# **9. Trans Inclusion, Gender Expansion, & the New Queer Theatre**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter brings to light recent developments in understandings of gender identity that help comprise a milestone in-the-making. The chapter explores the lack of representation for trans and non-gender binary artists in queer US theatre, as well as shifts that have just begun to occur. New analysis of work and thinking by artists including L Morgan Lee, MJ Kauffman, Basil Kreimendahl, Jess Barbagallo, Vaginal Crème Davis, Ty Defoe, and more to call attention to the ways in which US theatre has—and, significantly, how it has not—made space for trans and nonbinary representation. The chapter celebrates recent landmark events towards inclusion as well as the establishment of a “New Queer Theatre” emphasizing that goal.

## **“First” Thoughts on Transgender Inclusion**

Transgender inclusion in United States theatre is bound up in a conflation of gender play on stage and lived trans identity. Gender play is woven into the fabric of US theatre through acts of cross-dressing and gender-bending where artists have posed questions about the stability of the terms “man” and “woman,” and the roles gender plays in our lives. Over the last twenty years, transgender theatremakers have been thrust into a spotlight, conscripted into the staging of gender questions by artists, institutions, and publics alike. In this chapter, I use the term **transgender** to mean the identity of those whose existence rests beyond the gender they might have been assigned at birth or beyond the gender binary itself. I follow in the footsteps of Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller when I use the term “trans” as descriptor for theatre: “ … an imperfect word to group together experiences of many people across many cultures across many eras—past, present, future, and the trans experience that invites those temporalities to coexist in a single body” (2021, 3). As such, I ground this chapter in the labor of trans artists pursuing their craft: educating audiences on gender expansive life beyond the stage to justify their existence on the stage. The milestone of transgender inclusion in US theatre is still unfolding, and it is found in everyday survival and advocacy. In the pages that follow, I examine (and echo) the tone of trans and non-binary performance styles—which shatter concepts of linearity, binaries, structures, legibility, and form—to show that “trans theatre” is not simply work created by and for transgender people, but a movement that radically toys with and reshapes white and colonial traditions of theatre, within which a New Queer Theatre makes its debut.

A ruse of representation currently defines transgender inclusion in the theatre, and award “firsts” are part of this narrative: “But you’re nominated for a Tony,” says Jonathan Capehart in a 2022 interview for his MSNBC *Sunday Show*,before the camera pans to L Morgan Lee in a director’s chair. At the time of the interview, Lee had been nominated for her work as Thought 1 in Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop*. As Michelle Dvoskin notes in an earlier chapter in this volume, *A Strange Loop* tells the story of Usher, a queer, Black, aspiring musical theatre writer in New York City who grapples with the complexities of his inner “Thoughts,” embodied on stage by six actors. In response to Capehart, Lee wrestles with her own thoughts as she exhales contemplatively, and nods. Capehart continues with intensity, “and what makes your nomination historic is that you are the first out transgender woman nominated for a Tony for a Featured Role. Please share … with us what that means to you.” Skipping a few beats, Lee responds:

… [For] me, even being on stage … in a role that is simply a woman, that my transness is not a subject matter in this piece, that is something that I think trans people…are seeking more of: spaces where we are allowed to simply be and bring our own intersections into the thing that we are doing. Instead of having it be given to us by people who are not living those lives. (Lee 2022, n.p.)

Lee, the first openly transgender performer nominated for a Tony Award in any performance category, is a Black woman. This 2022 honor continues a legacy of Black transgender and gender-nonconforming people blazing trails in art and activism within US queer history. A nomination of this caliber places Lee in a genealogy of “firsts” with her peers both past and present. She joins blues singer and gender-bending lesbian Gladys Bentley of the Harlem Renaissance; activists Marsha P. Johnson and Miss Major Griffin-Gracey; television performer and Emmy Award-winner, Laverne Cox; Golden Globe Award-winner, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez; two-time Helen Hayes Award-nominated playwright and choreographer, Dane Figueroa Edidi; and more. Lee's recognition by the American Theatre Wing highlights the repeated excellence of Black trans artists working within US arts institutions. However, the harsh realities of transgender survival rarely make the same kinds of headlines as awards. When performance pieces about transgender life are celebrated, the referents (and runners-up) are often lost in the struggle.

