

Some Unsorted Thoughts On The Ethics of Dress Up

“I don’t decide to play the characters I play as a political choice, yet the characters I play often do become political statements. Having your story told, as a woman, as a person of color, as a lesbian or as a trans person, as any member of any disenfranchised community, it is sadly often still a radical idea.”

-Kerry Washington

About a month ago, I had a callback for a production of *Fun Home*, and, at the risk of being super corny and obvious with a first line here, I’ll say that it wasn’t exactly “fun.” The show is a 90-minute musical that won the Tony in 2015, and I will confidently assert that the Broadway production was one of the best, and most important, pieces of live theater of the 21st century. It’s based on the auto-biographical graphic novel of the same name by Alison Bechdel, a lesbian cartoonist. The piece functions as a bildungsroman, a memoir in which Alison reflects on both her own coming out and her relationship with her father, a closeted gay man who ultimately killed himself. It is a stunning piece of literature, turned stunning piece of theater; it is moving, it is funny, it features strong female characters whose narratives are not defined by heteronormative love stories, and it is not two-and-a-half hours long. It is the story of a queer woman coming into her power through self-acceptance; it is by her writing and illustrating *Fun Home* and her reflections on missed opportunities for connection with her father that Alison is able to find her artistic voice. That artistic

voice is a glorious one, and a newcomer to the forefront of the American [commercial] musical theater cannon.

This show was one of the best things I have ever seen on Broadway or off. The music is stunning, the story genuine and sweet, heartfelt and sad, significant and commonplace. As an theatergoer I was captivated, as a human being I was touched, and as an actor I was eager to get my hands on this material. I guess the rights for production became available in the last nine-or-so months because a lot of regional theaters have started putting up productions of *Fun Home*. It makes sense-- the show is short (have I mentioned that it's short?), it's a small cast of mostly women, it's a contemporary show that theaters want to be the first to share with their audiences. I've started submitting for Medium Alison, Alison as a 19-year-old, newly-out freshman at Oberlin who starts dating this uber-cool-and-edgy-hot-as-shit lesbian named Joan and subsequently becomes obsessed with sex. In the Broadway production, Emily Skeggs played Medium and donned a super-short pixie hair cut, loose, boy-style jeans, and an oversized striped red polo shirt. Alison is iconically butch, or, as Joan says in a fairly light-hearted reclamation, a recognizable dyke.

On the day of my audition, I came straight from an EPA for the tour of *Frozen*. I prepared the same song for both shows, a contemporary musical theater belt song that's upbeat and youthful. For *Frozen*, I wore my favorite pair of loose, high-waisted black capris with a tight-fitting green tank top, heeled booties, hoop earrings, and my hair down and wavy. I walked down to 38th street for my *Fun Home* audition and changed my shirt to a loose-fitting Hawaiian tee, swapped my heels for Pumas, took off my jewelry,

and threw my hair in a ponytail. I never like to feel like I'm in a costume for an audition--I only audition in clothes that I also wear in my everyday life-- but it's an industry-wide expectation that you'll dress in the realm of the play and character you're going in for, kind of like you wouldn't wear jeans to an interview for a bank. I wouldn't wear a leather jacket to an *Oklahoma!* audition; I'd probably not don winter-wear for *South Pacific*. It just makes you seem like a weirdo, or worse, like you literally don't know the content of the show you want to be hired for. There's also this kind of running-joke in the musical theater world that the audition "uniform" for young women is a jewel-toned a-line dress with nude pumps, or worse, character shoes. (Sidenote: it is weird to wear character shoes for an audition because people do not actually wear character shoes in real life. They are for dancing in a production number; they are not real shoes.) That is to say, rolling into this *Fun Home* audition, I didn't expect to see *that* particular uniform, but I was met with a different one. Almost every girl in the holding room had a pixie-cut and wore loose-fit jeans, a horizontal striped shirt, and Converse. It was noteworthy; the callbacks were in White Plains, and when I took the MetroNorth to get there from Grand Central, I spotted several other girls on the train and knew immediately that we were headed to the same place. Finding my way from the station to the theater was easy--I just followed the Peter Pan haircuts.

