

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT



Eddie Redmayne in "The Danish Girl."

IMAGE COURTESY FOCUS PICTURES

## Transitioning into Lili

### OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA



Film tackles gender identity with wisdom, empathy

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

I expect that most people will approach "The Danish Girl," as I did, with interest in learning a bit about the transgender pioneer who is its subject: Einar Wegener, who became Lili Elbe, one of the first people to undergo gender reassignment surgery. This fictionalized retelling, based on a novel of the same name, introduces Einar (Eddie Redmayne) and his wife Gerda (Alicia Vikander), as happily married bohemian painters in Copenhagen in the 1920s, and follows their journey through Lili's awakening identity, culminating in the surgeries. The film works well as historical exploration, placing you in a time, less than 100 years ago, when there was no concept of transgender identity. And as you might expect from his other fine work as an actor (including playing Stephen Hawking in last year's inferior "A Brief History of Time") and his androgynous beauty, Redmayne believably depicts Einar's physical transformation. Redmayne and the luminous Vikander have already begun to garner well-deserved award recognition.

But "The Danish Girl" succeeds best in conveying, with patience and care, a lived-in sense of a rare but essential human experience: that of undergoing, inside one lifetime, a transformation for which there is no roadmap and which encompasses an evolution in thinking that will take the rest of the world several successive generations. Not to minimize the obvi-

ously dramatic story of submitting to gender reassignment surgery when it was so untried -- let alone doing so now, 85 years later -- but these fine actors, screenwriter Lucinda Coxon, and director Tom Hooper ("The King's Speech") have managed to capture something important about the soul and the evolution of human consciousness. On lives such of these, our progress as a species depends.

In the film's early scenes, Einar and Gerda enjoy a playful and connected marriage. They share an artistic vocation -- he is a celebrated landscape painter and she has achieved more limited success painting portraits. Small signs of what we would now term Einar's "genderqueerness" go unnoticed by both -- until one day, while waiting for a portrait model to arrive, Gerda enlists Einar to pose in hose and a ballet dress. We see the subtle flickers of longing and recognition on Einar's face as he dons these garments and assumes a pose he identifies as female.

Gerda is unfazed when she later finds that Einar has commandeered one of her dressing gowns to wear under his clothes. She even encourages him to attend a public event disguised as a woman, for a lark, but Redmayne captures the subtle but insistent shifts in Einar's thinking; we see how he is more and more compelled to follow where this journey takes him -- until, soon, Gerda finds that it harder and harder to access the husband she loves.

The film lingers longer than most would dare with the shifts in Einar's perspective, and with Gerda's confusion, love, and loss. Director Hooper has the courage to push us to sit with the magnitude of what they experienced, at

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