In the general imaginary, history is made through a series of "firsts;” thus, the day-to-day labor, successes, and failures of trans theatre artists working against institutional bias are rarely documented. As Lee notes, “[w]henever I hear the ‘making history’ element of it, it’s sort of unreal to me, because I just feel like I’m literally putting one foot in front of the other, just trying to make it from day-to-day … ” (Lee 2022, n.p.). Survival in an industry that frequently ignores or erases one’s existence is a challenge many transgender artists must endure. Cultural education around transgender issues has shown many theatre institutions that accommodations for trans artists are based in broader nondiscriminatory policies for workers’ rights. In a viral article, “Beyond the Bathrooms,” M Sloth Levine and John Meredith argue that gender inclusion in regional theatre has manifested in the “swift creation of gender-inclusive [restroom] facilities…a task on the advocacy checklist that theatres have clung to with surprising fixation” (Levine and Meredith 2019, n.p.). **Gender expansion** (existence beyond binary definitions and expressions of “man/woman”) has always appeared on stage in US theatre; however, through the 2010s, “ … productions still have entirely cisgender casts, include far too many femme-acting men in dresses as a punchline, and present other harmful jokes at the expense of the trans community” (Levine and Meredith 2019, n.p.). Due to these pitfalls, I find difficulty summarizing transgender inclusion in early 2020s US theatre. While trans representation on stage increases, the grammar of the gender binary is still upheld institutionally in hiring practices and language used in casting calls (e.g., biological sex terms, like “male” and “female,” are still used to describe characters’ genders). Theatres implement gender-neutral bathroom infrastructure for workers and audiences in need of relief. However, to truly address structural transphobia at the cores of these institutions, other inequities around trans inclusion must be regulated (puns and bathroom humor intended).

As trans theatremakers continue to push for more inclusive practices and move beyond the bathroom, some work against tokenization even while feeling compelled to acquiesce to the demands and frameworks of power at play in US theatre traditions. Others actively fight against legibility, a process defined by T.J. Jourian and Z Nicolazzo as cislation, or “the translating of seemingly illegible (i.e., not understandable) genders for cis recognition” (2020, n.p.). Trans theatremakers work with their communities in amateur spaces on the fringes of mainstream regional theatre. Allies in authority occasionally extend their hands to transgender artists waiting offstage, as when L Morgan Lee found success as a transgender woman in a musical written by Michael R. Jackson, a gay man. Coalition forms across every letter in the LGBTQ+ acronym to foster affinity spaces, new play labs, and workshops cultivated by queer artists who produce the most potent works of trans storytelling. Realistically, trans theatre is curated in the seams and cracks of the US theatre industry by and for transgender people: it is a milestone in the making.

A professional playhouse or awards conglomerate may highlight the labor of a trans artist with the goal of supporting a “first”— even if theatres demonstrate little interest in going back for seconds. Despite the resulting whiplash, transgender artists in US theatre continue their craft in this strange loop. Lee received her Tony nomination for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical after over twenty years working in the theatre. It was not until 2015 that Lee was invited to read for Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop* at the Musical Theatre Factory in New York City. Seven years of work on this production led to her 2022 Tony Award nomination. Many achievements for transgender artists, Lee’s nomination included, tend to foreground the breaking of barriers or the smashing of ceilings without much attention given to why, how, and by whom institutional obstacles for trans people are constructed in US theatre. Lee goes further to say that she “ … would like us to get to a place where it’s not a big deal when you find that someone is trans” (Daniels 2022, n.p.). Lee achieved her historic nomination in *A Strange Loop*, a piece which offers ways to think about the paradoxes of Black and queer representation within US theatre, but a transgender character is only one “Thought” in the musical’s plot.

