

FEATURES

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A GAY WALKS INTO A THEATRE:

ON THE WHYS AND WHETHERS OF
GENDERBENDING THE CLASSICS

By Asher Wood

In 2023, I sat in the very back row of the Sydney Opera House Playhouse and watched a female character be humiliated and tortured under psychiatric imprisonment for acting on her desire for another woman.

There was no warning – no indication that we were going to hear her screams for help met with cruel laughter, visceral, and jarring in the middle of a comedic play. I remember the confusion: is this supposed to be funny?

The play was Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. A comedy, one that already plays with the lines of gender, sex, and sexuality. This story is about the supporting character Malvolio, who works in the house of a countess, Olivia. Having decided that Malvolio is too full of himself, other members of the house play a trick to embarrass him, forging a letter from Olivia declaring her love for Malvolio. The letter demands that if he feels the same, he should dress up in yellow stockings and smile, contrary to his usual serious nature. He follows the instructions, which makes Olivia deem him mad and lock him away in the dungeon, where the others torture him.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen a *Twelfth Night* adaptation where they chose to genderbend this character, nor was it the last. In subsequent productions, the moment has still sat uneasy with me, wondering exactly what is gained by depicting Malvolio as a woman.

There's a layer of queer experience added that doesn't get properly addressed when Shakespeare's text is otherwise performed as written. It feels like an ever-present fear for queer folks, and for many of us, a real experience: you put yourself out there and express how you feel for someone, only to be laughed at, shamed, or shunned for feeling something deemed unacceptable. This particular production's dark and gritty emphasis on the imprisonment and torture that she faces was horrifying and not at all funny, despite the laughter of the audience.

It also amplified the fears and histories of the queer community – throughout history, we've been abused, institutionalised, and imprisoned for who we are. I was blindsided and deeply unsettled by something I had thought would just be a fun afternoon out.

Were there any queer voices in that room that knew how it may affect audience members? I'll never know. Did everyone have the same experience? Almost certainly not. But, are there better, safer, more uplifting ways to experiment with gender and queerness in classic plays? Yes.

Let's rewind to September 2022, a year before my *Twelfth Night* adventure. I was in Melbourne for just one reason: Australian playwright Virginia Gay's new adaptation of *Cyrano* at Melbourne Theatre Co. Gay had changed the titular character from a man, who considers himself unlovable because of his extremely large nose, to a woman, whose 'nose' is her gender and queerness.

Watching a production of the original *Cyrano de Bergerac* in London, Gay instantly recognised the potential for

Cyrano as a queer character. There's something inherent about them that makes it unimaginable for them to ever have a chance with the beautiful woman they want, even though on paper they're exactly what she's looking for. Cyrano resigns himself to helping Hemsworth-esque himbo, Christian, to woo Roxanne instead, feeding him lines (originally, writing letters for him) to compensate for his unintelligence. But, the original ending is tragic and chaotic: there's a war, Christian is killed, Cyrano only tells Roxanne the truth moments before his own death, and they never get to be together.

If Gay had chosen to keep everything the same, the ending would be painful and dissatisfying. So, she wrote a new version. This *Cyrano* is explicitly, realistically, authentically queer. Cyrano's discussion of her self-doubt rings incredibly true, and the way she describes her attraction to Roxanne feels tangible in a way most onstage love stories don't. I left the theatre feeling seen, and healed in some indescribable way. Like it was something I'd been needing without ever knowing it.

What's the difference between this and *Twelfth Night*? Well, logically, a lot. Cyrano gets the advantage of being the main character of their story, and *Cyrano* itself is an adaptation rather than just another production. But, importantly, Gay had the queer implications of a female Cyrano at the forefront of her mind, and ensured that her version is the one today's queer community deserves to see.

The takeaway here, if there is one, is about intention and impact. What is the point of genderbending classic stories?





What are the consequences? When producers and directors decide to break the mould of the story they're working with, it can be a powerful thing; it can empower us or foster a deeper connection to something we already see ourselves in. But, when done frivolously or without consideration, it can be hurtful or isolating in an equal opposite way. In short: adapt wisely.

Image: Brett Boardman



I'VE
NEVER
REALLY
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EXACTLY
RIGHT
WITH

GIRLS

BY ANONYMOUS

I've never really felt exactly right with girls.

Amongst all the hair braiding and the dollies and the apple on a stick.

Or in this body with its softness, its give and its lines.

