Identity Awareness in Casting: When Trans Actors Play Roles Outside Their Gender Identity

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About the Author:

Matthias Bolon (he/they) is an animated bundle of unintentional humor and strange facts. Most of these quirks only became applicable after he graduated with his MA in Theatre & Performance Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder. He is currently swimming through an ocean of projects for his MFA in Shakespeare & Performance at Mary Baldwin University. His scholarly interests lie in intimacy choreography and consent-based practices, and trans and queer depictions in media. His interests as an actor lie in educational touring theatre and workshops for young audiences.

Beginnings

In the fall semester of 2022, I was cast as Lady Bracknell in the University of Colorado Boulder Theatre & Dance Department's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I was bemused by the choice since (1) my first principal role (as a female-presenting student actor) in the fall semester of 2020 was in a university production of *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* as the male-identifying dungeon master Chuck Biggs, after which (2) I socially and medically transitioned to a transgender (hereafter "trans") man just in time to take on the classic feminine role of Bracknell. The whimsical contrast between these two experiences let me explore gender identity in an unusual way both before and after my transition.

My purpose for sharing the notes from my experience playing Lady Bracknell is to record the practices that improved my experience as a trans masculine actor choosing to play a well-known feminine character. This role was challenging both for me as a trans person and for the production team tasked with producing a well-crafted performance with a non-traditional actor choice for a major supporting role. It was emphasized early in the process that we were all learning together how to incorporate a trans company member into an otherwise all cis-gender (hereafter "cis") cast, so there would undoubtedly be some discomfort and mistakes. Incorporating this philosophy established a shared understanding of experimentation and growth through discomfort. Nonetheless, we began to fumble forward together. The phrase "fumbling forward" was introduced to my Theatre department by dancer, associate professor, and associate dean for student success Erika Randall, as a concept to name mistakes when they happen in order to bring the team's focus to progress rather than nitpicking.

Taking on a female-presenting role can be frightening for trans masculine actors for a number of reasons, but one of the biggest is the potential of experiencing more frequent gender dysphoria during rehearsals and performances. Gender dysphoria is a feeling of emotional distress in a person whose gender identity in the internal (mental) sense is different from the biological sex they were assigned at birth based on external physical features. Gender euphoria, on the other hand, is a feeling of enjoyment or happiness that occurs when a person feels assured in their gender identity in all possible ways: physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and spiritually. In general, this feeling of euphoria is a background setting for cis persons where little conflict exists in their gender identities, but this euphoric state must be actively sought and sustained by trans individuals

faced with regular buffeting by differences in their personal experiences and societal expectations regarding gender identity.

Personally, I experience gender euphoria when being perceived as a man, and when people use masculine ("he/him" or "he/they" pronouns for me). Such acknowledgment by others confirms for me that they care and respect me as a human being, specifically in the way I express my sense of self. My joy in being able to explore my sense of gender identity carries through in my acting, alongside my interest in giving a committed performance as an actor. I am not opposed to performing as female-identifying or female-presenting characters *on stage*; the only reason I hesitate as an trans masculine actor is the possibility that the theatrical team I work with may—unintentionally—perceive *me* as a woman and use gendered pronouns ("she/her") that are no longer appropriate for who I am *offstage*. I have been conflicted in trying to balance my interest in performing as many stage roles as possible (including characters of various genders) while also being worried that performing as a female-identifying or femme-presenting character will activate the gender dysphoria that inherently comes with such roles.

I have observed considerable fear regarding how to approach working with trans student actors. The following sections record the practices that worked well for our company, and for me, when incorporating a single trans actor as part of an otherwise all-cis cast; these sections also outline the consent-based practices utilized to support our student production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I hope that my notes from our shared fumbling will offer guidance for trans student actors in other companies and for the teachers and faculty learning alongside them. My attempt here is to offer the tools that benefited my personal journey as a trans masculine actor. These consent-based tools provide practical recommendations on building a support system; optimizing communication; implementing apologies; using self-care cues; separating the actor and character (entrance and spring-boarding gestures, closure routines); creating individual and group closure practices; undertaking structured pre- and post-rehearsal check-ins; and giving compliments. Some of my suggestions may not work for every trans student, so ongoing communication will always be important as this process is fashioned for each individual on a case-by-case basis.

