

There are a number of films and plays that deal with transgender and cross-dressing and the quality is undoubtedly mixed, but does not seem to have anything to do with the selection of actors whose private lives match the persona they are asked to play.

At one time, when the acting profession was more dominated by white males (on the producing, directing and casting side, at least), it was probably harder for women and for ethnic actors to audition for parts. The world has changed, at least within Western culture, and it would now seem most sensible to use the best available talent for any given situation, and throw auditions open to any and all who are available.

If a transgender turns out to be best for the role, give it to him or her. If a man turns up for a female part and his talents outweigh his 'inappropriate' gender identity, so be it. The play's the thing, not the political correctness of the casting. As for catching the conscience of the King, first you have to catch the King. They are becoming a rare breed these days, and a good thing, too.

Katherine Cummings

Katherine Cummings is a writer and transgender activist, currently working at the N.S.W. Gender Centre as Librarian and Information Worker. Her autobiography, *Katherine's Diary*, based on a two-year series of radio talks she gave on Radio National's "Health Report", won the Australian Human Rights Award for Non-Fiction in 1992. It has since been expanded and updated and was re-issued at the end of 2007.

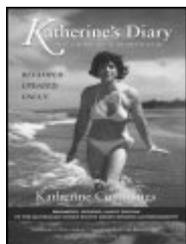
Katherine edits *Polare*, the quarterly magazine of the Gender Centre and writes for it. She is currently putting together a collection of her essays, short stories, poems and book reviews to be published in mid-2013 under the title *The Life and Loves of a Transgender Woman*.

Katherine transitioned in 1986 at the age of fifty-one.



The Life and Loves of a Transgendered Lesbian Librarian
 Author: Katherine Cummings
 Publisher: Beaujon Press (2014)
 I.S.B.N.-13: 978-098036535X

From Polare Magazine Review: The publication of this collection is a timely reminder that there is still a lot to learn about gender identity, its causes, aetiology and expression. To redress common misconceptions, prejudices, and targeted violence, ethically focussed education is critical. Of overriding importance is the acknowledgment of the truth of all 'real-life' experiences and within this framework Katherine's lifetime experience, retold through cleverly assembled vignettes (essays, book reviews, verses and poems), is central. The book's content is varied and provides the reader with decisive personal viewpoints centred on the paramount issue of gender identity.



Katherine's Diary: Revamped, Updated, Uncut Edition

Author: Katherine Cummings

Publisher: BookSurge Publishing (2008)

I.S.B.N.-13: 978-1439215456

From Bookpod Book Store website:  "I think that I was irrational, even insane, at the time. My transsexualism had taken hold of me with such obsessive force that I could not concentrate on anything else. There I was, a fifty-year-old professional academic librarian who had desperately wanted to be female ever since memories began ..." In 1986 John Cummings became Katherine Cummings and a whole life changed. In this painfully honest account of John's transformation into

a woman, Katherine tells of years of fantasising behind locked doors, of the betrayal felt by her family and the final relief of surgery. Katherine's Diary covers a lifetime of self-discovery and self-destruction told with acerbic wit and crisp observation.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.