The two college-age female characters in the show are Medium Alison and Joan, her girlfriend at Oberlin. There isn't quite as much of a "look" associated with Joan; she's the cool, out-and-proud lesbian at Oberlin who oozes confidence and unsurprisingly sparks Alison's sexual awakening. With my long hair and big mouth (I'm

one to introduce myself and crack jokes in a holding room), other girls in the room asked me if I was called back for Joan. I'll be clear-- there was little question as to who most, if not all, of the other girls were called back for.

I was proud of the work that I did in those auditions, but I kind of knew in my gut that I wasn't going to get an offer. I fixated on this while I was waiting my turn and it got me down a bit, for sure. Often I leave a good audition on a high, grateful to have gotten to give a mini-performance and spend a little time with good material. For this, I definitely got to give great mini-performances and, as I've said, the writing and composition of *Fun Home* is nothing short of masterful, but in this particular callback I couldn't find that levity of spirit that I've worked so hard to cultivate in such a competitive profession.

I've been mulling over what it is that didn't sit right with me, and I think it comes down to what I'll lightly refer to as the ethics of playing dress up, which is, in large part, what actors do professionally. Yes, there's craft and artistry, training and talent, but at the end of the day we are impersonators. We are playing people who we are not, and this lends itself to a myriad of conversations about who it is socially acceptable for us to become onstage. Much is at play here, and progressive casting is due for an exciting and dynamic moment in this industry-- I often refer to the Brandy and Whitney Houston *Cinderella* as a perfect example of a classic show that used the most color-blind of casting with extraordinary success. Literally nobody cares that Whoopi Goldberg and Victor Garber are the black and white parents of a super hot Asian prince because he is SUPER HOT (and Paolo Montalban is very talented and well

equipped for the role). I don't think there's a reason for any show nowadays to be cast entirely white or cis or heterosexual. I just don't. And for shows that are explicitly about race and colonization and privilege and oppression (I'm looking at you, *The King and I* and *Miss Saigon*), I need a better reason than "It's a classic!" or "The music is gorgeous" to justify a revival that perpetuates merely roles of limited depth at best, antiquated objectification at worst for actors of color.

What I'm getting at here is more about actors who are white, cis, and heterosexual, and when we are simply pursuing a contract versus treading into the waters of seemingly-harmless-but-maybe-rather-harmful minstrelsy. Obviously you don't see white girls going in for *Memphis* or *The Color Purple*. But there's been an epidemic lately of white girls with an affinity for an enviable tan in summer, maybe of Mediterranean descent, auditioning for *West Side Story*, *Evita*, and *In The Heights*; these are the Sarah Joneses who do their bronzer a little bit heavier on audition day and throw in thick gold hoops to channel Maria, Eva, or Vanessa. I think we've collectively decided that this doesn't sit well, that it borders on a blackface of sorts. To this end, I think about *Fiddler on the Roof*, too. I'm actually Jewish, and have been *typed out* of *Fiddler on the Roof*, meaning I've had a casting director look at my headshot and my face and say I do not look right for this show. Meaning that I do not look *Jewish enough* to pass for a *Russian Jewish girl* onstage, even though I have *Russian Jewish lineage*. I refuse to believe that every actor who has played in Anatevka in the recent Broadway, off-Broadway, and national tour adaptations of *Fiddler* have all been Jewish.

What's the difference here? Obviously white performers cannot play black characters, so why do we even have to have a conversation about whether white performers can portray Latinx? Shouldn't the answer be a resounding, unanimous "absolutely not" with a side of "why would you even ask that in the first place"?¹ Then, further, why is Latinx impersonation by non-Latinx folk less acceptable than Jewish impersonation by gentiles? I won't say it's because "Jewish is a religion," because Judaism is historically an ethnic identity as well, particularly in reference to the Russian shtetl. I don't hear grumblings about *Fiddler* castings the same way I do about *Evita* ones. Granted, in today's society, the cultural appropriation and systematic racism against the Latinx diaspora is *far greater* than that of Jewish people; maybe I just harbor some resentment because I am a Jewish actor who has been told she doesn't look Jewish enough to book a job. I'm only human, I want to work, I own that, and if actually having a Bat Mitzvah can get me a Hodel contract, I WILL TAKE IT. But what makes one group more acceptable to impersonate than another?