Practices that Supported the Process

Building a Support System

Being a trans individual can be considerably distressing as running into people who devalue trans people's lives is high, and these frequent experiences can affect a trans person's sense of self. So, having a support system in place is important to me for my comfort and success when acting in a production. A *support system* is a communication network of key individuals who offer practical advice or emotional comfort to me (and vice versa). Building a support system helps me clarify methods of communication with the production team and creates outlets for gently venting frustration. For me, this process begins with creating a list of people I can contact if necessary and making note of the kind of support I would hope to receive if I reached out (TABLE 1). My starting point for crafting the list was my prior experiences with members of the production team. For our staging of *Earnest*, a second resource available to me was a production packet prepared by the Theatre & Dance department and handed out during the first rehearsal. This folder contained production members' contact information, rehearsal dates, a chain of communication chart, and an apology system. If there was anyone absent from the list who I thought I might want to reach, I would request their contact information or I would find out who I could communicate with to reach them. Another possible resource in some venues might be an institution's policy handbook. Building a support system takes some time and thought but is well worth the effort in terms of enabling the success of the student actor as an individual and the production team as a whole. Faculty may feel that this work is not necessary, but many university students find themselves distanced, perhaps for the first time, from their familial support system and may have little or no experience in building their own in a new place. Trans students, along with first-generation students and others who have been historically marginalized, may need guidance with this, as they may not have been introduced to the institutional community areas. Helping students find their support network during their actor training prepares them to do this work for themselves in the field.

TABLE 1: MATTHIAS' SUPPORT COMMUNITIES FOR *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*
INSIDE THE PRODUCTION

Cast mates - peers who were involved in similar situations and responsibility for the play as me and who offered support and humor while we explored characters together.

Actor Deputy - I was the elected Deputy (advocate for persons encountering difficulties with someone else in the production) to start, but a little later in the production another actor was brought in when I was shifted to do intimacy choreography for the show (to provide another person for actors in case they had concerns about me and my choreographic suggestions). If I had concerns I could bring them to the new deputy or straight to stage management.

Stage Management - individual(s) who support and organize the production teams and day-to-day aspects of the process. They were a great secondary point of contact as they have connections with everyone.

Director/Assistant Director - oversees the production team, leads rehearsals, and manages the vision of the show. They hold space in rehearsal for check-ins with the entire cast to create open communication, and they determine the physical/emotional needs of the day's work.

Production Coordinator - handles the technical elements of the show, making sure that the show is safe, on time, and on budget. They were new to the department and made themselves readily available for concerns and questions, trying to establish community and understanding of the needs of the production.

Theatre & Dance Departmental Leaders (Associate Chair and Chair) - in university settings, these individuals set the departmental curriculum, interview new professors, manage faculty schedules, and settle faculty and student disputes. They were the production's final line of contact for conflict resolution before things had to be taken outside the production line of communication. This level did not have to be utilized for conflict between actors for this production.

OUTSIDE THE PRODUCTION
Office of Victim Assistance (OVA) - this University office offers trauma-focused services to mitigate the impact of traumatic events. I kept the phone number in my phone "just in case" but never had to use it. **Counseling and Psychiatric Services** - this office had options for in-person and virtual (informal and formal) consultations for students, up to at least six free sessions at my university. I did not feel the need to use this service during the production process. **Faculty** – I felt comfortable that certain faculty members who have acted as mentors during my thesis research and embodied exploration were available for advice. They offered space for me to logically walk through my acting process of handling a female-identifying role ~~again~~, as an additional option to the assistance of my director(s). **Friends/Roommates** - I am fortunate to have a large community of friends within the Theatre & Dance department who I felt comfortable telling about my excitement and struggle with the production process. Even the best productions have moments of difficulty, and having people outside the production as potential sounding boards helped keep me centered. My roommate also let me vent on occasion about all the things I was doing. These outlets allowed me to discuss how I was enjoying my semester but also feeling overwhelmed. They would often let me just talk, and then if I asked for advice they would offer little solutions to help smooth the immediate distress without infringing on my autonomy. **Family** - having relatives physically nearby who have known me for years and assisted me without judgment through my social transition and gender-affirming surgery as a trans masculine actor was and is wonderful, and it offered an additional space to express myself.

