

Theater Review: Morality of Gender Identity on Display in '[Trans]formation'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 19, 2016 - 9:31pm

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CHICAGO – The issue of gender identity, especially for those who are born with a vagueness as to what to call themselves between/beyond boy and girl, has come front and center in the U.S., both with the legalization of gay marriage and the callous repudiation of identity by trying to pass laws dismissing it (the North Carolina “bathroom” laws). The performance companies of The Living Canvas and Nothing Without a Company is currently staging “[Trans]formation,” which presents gender identity art by six performers, who perform most of the play in the nude.



Play Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The nude performance note is an important distinction at the outset, because it literally puts it all out there. The six actor/movement artists expose their “parts,” and asks the audience not to judge based on what they see, but the truths that lie inside those shells. Through dance numbers and monologues, the actors expose those inner worlds, with all of the confusion, anger and even medical procedures to help them find wholeness and identity in a society that demands labels. Despite some redundancies in rhythms, the passion is expressed in the piece.



Butterflies: The Cast of '[Trans]formation'

Photo credit: Pete Guither

Six performers (Gabriel Faith Howard, Ronen Kohn, Lily Jean, Chase Nuerge, Ben Polson and Kevin Sparrow) portray the neutral roles of Sometimes, Ezekiel, Kelly, Zhey, Diamond and Meteorologist. Kohn and Sparrow – along with the director Gaby Labotka, plus Darling Squire and Avi Roque – are the “co-devisers” of the presentation, which features monologues and tone dialogue based on works submitted from non-binary and trans individuals about the confusion, rejection and sometimes triumph of gender assignation. There is also movement and dance involved, as the performers float together in pastiche of lighting which decorate their bodies with different textures.

Although the overall piece felt unfinished and unformed, and the dance/movement a tad redundant, the power of the show is in its fiery cast, almost chomping at the bit to exclaim their points of view and experiences within the lives of gender confusion, and the stage art that is created with lighting on their skin (Chris Owens is the “Projection Designer”) The nudity and exposure is part of that fire, and is a reminder that no matter what body issues you might have, you’re never more beautiful in form than in the second and third decade of suppleness. It’s impossible to forget the nudity, but the words within the dialogue carry weight, and often supersedes the exposed skin.

The most powerful sequence in the 100 minute show is a monologue regarding a surgical procedure to remove female breasts due to an identity towards maleness. The actor is wrapped tight around their chest to de-emphasize their form, and the pain of making the decision and going through the complex surgery becomes agonizing, and the result isn’t as freeing as the patient initially thought (which ironically is often the same thing that occurs with patients of breast augmentation). Least effective is the general moments of expression regarding the broader feelings of being outside the definition of identity. It felt as if there was no distinction between the points of dialogue along that subject matter, especially towards the end of the play.



Another View of the Cast of '[Trans]formation'

Photo credit: Pete Guither

But this performance art seeks more, and invites the audience to participate in a couple of ways. First, there is an audience invitation to join the cast in the nude, with a bit of dance party at the end – this becomes a celebration of each individual’s form and gender identity. Secondly, a discussion takes place after each performance, so audience members can feed back about they just saw, and perhaps offer thoughts or expressions of understanding.

In essence, the performance does bring up the question, “who would you be, and how would you identify yourself, if nobody labeled you during your process of life? Maybe you’d be a “boy” or a “girl,” or maybe you’d fall somewhere along the spectrum in between. What is important for people who struggle with this identity spectrum is that we give them room to grow into what they are, for the purposes of health, love and empathy. “[Trans]formation,” as a presentation, seeks those three purposes.

NOTE: Did yours truly, the Über Critic, participate in the post-performance nude dance party? Let me just say, you only live once.

The Living Canvas and Nothing Without a Company Presents “[Trans]formation” at the Flat Iron building, 1529 North Milwaukee Avenue (Third Floor) in Chicago, at various days and times through December 17th, 2016. [Click here](#) [20] for more information, dates/times and to purchase tickets. Featuring Gabriel Faith Howard, Ronen Kohn, Lily Jean, Chase Nuerge, Ben Polson and Kevin Sparrow. Devised by Ronen Kohn, Kevin Sparrow, Gaby Labotka, Darling Squire and Avi Roque. Produced by Anna li-Epstein and Pete Guither. Directed by Gaby Labotka.

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