Lee began questioning her place in a “big, Black and queer-ass American [soon-to-be] Broadway show” (Jackson, *A Strange Loop*) during the musical’s development—around the same time she was questioning her own gender: “I actually tried to leave the production at one point in the process because I did not feel like it was my place to tell this story … but the fact that I was able to remain with the piece I think gives it more reach” (Lee 2022, n.p.). The character Thought 1 transitioned with Lee, as head creatives in the process ensured her that this characterization was welcome in the world of the play: a trans woman representing a Thought in Usher’s head. This fear of exclusion, of not embodying the right type of queerness for a predominantly cisgender room of theatremakers, is all too common for many queer artists working in US theatre. Transgender, non-binary, and third gender hires account for less than one percent of Actors’ Equity Association contracts according to a 2021 report (Conley 2021, 6). Vying for such a small portion of jobs, transgender creatives labor on the fringes to feel “the kind of tired” that Lee “waited [her] whole career for” (Lee 2022, n.p.). She experiences her exhaustion as a positive condition—a result of consistent work in *A Strange Loop*. Most trans actors, however, may recognize tiredness as symptom of being transgender within a genealogy of theatrical “firsts”: weary-but-willing transgender performers navigate the US theatre in search of vital, career-sustaining roles despite potential worries that any “first” may also be their last. Perhaps these actors can find relief outside of the gender-neutral bathrooms and the buildings that house them—leaving the mainstream theatre altogether for plays written by transgender writers not yet invited inside.

## **Tropes of Transgender Storytelling in TV, Film, and Theatre**

Though fraught with tropes and cislation, transgender storytelling began its rise during what *Time Magazine* described as “transgender tipping point” in a 2014 issue featuring actress Laverne Cox on the cover. The article highlights a generational debate surrounding transgender narratives: is gender transition binary or is it a more complex idea, reliant upon “seeing gender as a spectrum rather than a two-option multiple-choice question” (Steinmetz 2014, n.p.)? The feature revealed that the US had reached a “transgender tipping point” due to increased visibility of transgender people on screen and off, and that this “new transparency [was] improving the lives of a long-misunderstood minority and beginning to yield new policies … ” (Steinmetz 2014, n.p.). Another “transgender tipping point” occurred in the theatre via *The* *New York Times* in 2016. Alexis Soloski interviewed three up-and-coming white, transmasculine playwrights about the importance of trans stories written by transgender playwright. Each of the artists— Jess Barbagallo, MJ Kaufman, and Basil Kreimendahl—spoke about their most recent plays, autobiographical storytelling, and fears of being typecast in the role of “trans playwright.” Basil Kreimendahl, whose *Orange Julius* was set to open at Rattlestick Theatre in January 2017, clarified that he hoped to be “seen as a playwright.” Regarding the tokenization of his 2013 play *Sidewinders*, Kreimendahl commented that San Francisco’s Cutting Ball Theater marketed the piece as “very queer” even though it was “about being human. So, people came expecting to see a trans narrative and then were disappointed.” The paradox of transness in the theatre—as an aesthetic, a plot device, or a vehicle for social commentary—is made clear in this disappointment: transgender artists are expected to (only) transgender artists are expected to (only) create theatre about their own queerness.