Table adapted from Matthias Bolon (2023), "Trans Identity On and Off Stage: A Guide for Supporting Trans Actors Playing Roles Outside Their Gender Identity." *ProQuest LLC* (Ann Arbor, MI).

Pre-Production (communication and apologies)

In a collaborative environment like theatre, communication is vital in establishing working relationships and approaches to managing conflict. The standard for communication style may be glimpsed in auditioning, which reveals the potential approach a director may assume during the process. When I was auditioning for my university production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I was asked after delivering my initial monologues if I would be open to being called back for a traditionally female-presenting role, like Lady Bracknell. It was a pleasant surprise to be asked about my interest and willingness to play a female-identifying character instead of being faced with an unspoken assumption made by the casting director about the kinds of roles that I would be open to playing. The inquiry and details offered (being called back for Bracknell) allowed me time for reflection before making an informed decision; this is *consent-based casting*, which is based on inquiring, offering context, and receiving confirmation about an actor's openness to a role with no assumptions or preconceptions. The directors being open to casting traditionally gendered roles in a new way was interesting, and their concern for the emotional well-being of the actors (trans or otherwise) affirmed that I had support in the theatrical learning environment. Being offered the role of Lady Bracknell let me continue my exploration of gender identity as one tool in an actor's repertoire while letting me tackle head on my concern that a production team might misgender me. I had wonderfully supportive directors, an attentive production team, and a communicative costume crew ready to fumble forward with me during that process.

During the first rehearsal, stage management established a common communication style for the people in the room by reading through the *method of apologies*. The Ouch/Oops system (Myers and Fisher 2015) given here permits the team to address any conflict rapidly so that the team can continue forward quickly in the rehearsal and performance space. This system allows for immediate acknowledgement that a mistake was made but permits the team to move on knowing that a more complete discussion will take place later. In the case of misgendering, one can say "Ouch" to note that harm was experienced, whether unintentional or intentional. The person who made the mistake then responds with "Oops," acknowledging that they made a mistake and are willing to address it later while not repeating it now. If misgendering is a consistent issue, then a more immediate discussion between the impacted party, offender, and an arbitrator (e.g., director, or stage manager or actor deputy) should be held about accountability and how growth can be supported. Ouch/Oops is also a great tool for harm of any kind when things are too busy in the

moment, as this method acknowledges the harm now but can be looked at when there is a moment of pause. Apologies are a system for recognizing a mistake and taking accountability in the moment, and they can be used for issues other than misgendering. In the production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Ouch/Oops was our system of apologizing and moving on in the moment, knowing that a full discussion could be held after rehearsal if needed. I never felt the need to use "Ouch" during our process.

TABLE 2: OUCH/OOPS IN ACTION

OUCH	OOPS
Misgendering: Person A: "When she steps toward me, do I lean back?" Person B: "Ouch."	Misgendering: Person A: "Oops. I'm sorry. When they step toward me, do I lean back?" Person B (might offer): "Thank you. Yeah, do they lean away?"
Comment on Appearance: Person A: "You look so cute in that dress. It fits your figure." Person B: "Ouch."	Comment on Appearance: Person A: "Oops. Apologies. I like the design of your costume, and think it works great for your character." Person B: "Thank you. I like the way it spins when my character twirls in Scene 3."
Overstepping Boundaries: Person A: *touches Person B's upper, front of chest area during a moment of dialogue. This contact was not discussed previously.* Person B: "Ouch."	Overstepping Boundaries: Person A: "Oops. Sorry." Person B: "We have not talked about physical contact for this moment. I would like to not incorporate touch until we discuss it later."