Nothing against the sisterhood or whatever, Girl Power 4eva and everything but ... it's never quite felt like it's meant for me.

Like everyone is following a script I haven't seen, and making it look so easy. Like breathing.

Or like ... you know when they replaced the Yellow Wiggle? And the new guy, Sam, he was okay, like he was in the skivvy and everything, but he was always looking sideways to check the dance moves? And his pointy fingers were never as smooth as the other guys'.

Pretty much like that.

But then, since I met you ... I get it.

Well, I sort of get it.

I still don't really want every girl I've ever known running their fingers through my hair, that's why I don't keep enough of it on my head to braid.

I'd quite like to run mine through yours.

Feel like I could do that as easy as breathe.

SEX ROBOT ADVICE COLUMN

By Clare O'Toole

My roommate made a deepfake of my voice from recording me around the house. Now, their robot sounds like me when they have sex.

I've lived with my housemate for about 5 months now, and we're signed on to a 12-month lease. They're a friend of a friend, and we'd only met peripherally at parties before moving in, but they seemed ok. The lease is a really good deal in a very convenient location, and there's no way I'd be able to afford anything similar on my own. We decided to move in together, and things have been cordial so far. Just the usual little annoyances with a few dishes in the sink, but nothing major. Until 2 weeks ago.

About a month ago, they'd mentioned that they were looking into getting a sex robot, asking if I knew anything about them or had any recommendations or anything, which I didn't. We left it at that, and it was just a casual conversation. They've never been weird about sex with me before, they've never hit on me or anything, and we're both pretty considerate about inviting people over - letting each other know, not leaving anyone home alone, keeping noise down, etc.

So, I was pretty surprised when about two weeks ago I started hearing incredibly loud sex coming from their room. At first I thought they must have someone over, and so I put on headphones and tried not to notice. Being polite, and trying to respect privacy - the apartment isn't completely soundproof. The noise from them having sex was incredibly loud, far louder than anything my housemate had done before, and I just made a note to talk to them about trying to keep noise down if it continued. Which it definitely did.

I noticed that no one left the apartment that night or the following day, and didn't start putting the pieces together until I started hearing more incredibly loud sex the following night. And, pretty much every night since. I figured they must have gotten the sex robot they'd been talking about, and was happy for them in a weird way. I know they'd been having kind of a tough time with their last breakup, so I thought the sex robot might help lift their mood.

Until I noticed that the sex robot sounded exactly like me.

My accent is not entirely unique, but is definitely a little out of place in our area, and I have an unusually low register. Not definitive proof that my housemate was copying my voice, but a little strange. The thing that has sent me over the edge is how the

robot sounds when they're having sex - not getting into too much detail, but I know that I have some specific sounds I make, and previous partners have mentioned (all in good ways!) that they're pretty unusual. That's just how I sound when I'm really into sex. So, hearing my own noises projected back at me from my housemate's room when they're fucking their robot is way over the line.

It would be bad enough that my housemate is very regularly having very loud sex in the apartment, but this is a major violation of boundaries. After I heard them a few times, I had a talk with them, trying to, in the most delicate way possible, ask if there was anything unusual about their robot? Like any customisations? If they were happy with it? I know I wasn't super tactful, but I was trying to bring up an incredibly unnerving topic which I was trying not to be furious about, so I was kind of dancing around the topic trying to start the conversation.

I didn't need to bother. They cheerfully told me that they had actually worked pretty hard on a customised voice system for the robot, and that they were pretty proud of the project since it involved a complex connection between recordings, training systems, filling in gaps with machine learning, etc. etc. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. They were actually

bragging to me about having stolen my voice. What. The. Fuck. They were so caught up in how impressive their 'project' was that they were seemingly completely oblivious to any potential ethical issues or having overstepped boundaries in stealing my voice. I kind of lost it. I asked them how the fuck they even got the recordings in the first place, and they said they'd just left some microphones around the apartment, and figured I wouldn't mind since they only left them in common spaces and their own room.

I feel so humiliated, frustrated, violated, and powerless. I'm stuck sharing my space with someone who has so little concern and empathy for other people that they see no issue in recording me, including when I'm having sex, and on top of that I have to essentially hear them fucking me whenever they want. How can I get them to stop? Or, get them to leave? Is there anything I can do to get rid of the copy of my voice? I feel completely stuck and knotted up with frustration. How can they not get it?