Historically, trans-written works are not the most popular representations of transness in theatrical canon. The landscape of trans representation in US media by the 2010s shifted away from depictions of desolation and rocky horrors (pun intended) established from the 1960s through the 1990s. Characters like Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Tim Curry’s cross-dressing “sweet transvestite” Dr. Frank N. Furter from Richard O’Brien’s *The Rocky Horror [Picture] Show* (stage show 1973, film 1975) inspired other transgender serial killers in theatre and film through the 1980s and 1990s. After many years of characters like cross-dressing serial killer Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Jonathan Larson’s musical *Rent* (1994) had audiences lighting candles for characters like Angel—innocent, flamboyant, and dying from HIV/AIDS and other tragic fates (Keyes, Mantoan, and Schiller 2021, n.p.). These archetypal (and frequently dying) transgender figures took the fore in the post-1990s media milieu. Slowly, the T in LGBTQ+ earned a spot center stage by way of cisgender actors and writers crafting vulnerable and pathetic trans characters—arousing pity from principally white, cis-heterosexual audiences despite being riddled with superficial examinations of trans experiences. This style of transgender storytelling, which often focuses on characters amid transition, remains popular for cis and trans writers alike (see P Carl’s *Becoming a Man*, staged at American Repertory Theater in 2024). Since the “transgender tipping point,” a fire has been lit under mainstream media to include transgender protagonists, shifting away from the adulterated antagonism of previous decades.

Transgender narratives exist in US theatre more than transgender creators, reflected in the influence of increased representation in film and television; this serves as a case study in the palatability of transness for broader US publics. The 2010s witnessed successful trans-centered media like *The Danish Girl* (2015) and *Transparent* (2014-2019), with each acclaimed work featuring a well-known white, cisgender man playing a lead transgender character. These stories gave attention to the social ramifications gender transitions have on these characters’ loved ones and focus distastefully on the physical changes of transition: gender-affirming surgery on genitals, variations of bodily phenotype, and shifts in sexuality. Predominantly led by cisgender writers, this era of storytelling prioritizes the impact of one’s gender transition on those around them. These practices are resisted by some writers who wish to avoid the "trans playwright" label to evade industry limitations. MJ Kaufmann says that transness within playwriting has been restricted to public conceptions of what it means to be a trans person. “Coming out” plots were the only way Kaufmann “had encountered [a trans narrative] … the story of someone who is born in the wrong body and then they get surgery, and they take hormones, and they transition and then they’ve found themselves.” (Soloski 2016, n.p.). When transgender playwrights are placed into the category of “trans playwright,” opportunities to produce work other than coming out narratives can become foreclosed. Trite plays about transgender experiences—memory plays and autobiographical works—help to ensure a future where plays featuring trans characters continue to be commissioned from trans writers. Later in the interview, Kaufmann laments, “I don’t see very many cis writers writing about trans experience responsibly … There’s an unfortunate compounding problem that theaters would rather produce work about us, not by us right now. We should get to tell our own stories first” (Soloski 2016, n.p.). The double-bind of writing for the benefit of one’s community, but not speaking on behalf of all its members, results in many of the representational conundrums that trans writers face today.

Advancements in trans representation in regional theatre remain almost exclusively white. In a widely circulated *American Theatre* article titled “What is a Non-binary Play?” Jonathan Alexandratosinterviewed six non-binary playwrights (the majority of whom are white). Here, Alexandros wrestled with the same issues of representation faced in 2016. Trans playwrights are requisitioned into writing coming out narratives, or their plays are charged with having to represent their entire community: “Whatever I would say after [“a non-binary play is”] would exclude a fellow non-binary playwright and would void the greatest gift non-binary plays can give audiences: a sense that space exists to be claimed by those who have none, rather than assigned by or to those who have plenty” (2022). Alexandratos included discussions of playwrights’ responsibilities, anxieties around inclusion, and reckonings with intersectionality: “As non-binary playwrights intersect their work with the other parts of their identities … their audiences get to see the different ways our gender exists in the world. This lets us avoid the pitfall of portrayals of non-binary people in media, which typically skews white, thin, able-bodied, and neurotypical.” Alexandratos has recently edited a more racially inclusive anthology called *Beyond the Binary: Works by Non-Binary Playwrights* for Next Stage Press (2024). In just two years, the definition of “non-binary play” shifted through these canonizing events, expanding at points where “non-binary” intersects with other identities on the page.