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Ahead of apologies, conversation is a proactive method to communicate needs when one wants to prevent or minimize potential mistakes. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, our costume designer asked to have a pre-rehearsal meeting, which included me, to discuss my comfort as a trans actor with various female-presenting clothing styles and how to fashion them to best support me as an actor. Lacking prior experience with a situation like this, the designer was unsure how to approach costuming for the female-identifying character when working with a trans masculine actor. Therefore, instead of assuming how I might feel about it, they reached out to hold an extended discussion. This exchange led to mutual understanding of each other's creative possibilities and limits. Importantly, the conversation was unprecedented for me since it was the first time anyone had asked me about my boundaries and needs as a trans masculine actor, which was beneficial to me in the moment as this was the first time I had been asked to play a female-identifying role. I was encouraged because my opinions were sought, heard, and merged with the concerns of the designer so that we could support the production and my lived experience while also fulfilling the creative vision for the show. I was able to express my fears about possible gender dysphoria if we used costumes too extreme (i.e., overwhelmingly feminine modifications) to modify how I looked, like emphasizing my bust or hips. Having the space early on to express concerns from both sides, we were able to find where there were boundaries and how to stay within them. The costume designer still chose the style and pattern of the costume to fit their artistic vision but took into account my needs. The discussion lessened the worries I had going into the production, letting me focus on my character work. The combination of distinct costume styles and verbal cues (e.g., use of gender-appropriate pronouns) permitted separation of Lady Bracknell on stage and Matthias in real life.

In Rehearsal (working together)

During the first rehearsal, the stage manager communicated the apology system (Ouch/Oops, as described above) to the cast and discussed the department's conflict resolution pathways (below) for the production. Three levels were established to handle conflict: (1) addressing the concern with the individual(s) involved, (2) engaging an impartial referee if necessary (stage manager/director/actor deputy), or (3) in extreme cases taking the dispute to the

departmental level (e.g., associate chair/production coordinator/department chair). Level One meant having a personal discussion between those involved in the conflict, if they are comfortable doing so. The intention of this level was to foster open communication and honesty among the members of the production company. Level Two may be used if an individual is not comfortable directly discussing the conflict with those involved. Instead, the distressed person might go to the stage manager, director, or the actor deputy to serve as a bridge to facilitate calm communication. Level Three comes in when an issue cannot be resolved through the other levels and would involve more senior leaders such as the departmental production coordinator, associate chair, or chair. If a concern is conveyed to one person in the Level Three area, it may be shared with other members as well to maintain open discourse for the department leadership. The company of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was informed of these options during the first rehearsal, and an actor deputy was elected by the entire cast later in the week. Intriguingly, I was chosen for the actor deputy role although I was joined later by an additional actor deputy when I was appointed to a second non-acting role as intimacy choreographer.

Self-care cues were another method of communication stage management shared during the first rehearsal and included in our actor packets. *Self-care cues* (Pace 2020) are a way to create a pause when an actor needs a moment (no matter the reason) to think or re-center themselves in the room. For *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the team chose the verbal word "button" as the verbal self-care cue. In speaking this word, the actor does not need to justify why they need a moment to take a break from the scene or choreography. Having been trained as student actors to say "Yes" and to not be a contentious ("hard to work with") actor can make saying "No" difficult in the moment. A cue word like "button" can be enough of a shift from a hard stop "No" to a soft stop "Give me a minute" to allow the actor to engage with the pause. The word does not necessarily need to be "button," it could be something silly like "banana" or magical like "unicorn." Pace (2020) says, in her book *Staging Sex*, that the key is that the cue word does not appear in the show's script, thereby preventing it from being confused with dialogue. An alternative self-care cue might be a distinct physical gesture such as a double tap (applied somewhere on one's own body, such as the thigh or shoulder) to non-verbally indicate a need for a pause. If a self-care cue is used in rehearsal, gently stop the process and offer the team a quick break. If the cue occurs during an intense or intimate scene, asking for clarity once the break has occurred ("Do we need a water break/to check in about boundaries?") can better inform the quality and length of the pause needed.

It may be that the actor just needs a moment to breathe and refocus, which might be accomplished on stage, or perhaps a short period of solitude off-stage for uninterrupted thought would be more appropriate; only the person giving the cue can tell. I never felt the need to use a self-care cue, as the 5- or 10-minute breaks we took fulfilled the majority of my needs.

