



GenderWise & Butch Mermaid Productions



By Ania Upstill

As an artist and as an educator, I work to make the world better for the LGBTQIA+ community. I believe that theatre (and the theatre) is an incredible medium for encouraging new perspectives and increasing empathy – whether that be onstage or off. Onstage, I do this through my creative work as the Artistic Director at Butch Mermaid Productions, where our mission is to make queer joy irresistible and contagious, envisioning a world where all queer people experience joy and belonging. Offstage, I do it through my educational work as the co-founder for GenderWise, where our mission is to use applied theatre techniques (especially Theatre of the Oppressed techniques) to make education around gender diversity accessible and relatable regardless of familiarity with either content around gender, or with theatre. Across both these companies, my work combines theatre, social justice, and education to encourage curiosity, dialogue, and learning.

Butch Mermaid Productions' theatre pieces came about by accident. In 2018, I moved to New York City after completing the year long Professional Training Program at Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre. Fresh from a rigorous, weekly devising regime at Dell'Arte, I didn't want to lose my creative momentum. Nightlife spaces offered the most accessible performance opportunities, so I started making short form clown pieces. It quickly became clear that all of the pieces that I was making were about gender – and about being transgender, specifically. The stripping-out of social constructs at physical theatre school had been transformative for me, and I had started using they/ them pronouns upon moving to New York. I didn't, however, plan on making work about my gender transition, but there I was, creating what became an entire solo clown show. Sometimes you don't choose the work; sometimes it chooses you. Around that same time a friend in the circus world asked me my gender identity. I replied 'butch mermaid' and it stuck – becoming the name of the company when I had to choose something to put down on a Fringe Festival application. It stuck.

Touring with that first Butch Mermaid show, Transhumance, the thing that always struck me the most was the conversations that come after the show – with all kinds of audiences. Parents who spoke about wanting to raise their child with more expansive ideas of gender. Young trans people, brought to the show by caring relatives. Cisgender audience members who cried in recognition of how gender constructs have negatively impacted their lives. As I spoke to audience members, I began to realise that work centred on queer joy could be transformative. Since I had created a clown show, I was exploring gender, and the world outside of the gender binary from a place of joy and curiosity.

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For many people, these conversations and depictions tend to focus on difficulties and challenges rather than pleasure or joy. While I, like many queer people, had often seen our trauma portrayed across various media, I had rarely seen the positives of living life as a queer person: experiences of self realisation, of finding community, of self definition. I realised that joy was a wonderful place to start a conversation. I also realised how transformational it can be to see LGBTQIA+ characters experience joy.

Since that first production, I've created four other shows with Butch Mermaid: Into the Bush (circus theatre), Sapphic Lake (a comic ballet), A Bit Too Much Hair (a gender euphoric musical cabaret), and Antonio! (a queer punk pirate musical). Each of them used different performance forms and stories to celebrate queer joy, and each of them have led to celebrations and conversations with audiences. I believe that creating work centred on joy creates both an important representation for LGBTQIA+ people (look, you do get to be happy!) and provides an accessible jumping off point for allies to join in the conversation.

Offstage my work is more directly education. With GenderWise we specifically focus on creating learning opportunities that lead to greater social justice for transgender and gender expansive people. GenderWise grew out of my time as a Master's student in applied theatre. During the course, my fellow student Rachael Feldman and I realised that many of our cohort—despite their best intentions—had very little knowledge of how to interact with gender diverse people, especially their students. After a lot of ad hoc education fielding questions and concerns, we decided to develop a training that could teach educators about best practices for working with transgender and gender expansive students, educators, and education staff. To give people practical experience with these ideas, we incorporated a Theatre of the Oppressed inspired roleplay into the training. Our company, GenderWise, was born.

It has been profoundly encouraging to see how many companies and spaces have been interested in learning how to better support and include transgender and gender expansive people. Since 2022 we have held workshops for a range of companies (including Lincoln Center Theater and New Victory Theatre in NYC) and at conferences including the 2024 TYA/USA conference in Atlanta, GA. Most recently, we consulted on character representation and transgender actor support for a production of a new play with a trans character. As we do this work, Rachael and I are constantly reminded at how valuable a tool theatre is to effectively educate. Instead of just talking about inclusion or giving facts about best practices, our training offers both tools and a space for people to actually practice in real time, with other real humans.

As we expand our work with GenderWise to reach more people in education and in other fields, our hope is to make the world a more welcoming and understanding place for transgender and gender expansive people. As I continue my work with Butch Mermaid, I hope that I can bring audiences together to laugh, to learn, and to imagine a more radically inclusive world. Overall I believe deeply that theatre, whether in the classroom or on the stage, offers incredible opportunities for connection, growth, and joy.



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