## ***The White to be Angry* about the Coloniality of Gender**

At large, transgender representation in professional US theatre maintains assimilationist sensibilities around trans identity and race. The cultural conditions of the industry, steeped in colonial logics of gender and white supremacy, reveal the contexts in which transgender narratives appear on US stages. The concept of the coloniality of genderrefers to the way in which colonialism and imperialism have historically, and with force, upheld binary constructions of gender (identity, social roles, aesthetics) in global cultures (Lugones 2007, n.p.). Such constructions have implications for how gender is understood and performed, both within these cultures and in relation to Eurocentric theatrical methods. In fact, even the word “transgender…implies going from one gender to the next,” but as Two-Spirit, interdisciplinary performance artist Ty Defoe notes, “being Two-Spirit is identifying as Native or Indigenous, and then your spirit is all-encompassing of gender and sexual orientation at the same time” (2016, interview with Anupa). False binaries of gender (man *or* woman, masculine *or* feminine) are what many Indigenous artists, like Defoe, defy in postcolonial frameworks through their creative practice. While gender mutability is part of that work, “it’s not about a gender identity overpowering the other. The soul craves movement around these concepts of masculine and feminine we have created” (Caven 2023, n.p.). Despite interventions from Indigenous artists like Defoe, the US theatre continues to uphold the coloniality of gender in its Eurocentric vision: prioritizing a binary and medicalized approach to transgender identity (gender-affirming surgery and hormonal transition as the primary mode of achieving gender euphoria).

Trans narratives that center the experiences of white, middle-class transgender people who have access to medical transition care are featured in US theatre, while stories of transgender people of color, lower-income individuals, and those who do not conform to the gender binary are often overlooked. Taylor Mac’s widely produced kitchen-sink tragicomedy, *Hir* (2015) and Basil Kreimendahl’s *Orange Julius* (2018) had moments of regional appeal. Both pieces navigate gender questions from the perspective of white, middle-class families recovering from the effects of war on their relationships, and the resulting disillusionment of gender roles within the home. I believe that these pieces have had success within US theatre due to the white (and masculine) protagonists at their cores. Since *The New York Times* coverage of three white, transmasculine playwrights in 2016, transness has come to be associated with whiteness on US stages; whiteness, by extension, gives artists an inherent privilege to toy with gender for mainstream audiences. The relatability politics of white trans characters trounce potential backlash or critical panning. Instead, audiences are seated in front of a mirror and given the chance to laugh at the coloniality of gender—a structure of power which they themselves uphold. Relief from these intersectional gender problems are, again, not found in gender-neutral bathrooms, but in the support and production of works created by queer and trans BIPOC theatremakers.

Many performing artists of color have fought against this totalizing force of whiteness on their gender and identities. Vaginal Davis is an intersex and genderqueer performer, musician, and artist who emerged from the punk club performance scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s and rose to prominence in the 1990s. Davis’s confrontational, politically charged performances challenged norms of gender, race, and sexuality as she navigated her own Black Creole, Mexican, and Jewish heritage. Her work helped pave the way for a new generation of queer and transgender performers who embraced activism and subversion as central to their artistic practice. *The White to Be Angry* (1999) is a visual album, a collage of performances by Davis’s band (Pedro, Muriel, and Esther) interspliced with 1990s television clips and short skits. Davis and her band offer a pastiche of white supremacist aesthetics (skinhead, militia fashion, Confederate flags, etc.) humorously layered onto stories of queer desire and aberration, in what José Esteban Muñoz defines as a performance of disindentification (discussed more thoroughly by Jasmine Mahmoud and Dennis Sloan in a previous chapter of this volume). Challenging white supremacy in her work, Davis “[recycles and rethinks the] encoded meaning[s] … of a cultural text in a fashion that … exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations” (Muñoz 1999, 31). Trans theatre artists of color defy gender in similar ways to undo colonial constrictions.