A main way that I requested support from the production team in rehearsal was for a clear separation of me as a trans masculine actor versus my female-presenting character. S*eparation of actor and character* can help an actor (cis or trans) remove themselves from the emotionally taxing aspects of a character's personality and physicality at the end of the day; the goals being to prevent an actor from bringing the character with them after the session has ended and blocking those character-specific aspects from affecting the actor's real-world interactions. Villarreall (2021) builds on Nordic scholarship to examine this concept, which they call "actor-character bleed," further examining multiple tools intimacy specialists use to "mitigate" this bleeding of character into actor's lived reality (129). Power dynamics related to the director-actor relationship can come into play here (TABLE 3). There is an inherent power dynamic that the director (even a student director) has authority over the student actor in a variety of circumstances outside of the rehearsal space. The power imbalance is magnified further if faculty members are directing student productions. A first step in handling power dynamics is acknowledging that they exist and offering and affirming methods of support for students both inside and outside of the production team. The power dynamic between me and the director and assistant director was a bit different for this production. The director was a former teacher from my undergraduate days, though I no longer was in their classes as a graduate student. Therefore, I did not feel the same compulsion to say "Yes" to everything they asked for fear that my grades or future professional references might suffer. The assistant director was a fellow student in my Master's degree cohort, and we had a pre-established collaborative relationship. Both the director and assistant director demonstrated during casting that they were invested in asking questions and creating a space where I could consent to the process.

TABLE 3: SEPARATION OF ACTOR AND CHARACTER		
CONCERN	OFFER	EXAMPLE
Potential misgendering due to the actor performing a role they do not identify with or that uses different pronouns than they do off-stage	Holding space in the first rehearsal for everyone to share their name, role in the production, and pronouns. Training about apologies and Ouch/Oops.	"Hi, I'm [so and so], and I am playing [this character]. I am excited about it. I would just like to emphasize that I would like to use [these pronouns] for me even when talking about the character."
Being perceived as the gender of the character while in rehearsal and hearing the character's pronouns used for them in direction.	Having a conversation about using gender-neutral pronouns when giving directions and use of the character name in rehearsals when intentions are discussed.	"On that line, could [character name] cross stage left toward their sister?" "At this moment, what do you think your character feels? Why are they moved to this action?"
Being misgendered outside of rehearsal in costume fittings, make-up tests, cast meetings, etc.	If gender-neutral terms are being used to separate actor and character, have a discussion or include in the production report the use of gender-neutral pronouns for the character.	"[Actor] is using they/them pronouns when discussing [character] to help minimize dysphoria." "[Actor] is comfortable using the character's name when discussing costuming/plot context/intention of character, but not when being directed in rehearsal or off-stage."

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When introducing ourselves in the first rehearsal, I expressed my concern to my company about being misgendered and so requested that production members use my pronouns (he/they) whenever possible when talking to me during rehearsal and outside of the theater. My peers and the directing team took initiative and asked questions about how this request might be implemented when blocking and performing a scene. Together, we experimented first by using "she/her" pronouns when discussing Bracknell when working on scenes and when speaking directly to me as an actor. It became clear for me by the second rehearsal that I was still experiencing dysphoria. For example, when discussing any character's relationship to another person in the play, it was easiest to gesture at the actor, leading to moments like someone pointing at me and saying, "Your aunt [Lady Bracknell], when *she* says…" that would make me hyper-aware of my presence as a "woman" in that moment. In order to remedy the sense of dysphoria I experienced we shifted our language to support my needs. The director, assistant director, and myself had a discussion about experimenting with the use of "they/them" pronouns for Bracknell when directing. It was a subtle difference in wording, but it was enough that I felt affirmed when I was gestured to or referred to by the character's name when discussing context and relationships. When there was a slight slip-up after this new agreement on language, the director would adjust it casually in conversation without making a big deal out of it: "Your aunt, *she* is facing this way right now. And on this line *they* are glaring at you." The immediate adjustment limited such simple mistakes to that moment, and we did not have to hold discussions about it because there was always a quick correction that let us carry on. In this moment, "Ouch/Oops" (TABLE 2) could have been implemented, but it was not necessary as I did not feel the need to say "Ouch" because the self-correction followed immediately. During the actual dialogue of scenes when characters referred to Lady Bracknell with she/her pronouns, I mentally and emotionally felt fine, as I could distinguish the literal text-based separation. We also used *check-ins* at the end of rehearsals for the first two weeks to see if I felt the gender-neutral language and support I was receiving was good. Check-ins are a short five- or ten-minute conversations after rehearsal to see what is currently working or needs to be adjusted to make the process supportive for everyone involved. The intention is always to avoid harm. The need for regular check-ins subsequently ebbed away because I felt the process was going well; mistakes occurred less and less often, and they were always minor and addressed immediately.