This brings us to *Fun Home*, and I wonder how this conversation applies to heterosexual actors playing queer characters. And no, queerness isn't necessarily something that is inherently worn or visually cued, but in a casting of *Fun Home* based on the original Broadway production, it is. Alison is butch. She looks like a quintessential dyke-- it's a key part of how she self-identifies. Interestingly the other

¹ I'll go a step further here too-- *West Side Story* and *Evita* depict very geographically specific Hispanic heritages, Puerto Rican and Argentinian. Is there a line to be drawn that discounts actors of other lineages from these tracks? I don't necessarily think so, but it does beg the question of whether we just grouping all Latinx characters into an undefined clump. Same goes for *Miss Saigon* and *The King and I* and the function they serve for creating jobs for Asian actors.

collegiate age lesbian character in the show, Joan, doesn't have a set look; at the callback I was at, there were Joans of all physical types in all sorts of cool, sexy outfits. The Alison hopefuls, in contrast, all seemed to be wearing the same outfit and sport the same hairstyle. Sure, Alison Bechdel is a real person, so there is a reference for what the character "should" look like, but there is something off-putting about seeing girls arrive at this audition and change into a boys' polo shirt and baggy jeans that they'd stuffed in their backpack, that they'll probably return to their male friend as soon as this audition is over, or just put back in their closet until their next *Fun Home* audition. If you don't actually wear that outfit in real life, you're coming to this audition in costume, and, to me, this doesn't feel too far off from wearing a slightly darker foundation to pass for Puerto Rican. It just doesn't sit right.

I don't know what I was more uncomfortable with, witnessing other actors dress in drag for an audition, impersonating this idea of a dyke with a quick change, or that I was a fish out of water because not only *didn't* I do that, but I'm just not gay. I'm sure I wasn't the only straight girl in the room, but of the Alison hopefuls, I was definitely the odd one out. Part of my discomfort was also, I'm sure, frustration and disappointment that I didn't think I would book this contract, which I was right about. Was it a form of distasteful drag for me to even audition in the first place? It's not my preference to put myself on the spot like this, to question my own motives and integrity not only as an artist but also as someone with a social conscience and desire to be as woke as I can be.

To be clear, these musings have nothing to do with acting ability; this is really a question of representation. And it isn't a question of the ever-exhausting "political

correctness,” but rather of artistic ethics. A few weeks ago a friend of mine in casting posed a question via Facebook about whether white girls should sing from *Moana*, and I’m a firm no on that. I’m white, I love to sing “How Far I’ll Go,” and I sing it really freaking well, but that’s not the point. It’s a matter of hijacking material that is written for people who are underrepresented. And it doesn’t go both ways; if a Polynesian girl wants to sing from *The Little Mermaid*, she ABSOLUTELY SHOULD because the fact of the matter is most roles in our industry are white. Most roles in our industry are male. Most roles in our industry are able-bodied, heterosexual. As far as I’m concerned, nothing is achieved by an all white, all male production of *Hamlet*; those were all that were staged, back in the day. But an all-female, multicultural *Hamlet* with a transgender Ophelia and Polonius in a wheelchair? That’s the art with real perspective and relevance that we should be striving to make.

Are the stakes of these questions really that high? I don’t know. Maybe. We absolutely can’t have people in blackface, and there are varying degrees to what may or may not be construed as minstrelsy, sure. I don’t mean to hijack these loaded words that are historically affiliated with the systemic oppression of black people or to say that all misrepresentations are created equal-- I’m not implying that at all. I’m just positing that *all* representation really matters. There is comparatively so little material that showcases stories of non-white, non-heterosexual, hell, NON-MEN. The way we approach those rare gem projects is critical and as such merits respectful, uncomfortable discussion. Taking representation by the horns and turning it on its head can be powerful when in service of marginalized, under-heard voices. Representation is

the most powerful and social element of theater, and it's with thoughtful depiction that something as seemingly trivial as wigged tap-dancers breaking out into song can actually matter.

-Tess Jonas, Fall 2018