Working against the US theatre industry’s binary conceptions of identity, Black and queer playwrights often refuse legibility in their portrayal of gender on stage through their characters: their work does not seek (or stoop) to educate predominantly white and cisgender audiences on gender expansion or race. Aziza Barnes, for instance, opened their highly successful play *BLKS* Off-Broadway in 2019. The play centers a trio of friends who negotiate Black femininity, queerness, and adulthood while sharing an apartment in New York City. Barnes wrote *BLKS* after spending a semester in Ghana with a friend, where the two struggled to make sense of their place “as Black American people, as Black American women and gender-non-conforming people” (Honold 2017, n.p.). This journey for the playwright influenced the plot of *BLKS*. The current definitions of “non-binary plays” circulated by *American Theatre* do not account for Barnes’s depth of understanding and lived experience of gender’s intersections with global Blackness: “the premise of the play continued to ring true to me … these three very different kinds of Black women in their early 20’s trying to deal with themselves through all the ways we self-medicate” (Honold 2017, n.p.). In 2021, I saw a production of *BLKS* at SpeakEasy Stage Company in Boston. Tonasia Jones, through their prodigious and subtle direction, presented vibrant gender variances among young, Black women through costuming and voice, but also through their intimate staging of how these characters express themselves to *each other*. Barnes offers the US theatre hilarious and distinct Black characters outside of binary depictions of womanhood. The gender binary in the US, a colonial construction, was and is used as a tool of oppression against people of color and Indigenous cultures worldwide. Barnes, and trans artists in the US at racial and ethnic intersections outside of whiteness, craft works that refute discourses of white transgender people. Barnes toys with and disavows the binary (one upheld by whiteness), by refusing to take part in the conversation.

Many works by BIPOC playwrights technically fit within the aesthetic category of *American Theatre’s* “non-binary play” by virtue of also being written by non-binary playwrights. Can these plays exist, however, as legibly non-binary in a theatre which continues to incorrectly associate gender expansion exclusively with whiteness? While the coloniality of gender continues to plague the US theatre industry, trans artists of color work in disidentificatory modes at the head of theatrical innovation in transgender representation. This artistic and activist labor pushes representational politics towards the milestone of equitable transgender inclusion in US theatre and gender expansion beyond colonial definitions.

## **Gender Problems, Trans Activism, and the New Queer Theatre**

From the late-2010s into the early-2020s, trans activists began making public critiques of transphobia within plays (specifically musicals) coming to Broadway. *Tootsie* (2019) was infamous amongst some LGBTQ+ communities at the turn of the decade. The musical centers a struggling and capricious actor (Michael Dorsey) who adopts the (drag) persona of Dorothy Michaels to find success again on stage. *Tootsie* was reviewed by non-binary critic Christian Lewis in an article wittily titled “The Gender Problem *Tootsie* Can’t Dress Up.” Lewis argues *Tootsie* employs the “man in a dress” trope rooted in **transmisogyny** (a hatred of trans women), which often plagues representation of transfemininity in the theatre: “Drag is not inherently transphobic, but the drag in *Tootsie*absolutely is …. *Tootsie* (mis)appropriates drag in ways that enforce ideas about binary gender by making jokes out of the dichotomy between Michael, the straight cisgender protagonist, and his drag persona, Dorothy … ” (2019, n.p.). Lewis highlights that drag itself as an art form is not one of the gender problems in *Tootsie* (even gesturing towards expansive and trans-friendly versions of drag in the musical *Head Over Heels*,which ran on Broadway at the same time). Rather, they argue, the conflation of trans identity and drag contributes to a wider misunderstanding of transgender people as trickster figures. Michael Dorsey pretends to *be* Dorothy Michaels to get ahead in the theatre encountering “bodily humor about genitals or gags about bras, wigs, and heels and how ridiculous it is that Michael would wear them” (2019, n.p.). The piece was read and retweeted by thousands, bringing the gender debate (questions about the credibility of the sex and gender binary) to Broadway.