Therefore, while faculty or directors may feel that this creates additional labor, this practice decreased the amount of time I needed for check-ins, making the process more efficient for me as an actor and the directing team.

In costume fittings, the use of "she/her" for Bracknell felt fine. The costume designer focused on the look of a costume and the way it would fit on stage, and the appearance of sleeves/patterns/style in relation to the character and "her" personality, instead of confusing me as a male-identifying trans actor with the character. In such sessions, the focus was directed toward how costuming and traditional feminine qualities and mannerisms felt for the character, rather than how they impacted me as a person. The designer also discussed with me the use of a wig and pantyhose, as an extra layer of separating the core me from the character. The goal was that whether I was in or out of costume, there was an extreme difference between who I saw in the mirror and my real self which allowed me to minimize my sense of gender dysphoria.

In Rehearsal (individual practices)

Two forms of separation that can actively be done in rehearsal are entrance and spring-boarding gestures. An *entrance gesture* is an action that mentally informs the actor that they are stepping into the character as they go on stage or begin working on a scene in rehearsal (Baker and Burke 2022). The action typically is something fast and simple like taking three slow breaths or spinning in a circle three times. When I would get ready to play Lady Bracknell in rehearsal, I would do three finger snaps by my ears as the auditory signal to help me focus. This separation can be assisted further by a *spring-boarding gesture*, an action that is done while in character as the actor is about to exit the stage; this is a practice that was introduced to me by Greg Geffrard and Emily Rollie during Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Best Practices" workshop in 2022. The gesture should be something that only occurs when they are getting ready to leave. In intense scenes, a spring-boarding gesture may be extended eye contact with another character, a moment that lets the actor recognize that they are leaving the stage. When performing as Bracknell I did not use a spring-boarding gesture when exiting the stage, but once I was done with a scene and had already stepped off stage I instead would do two finger snaps by my ears and bring my hands in front of my face in a silent clap before going to sit down.

The practice of stepping off stage with a spring-boarding gesture is a form of closure practice often used in intimacy choreography. A *closure practice* is a physical routine that indicates

the end of the day's work. Charlie Baker and Zoe Burke mention in the "Level 2 - Foundations of Intimacy" (2022) zoom workshop that closure practices can act as a mental signifier for releasing and closing out imaginative stories and reactions that the actor holds while working in a space. It is a form of separating the blocking (character's position on stage) and emotions of a character from the actor as a person, thus leaving the character in the rehearsal room. Closure practices can include the whole cast: standing in a circle with each person saying goodbye, doing a group clap together on an exhaled breath, etc. It can also be done alone after getting off stage: three snaps by the ears, a singular clap after an exhale, putting on an article of clothing and doing a meditative breath, etc. A closure practice that feels good for the actor is best as it lets them feel more like themselves; choices involving noise and sensation (a loud clap, snaps) or personal symbolism (putting on a ring or hat) can be adjusted for a group closure practice involving other cast members.

A practice I developed to help separate myself from Bracknell after rehearsal was creating a complex closure practice that involved clothing, goodbyes, and a moment of pause. Rehearsals were occurring during the colder fall months, so I usually wore my plaid jacket and beanie to keep myself warm while walking across campus. The jacket was a hand-me-down from my older brother, and the black beanie had my university's logo on it. When rehearsal ended, I would slowly put these items on, the jacket being a more traditionally masculine garment, and the beanie and logo reminding me I was returning to my real-world persona as a student after playing a female-identifying character. Taking my time and very intentionally processing the actions of putting these items back on was important for me to center my identity. When I was ready to go, I would make sure to say goodbye to at least three people. These could be fellow actors, individuals on the stage management team, or my director and assistant director. On a few occasions when saying goodbye to my directors, we had a moment to check in about the process and how I was feeling. This brief exchange was an additional closure practice for me as I was verbally informing other people of my emotional well-being while reminding myself that I was an actor performing a role. Finally, after exiting the building I would pause for a moment. It was usually fairly brisk outside, or sometimes snowing, which helped center my mind in the present moment: I was Matthias Bolon, a young man leaving rehearsal after performing as a woman and heading home to do homework. This combination of practices worked for me as I benefit from more extensive routines that involve multi-sensory elements, especially physical contact (clothes) and verbal cues (check-ins and goodbyes). Trans actors may already have a practice that works for them; however, when an actor

