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culture

Girl Meets Boy

Playwright feels boxed in by womanhood

by Jacob Anderson-Minshall

Like Alex, the main character in her new play, *Boxes*, Jessamyn Rae feels like "the world around me is saying: 'Pick one [sex]. Pick one or the other.' And it takes a lot of energy to explain anything other than identifying as female."

In *Boxes*, Alex is home for the holidays and attempts to show her family the possibilities beyond the binary gender identities that are forced on them by society.

"It's the story of a genderqueer individual trying to come to an understanding with their family about what it's like to be different," Rae explains. "Experiencing the world how I did, I wanted to talk about what it felt like to identify as trans."

Rae self-identifies as a woman. But she clarifies: "I was born with such typical female build and face structure and voice and everything—it's difficult for somebody that looks *hourglass* to identify as genderqueer without actually taking steps toward transition in the medical way. I sort of feel chased back into womanhood."

A former drag performer, Rae first took her masculine personae on stage in 1999, "in the middle of Missouri [where] there was no such thing as a drag king." She later founded a drag troupe with a friend in their hometown of Omaha, Neb.

"We were just so downhearted that we had moved away from Omaha for college and gone and experienced the drag world and we got home from college, and there was [still] *nothing* going on," Rae says. "We decided it would be a service to the community to start one."

Although Rae goes by male pronouns within the drag world and acknowledges, "Some of my friends call me by male pronouns at times," she maintains, "I don't really insist on it. To be a masculine-presenting, female-bodied person living as a woman is activism in itself. For my part, I feel like I'm trying to stretch the definition of what a woman can be."

Despite having lived in Portland for nearly three years, Rae admits she's only gotten involved with the local drag scene "as an audience member. Pretty much my entire time here has been working on my writing."

Co-produced by Key Productions and PenPlay, a group of Portland screenwriters and playwrights, *Boxes* has an unusual structure, integrating filmed segments with the stage action.

"I wrote a piece that was neither meant for screen nor stage but for both," Rae explains, intending to artistically mirror "Alex's assertion that 'either/or isn't good enough anymore.'"

Monologue video blogs from additional trans characters were added, Rae says, "later on in the writing process. I originally had two characters, just Alex and Ben, that were two very polar ways of reacting to a similar situation. And I thought that was a limiting way...to show this issue just through these two people who were taking a very binary approach. What [those segments] afforded me as a playwright was to show the audience...an entire world to contrast and compare those expe-

riences with those of the main character, Alex."

Addressing trans masculine issues like gender dysphoria, penis envy and choosing between losing one's hair and going off testosterone therapy, Rae admits, "I researched my friends" and says she based some of the script on conversations with transgender acquaintances.

However, "to keep from turning my social world into a group of guinea pigs," Rae insists, "I've also done research outside: a lot of reading and...watching these video blogs that I modeled some of the [filmed segments] after."

Rae declares, "I want to change the way people think about gender. But she's realistic. 'I can't do it single-handedly. I'm part of a movement, and it's one that I'm happy to be in.'"

Rae also acknowledges what she's up against: "Assimilation is just easier. People like people



Boxes discusses the possibilities beyond the binary gender identities that are forced on us by society.

who are like them. It's easier to be like everybody else, but I don't think it's always honest." **10**

Staged readings of *BOXES*, a part of the citywide new works festival *Fertile Ground*, will be held 8 p.m. Jan. 23 and 30 at Q Center, 69 S.E. Taylor St., and 7 p.m. Jan. 27 at Someday Lounge, 125 N.W. Fifth Ave. Tickets are \$7.

JACOB ANDERSON-MINSHALL is co-author of *Blind Faith*, the latest *Blind Eye* mystery, and co-host of the monthly queer literary series *Q Literati* and KBOO-FM's *Gender Blender*. For more information visit www.anderson-minshall.com.

Documentary Examines Community's Role in Gender Transitions

Tired of "watching trans movies where everybody dies," filmmaker Brooks Nelson felt compelled to create *Switch: A Community in Transition*, a new documentary that explores the impact of a gender transition on the progressive community of friends, family and co-workers that he transitioned in and the way that community shouldered much of the "responsibility" of his gender identity transition.

"I didn't change," Nelson maintains. "I became more who I am—so, really, the burden falls on everyone [else]. I peeled back stuff to reveal who I really am."

Meanwhile, he says, friends and family members are forced to switch gender pronouns, incorporate new names and—sometimes—examine their own attitudes about what it means to be male and female.



Brooks Nelson hopes *Switch* builds allies by normalizing gender transitions.

Furthermore, Nelson suggests, each person in the community has different responsibilities to its transitioning member: "My boss's responsibility is really different than my partner's responsibility. I'm expecting different things from him."

Nelson says he hopes the film builds allies by normalizing gender transitions. "Everybody has change and transition that they go through...how is this different?"

Although Nelson identifies as masculine, he admits he was initially "holding onto the middle," until he discovered how *hard* it is to be genderqueer, "particularly when you have to move through a mainstream world. People come up to me and say, 'Dude, I get you're trying to end oppression based on gender presentation, but I still need to know how to refer to you in the meeting.' It just became too much energy."

A longtime activist, Nelson, who moved to Portland from Atlanta in 1986, began filmmaking a few years ago after joining Northwest Documentary Arts. His first movie addressed the difficulties that gender-nonconforming people have using public restrooms.

Boxxo Productions, in association with Film Action Oregon, presents the first public screening of *Switch* 7 p.m. Feb. 4 at Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd. Tickets are \$8. For more information visit www.boxxo.org.

—Jacob Anderson-Minshall