

Emma Mell

Mr. Greco

English III

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Not An Act

It's been a laborious week for Strawberry 'Bears' Layton. Each hour packed with tedious practice, it devours the little free time he has outside of school, but he doesn't mind much. As the week pinches to an anticipating close, and the curtains lift on a well worn stage, it all comes together. Lights shine down on the actors with a luminescent glow that seems to invigorate the mood inside the theater, and as the show reaches its end, and the cast takes their final bow, ready to take a break from the months of busy rehearsals, Bears is already thinking about his next show.

Bears' has worked endlessly to achieve highly in his area of interest. In his time doing musical theater, he has not only had to work on his capabilities as an actor, dancer, and singer, but must pay close attention to the way he presents himself in order to avoid being put into roles which undermine his identity. The competitive atmosphere already poses a challenge for people hoping to reap successful careers in musical theater, but for some, trying to break into an industry which was built for cis-gendered people can leave them feeling emotionally dejected or discouraged. At times, Bears struggles to navigate his passion for theater as a trans man in an environment that is often unwilling or unable to accommodate his identity.

In 2018, Bears decided to audition for a production of *American Idiot*. The musical piqued his interest, being a show based on the music from one of his favorite bands, Green Day. He identified as non-binary at the time, which he made known to the staff. When describing his experience in the production, Bears recounts how he was met with constant disrespect and mis-gendering from the crew. He describes an instance during the production where he was sent women's makeup criteria: "My audition sheet says non-binary...I've never spoken to her (the makeup artist) or whatever. So someone had to have told her I'm a girl and that's not OK" (Layton). While Bears recognizes there are areas which are out of the crew's control when casting trans actors, like vocal limitations or casting restrictions, the deliberate disregard for his identity, and the constant pressure he felt to present less feminine in order to be taken seriously ultimately left him with feelings of resentment for the company. This is an unfortunately common experience among trans actors in theater. In an article written by Olivia Clement in *Playbill*, Donnie Cianciotto, a trans actor, recounts his experience transitioning and the effect it had on his career and social relationships, "Even after years of taking testosterone, facial hair, and the use of a binder—which acts like a corset in flattening the chest—Donnie would be misgendered at least two or three times a week" (Clement). To some, misgendering may seem like an unjustified point of frustration for trans people, but when a trans person is constantly being referred to by the wrong name, or misgendered, it implies that the people around them do not see them for who they are. It's a demoralizing experience that can leave trans people feeling overlooked and invalidated. Bears would go on to remark his discomfort in seeing the company perform a segment in the San Jose Pride Parade: "It was really heartbreaking to see them be the face of LGBTQ youth for this city when I was treated so poorly by them" (Layton).

When asked about his relationship with theater, Bears would recall an interaction he had with his third grade teacher, who, hoping to give the dramatic eight-year-old a less disruptive outlet,

remarked, “can you please go do the play or something?” (Layton). This school production of *The Wizard Of Oz* would kickstart Bears’ passion for the art, and from then on, theater would become his main focus for the foreseeable future. While he’s continued to explore this passion, Bears also began to explore other facets of his life—particularly pertaining to his personal identity. He first came out as non-binary in sixth grade, and, despite generally being met with support from his family and peers, he also experienced unwelcome comments from confused classmates and older family members who doubted his identity. This conflict weakened Bears’ confidence, who, throughout his life, had always enjoyed expressing his feminine side. He reflected on the way he used to dress as a kid, often dressing up like a vampire and donning gothic styles. Even as a teenager, he enjoyed wearing makeup and exploring styles which were viewed as more traditionally feminine. Bears would describe himself as a fairly confident individual, but notes that this does not mean he does not experience dysphoria, “Many will think like, oh, you know, just you got to learn to love your body. All bodies are beautiful, you know, but it’s more than that. It’s like a psychological thing” (Layton). This road of uncertainty would, for a time, lead him to identify as a cis-gendered girl for the next two years. Many young trans people are exposed to unsafe environments and lack a consistent support system, which, in some cases, can pressure them into feeling the need to detransition. In fact, “82.5% of those who have detransitioned attribute their decision to at least one external factor such as pressure from family, non-affirming school environments, and increased vulnerability to violence” (“New Study Shows Discrimination”). This does not discredit someone’s identity as a trans person; rather, it emphasizes the importance of providing young people exploring their identity a foundation of support instead of making them feel unsafe in an already uncertain and emotionally vulnerable point in their life.

Bears would come out as non-binary again in April of 2021, and, as the pandemic hit, he would continue to question his identity. Only a few months later, he would come out as a trans man. “I think over quarantine and, you know, being at home all the time, it allowed me to step away from

how other people perceive me, and I was able to spend a lot more time thinking about what that meant to me and how I could still be a trans man and enjoy all of the same things that I have for my whole life” (Layton). Throughout this journey, his mom remained as a consistent beacon of support, both on and off stage. For the thirteen productions that Bears has taken part in, his mom has played an active role in the crew of over half of them. His mom has demonstrated unequivocal support for her son, and throughout his journey of self-discovery, she has accepted his identity without pushback. “My mom never questioned, you know, buying me binders or even when I talked to her about starting testosterone. She’s all very receptive, receptive to all of it” (Layton). According to Provincial Health Services, parents play an important role in allowing their child to socially transition and explore their identities. No matter the age, “If they are persistent, insistent, and consistent about their need to transition or be affirmed in their authentic gender, these are important signs to pay attention to” (“Social Affirmation & Transition”). Believing and listening to trans people, and allowing them to step out of the costume is not only instrumental but crucial for their well-being and happiness.

Going forward, Bears plans on continuing theater. To him, it’s never something he’s really had to think about, but simply an inevitable and ongoing force in his life. He hopes to see the industry change to better accommodate people like him, but also feels it’s already on its way to becoming more accepting to trans-identifying individuals. He feels confident in his skills as an actor and believes, generally, this has earned him respect in the field. Regarding what he hopes to see change, Bears remarks, “ I think there’s got to be some change in some copyright laws. I know that, for some scripts, it’s against their copyright to change the octave...if you have a trans person in that role and their voice doesn’t match what a person can sing, they’ll never be able to get, you know, these lead roles” (Layton). Bears also hopes to see a change in his general community. Mainly, he hopes that people will listen to the voices of trans people and put their pride aside when confronted about how their actions may be negatively affecting others instead of jumping on the defensive.

Bears recognizes that people do not always act with malicious intent, and he doesn't want to argue with people; he just wants them to listen. "Whether you're right or you're wrong, it allows for any perspective to be shared and also for a less hostile environment in general." (Layton).

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