Recent online transgender theatre activism owes much of its structure and resonance to antiracist activism forged through pandemic cultural shifts of the 2020s. We See You: White American Theatre (WSY: WAT), a collective of BIPOC theatremakers, called for intersectional antiracism initiatives across the US theatre industry, using innovative social media to call out white supremacy through calls for cohesive aesthetics, anonymous first-hand accounts of mistreatment, and manifestos to reach wider publics. Transgender theatre activism was taken offline and onto the streets of the theatre district in New York City on September 6, 2021 with the “Trans March on Broadway” organized by trans performer, Sis. The march—the “first” of its kind—was a direct response to theatrical producer Cameron Mackintosh, who criticized the idea of trans actors playing roles not explicitly written as trans: “You can’t implant something that is not inherently there in the story or character,” Mackintosh said, “that’s what I think. Just to do that, that becomes gimmick casting” (Simpson 2021, n.p.). Various forms of “#gimmick” trended on social media as an inside joke as the transgender theatre community reached a new height of unrest. The term “gimmick” was reclaimed, embracing transness as a central part of the outraged artists’ identity and power in their craft: “I want this march to show people not only in the theater district, but in the entertainment industry at large, that trans people can exist in these spaces” (Kumar 2021). An event with speeches at Central Park’s Sheep’s Meadow, featuring trans artists like Peppermint (who was starring in *Head Over Heels* at the time), kicked off the march with a callout to the industry regarding the future of trans storytelling: “if you are not going to write new stories and bring new stories to the stage, then honey, you have to update the ones you already have” (Franklin 2021, n.p.). Roughly 200 people marched in protest that day, concretizing a significant shift in the transgender community’s intolerance for poor trans representation. Protestors made clear to the industry that the refusal of cisgender producers to educate themselves on the possibilities for gender expansion in the theatre would no longer be tolerated.

Out of the transgender theatre community’s discontent came new ways of canonizing queer works in US theatre online. Giving credence to communal script repositories as sites of change, Britt A. Willis offered an unofficial genre on New Play Exchange (“the world’s largest digital library of scripts by living writers”), called the “New Queer Theatre.” This compiled list of plays is queer and trans “not just by virtue of their creators (who are all trans/gender non-conforming folx), content, or representation*,* but in their very form *…* traditional, linear narratives and naturalism cannot adequately represent trans and queer stories” (Willis n.d., n.p.). The piecemeal production histories of these works reveal that these playwrights have traversed the terrain of new play development without substantial institutional support. These plays are workshopped in queer and trans dedicated labs and fringe theatre companies: organizations and projects like The Kilroys, Gender Explosion, Ring of Keys (which also houses a **gender consultation** program), K Woodzick’s “Nonbinary Monologue Project,” Parity Productions, Breaking the Binary Theatre, National Queer Theatre, The Tank, The Fled Collective, and other small, often independently funded endeavors. In fact, most of the nation’s trans plays are developed within community spaces—including virtual platforms (shared with peers via New Play Exchange) or even in shared apartment living rooms with roommates—from which a “New Queer Theatre” is born.

Works written by transgender playwrights find support in academic spaces across the US as more transgender, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming students enroll in theatre programs. Gen Z (b. 1997-2012) theatremakers are in search of works which reflect their identities. In a major development for trans theatre education, *The* *Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* marks the first of three anthologies of plays (so far) written by trans playwrights and featuring transgender characters. Less burdened by financial risks found the US theatre industry, universities are also primed to support new play development. As a personal example, in the 2022-23 academic year, Tufts University produced a season called “A Year of Queer Magic” under the leadership of then Department Chair, Dr. Noe Montez. The year’s programming supported new works, centering queer performance futurism—inclusive of directors Dr. Kareem Khubchandani (LaWhore Vagistan) and Mac Irvine’s *Welcome to Dragistan!* (a drag show culmination of Khubchandani’s course titled “Critical Drag”). The season featured the collegiate-premiere staging of M Sloth Levine’s *The Interrobangers* (which I directed) and Azure D. Osborne-Lee’s *Red Rainbow* (directed by Dr. Lilian Mengesha)*.* Both non-binary playwrights write in the realm of the fantastic—recycling tropes, bending genre—but ground their characters in transgender realities. Playwright David Valdes dreams of a “future in which every theatre season is queer,” arguing in an article for HowlRound Theatre Commons (another useful resource for transgender theatremakers) that both Levine and Osborne-Lee are artists on the frontlines of that change, fighting for their work to be produced out of the margins (2022, n.p.). Within academic settings, these pieces see new life and gain attention from young trans and non-binary artists in training. With the help of socially conscious students, intergenerational collaboration, and active allyship, the “Queer Theatre We Need Right Now” (Valdes 2022, n.p.) has been able to thrive.