is lacking tools, a mentor can provide training in these practices as part of acting training for actors to use when needed. Other actors may need fewer or more closure practices to re-center themselves at the end of the day.

In Technical Rehearsal (working together)

During *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a brief training was held the evening before the technical ("tech") rehearsal to discuss *compliments* and costume and to introduce the actors to the stage area and meet the backstage crew. Tech is the time when the lighting components of the production are assembled as it will be projected to the audience; costumes, make-up, and props are added in soon after to finalize the director's vision. The conversation included a discussion of costume preservation (not eating in costumes or wearing a jacket over costumes to protect them), the names of the costume crew and who to approach with costume issues, and methods of complimenting a fellow actor that do not involve comments about their body. Compliments (TABLE 4) focused on design elements but may be extended to encompass portrayal of character to provide another option.

TABLE 4: COMPLIMENTS

BODY-FOCUSED	DESIGN-FOCUSED
"That skirt really works for you."	"That design makes sense for the character!"
"I mean this in the best way, that outfit makes you look super hot."	"The way that outfit comes together is super cool."
"I wish my figure looked as good as yours in a dress."	"The overall look of your costume is awesome."
"Does it feel weird to be in a dress again?"	"Does it feel right for the character? Do you think it changes your portrayal of them?"

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In Performance

Some additional adjustments were necessary to support my gender identity during the actual production dates. For instance, during *The Importance of Being Earnest*, our restrooms were mostly away from the audience, but every so often actors would run into people who got lost in the building. For the production, I was a trans actor who usually presents in a masculine fashion but in the moment was wearing a dress, make-up, wig, and pantyhose. Therefore, going to the men's restroom was a game of careful timing to avoid any run-ins with male-identifying audience members unacquainted with the real me beneath the character's costume.

My own clothing choices also helped me center myself. During *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I chose to wear gender-affirming undergarments (boxers) under my Lady Bracknell costume as the garment did not impact the costume designer's vision. The pantyhose worn by my character activated my gender dysphoria, but the singular cloth layer of the boxers was enough for me to focus and feel assured in my sense of self.

In terms of active practices to frame my performance, I employed physical gestures when entering and exiting the stage to separate my character from the real me. Whenever I was about to step on stage, I chose to do an entrance gesture of three quiet finger snaps by my ears. When I stepped off stage, my exiting gesture was to perform two finger snaps by the ears and a silent hand clap in front of my face. My closure practices involved changing out of my costume, finishing by taking off my pantyhose and putting on my pants. The final element was removing my make-up and putting on a specific "trans pride" necklace I wore every day. Once the necklace was on, I mentally and physically recognized myself again. It also helped in my process to say goodbye to the actors with whom I shared the dressing room and thank my costume crew for helping me keep all my pieces organized and clean. This "Thank you" practice is a welcome courtesy as a human being but also mentally let me be present and recognize that I was actively leaving a performance space.

After Closing (working together)

For *The Importance of Being Earnest*, my university held a post-show reflection, as is done for all our shows as a learning practice for both the students and faculty. I had a fairly positive experience overall during the production, which was primarily due to early conversations to set expectations, regular check-ins, and consistent communication I had with the directors and other company members. I was ultimately inspired to focus my thesis research on working successfully with trans actors because there was fear expressed by some faculty members about the unusual casting choice for the show (a trans man playing a well-known feminine character). The main concern was the potential legal ramifications if my incorporation into the production were mishandled along the way. Despite the concerns, in the end the process was a team effort that resulted in a good experience for me as a trans actor. I felt confident enough throughout the play to express my needs and communicate with the directors and crew. I realize that is not the case for everyone, especially for students currently exploring their gender identity.