## **Transgender Theatre Community in Queer(phobic) Times**

As limits set by mainstream US theatre for queer artists are continuously met and reset by transgender and non-binary theatremakers, fewer and fewer “firsts” are to be found. Despite these queer(phobic) times —wherein legislation against transgender people and gender-bending performers in the US continues to grow at the time of this writing— artists endure, expanding the limits of gendered imagination in an industry which, though built on the practice of imagination, often resists change. Despite transphobic rhetoric propagated by conservative media outlets, artists write, act in, direct, design, and produce gender expansive plays. Moreover, trans theatre creatives persist through a landscape of transphobia which has been terraformed into their own industry: that is the milestone of transgender inclusion in US theatre.

At the time of writing, I celebrate a varied set of landmark achievements met by transgender theatremakers in recent memory: Jinkx Monsoon, a non-binary, two-time winner of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, became the first professional drag queen and trans person to play Matron “Mama” Morton in *Chicago* onBroadway; non-binary Artistic Director George Strus transformed the Off-Off Broadway Breaking the Binary (BTB) from an annual festival to a year-round theatre organization; *A Transparent Musical* (with book by MJ Kaufman) is headed to Broadway in 2024; P Carl’s *Becoming a Man* premiered at American Repertory Theater; Will Davis was named Artistic Director of Rattlestick Theater, becoming the first trans person to lead an Off-Broadway theatre; Giselle Byrd was named Executive Director of The Theater Offensive, the first Black trans woman to lead a US regional theatre; and Justin David Sullivan, star of *& Juliet,* confidently declined Tony Award eligibility in long-standing binary acting categories, igniting a call for gender-neutral acting awards in coming seasons.

Despite enduring gendered categories, Alex Newell was nominated in 2023 for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical, becoming the first performer who identifies as non-binary to win a Tony Award for their turn as the “independently owned,” corn-whiskey entrepreneur, Lulu in *Shucked.* Unlike so many transgender landmarks of the past, this “first” was not achieved alone. J. Harrison Ghee, of the gender-controversial *Some Like It Hot,* took home a trophy on the same night, becoming the second non-binary actor to win a Tony. This marked a historic night for transgender representation in the theatre: not just a “first,” but a pair. This moment points towards a future where the developing milestone of transgender inclusion in US theatre sees gender expansion uplifted, cared for, and lauded by cis and trans members of the community alike—on and, perhaps more vitally, off the stage.

In a post-ceremony *Browadwayworld.com* interview (2023, n.p.) with Editor-in-Chief Paul Wontorek, Newell spots Ghee beyond the camera, and calls them over to the couch: “Hey, baby! That’s my friend…come in, come here.” As Ghee sits, the duo giggle, admiring each other’s outfits, and compliments are exchanged with glee.

Wontorek interrupts the joy momentarily to move the interview forward, “You two superstars just walked into history tonight. Talk about…walking, doing this together…”

After thanking Ghee for being a friend, “my pal, and my confidante,” Newell gazes into their “auntie-sister’s” eyes, squeezes Ghee’s pink, gloved hand, and begins, “Imagine doing this alone…”

## **Further Reading**

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