After Closing (individual practices)

During the production, I kept a private digital journal to discuss the positives and negatives of my experience playing Lady Bracknell. I recorded my thoughts at the end of rehearsals or costume fittings. I knew the role was going to be a big shift in what I was used to as an actor. It was the first time I was being asked to play a female-identifying character after having completed my social and medical transition. Fortunately, I was working with directors interested in supporting me while also putting on a great show. Journaling my experience throughout the process helped me realize that the overall journey was positive; rather than fending off more serious harmful comments or actions, most of the negatives were mere moments in time when I was experiencing minor twists in clothes, make-up, and the act of presenting in a manner inconsistent with my gender identity. The overall experience of getting to portray a female-identifying character with who I identify now as an actor was fascinating.

Where I am Now

I had immense fun playing Lady Bracknell for the CU Theatre & Dance production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Knowing my directors were open to regularly discussing my needs as a trans actor, both before and during the production, offered me the space to breathe and focus

on my intention of character. I felt supported as a human being and could begin taking risks as an actor and truly playing as a student. In a practical sense, my experience was a crucial part of my research for a Master's degree but was also a crucial exploration of my abilities as an actor. In a personal sense, my experience showed me that there is space for conversations around the dual identities of actors as human beings and the parts they play.

Encountering these tools revealed to me that culturally competent collaboration between trans actors and the production team can be a "win–win" interaction that benefits everyone, and sometimes this comes in the form of collaborators asking questions and acknowledging when they have a lack of cultural competency. Examples of this success have been seen recently in the television industry with non-binary (e.g., Bella Ramsey) and trans (e.g., Elliot Page) actors. Both actors worked closely with the directors and writing teams to support their gender identities while filming the shows they were working on—*The Last of Us* in Ramsey's case and *Umbrella Academy* in Page's.

For example, actor Bella Ramsey mentioned in an interview with Jack King from GQ Magazine that they wore gender-affirming costuming (a chest binder) while filming *The Last of Us*. The binder acted as an unseen reminder of their gender identity while the actor portrayed a female-identifying character. Ramsey wore the binder "90 per cent" of the time while filming, and it enabled them to "focus better on set" (King 2023). Ramsey says that "[p]laying these more feminine characters is a chance to be something so opposite to myself, and it's really fun" (King 2023). Thus, the simple expedient of wearing an invisible gender-affirming garment under their costume was a substantial aid to Ramsey's process as they portrayed their character.

Similarly, actor Elliot Page came out as a trans man after season 2 of *Umbrella Academy* had wrapped. When approaching season 3, he and the showrunner, Steve Blackman, collaborated in advance regarding approaches to allow Page's character of Viktor to express a transition journey similar to Page's own path. Trans author Thomas McBee was also brought on board as a new member of the writing team. Blackman told McBee that having Viktor transition alongside Page was "right for the actor as well as the character because it deepened existing themes" within the show (Milton 2022). This shift was a challenge as the arc of season 3 had already been determined before this new sub-plot was added, but the team chose to "graft a transition story over the intricate plotting of an ensemble show" (Milton 2022). These thematic choices for the character's story were made collaboratively through discussions among Page, McBee, and Blackman regarding

experiences and feelings that Viktor would encounter during their transition, using Page's own insights gained during his journey. In the end, the fresh subplot added depth to the production without distracting from the season's other pre-established story arcs.

In conclusion, the tools I offer in this article are an approach to supporting trans actors and their colleagues in the artistic world. The examples of Ramsey and Page as well as my own experience described above represent some of the ways that actors have supported themselves and artistic companies have supported all production team members while successfully mounting film and theatrical productions. Engaging in conversations with trans actors during the artistic process may seem overwhelming at first, but it is crucial that we begin these discussions for the future ease of collaboration and artistic development. This article is not an ultimate solution to the all issues that trans actors may face in the performance industry, but it is a call for culturally competent collaboration presented in combination with some useful means for managing such collaborations.[1]

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