Out of the Ordinary

Out of the Ordinary:
Representations of LGBT Lives

Edited by

Ian Rivers and Richard Ward

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Out of the Ordinary: Representations of LGBT Lives,
Edited by Ian Rivers and Richard Ward

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3743-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3743-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for allowing us to reproduce the images in this book. We are indebted to Neil Montgomery and Besite Productions for allowing us to reproduce his image of Jo Clifford performing her stage play *(The Gospel According to) Jesus Queen of Heaven* for the front cover of this book, as well as Fig. 2-1 entitled *Jesus, Queen of Heaven*. We are also indebted to Antoine Rogers for allowing us to reproduce the posters for the Black Gay Men's Conference *"In This Our Lives"* (Fig. 4-1) and the reunion (Fig. 4-2). We are grateful for permission from Photoshot to reproduce one of the official portraits of Lord Justice Etherton (Fig. 5-2) and to Lord Justice Etherton himself for permission to reproduce a second portrait (Fig. 5-3). Special mention should be made of Paul Woodland who allowed us to reproduce pieces from his PhD work in chapter eight.

We are also grateful to Cambridge Scholar Publishing for agreeing to publish this unusual book, and to those reviewed the prospectus and final manuscript.

Finally, we would like to thank all of our authors for their hard work and commitment to this book and its completion.

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January, 2012

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: OUT OF THE ORDINARY

IAN RIVERS AND RICHARD WARD

Simply put, this book considers how the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans/transgender (hereafter LGBT) people are represented. Our aim is to interrogate the politics and practices of representation in relation to sexualities and gender identities. The book was conceived and produced against the backdrop of an evolving critique of the very act of representation, part of a broader backlash against the so-called "cultural turn" that took place across the humanities and social sciences at the end of the last century. Recent years have witnessed a growing unease with the idea of representation as a process that captures and fixes its subject, offering a freeze-frame depiction of that which is fluid, in time and space (Thrift, 2008). The critical gaze has turned from a focus upon the process and content of representation to question the utility of representation itself. How does it limit the way we understand and engage with the world and each other, what relationship does it have to lived experience and what lies beyond it? The chapters collected in this short volume make their own contribution to this emerging critique. We explore the limits and the silences, the damage and even violence of representation as it applies to the lives of LGBT people. For both critical realism and non-representational theory one focus for a critique of representation has been the body, in particular the sensuous and embodied aspects of social life that have for so long remained backstage in social analysis and theory. It is no coincidence then that bodily practices and embodied experience figure prominently here, especially towards the end of the book where the tensions between the sensuous and sexualised body and its formulaic and codified representation are identified and explored.

Nonetheless, this book also concerns itself with an array representational practices and what these mean for LGBT lives. Many of the following chapters occupy a space within the terrain of representation rather than

seeking to explore the world beyond it. In this respect the book makes a contribution to a historical thread that runs throughout LGBT and queer studies, which treats representation as one of the key battlefields for the citizenship and rights of sexual and gender minorities and the authority to define and accord status to non-normative identities. As the queer sociologist Ken Plummer (2001) once famously pointed out, until the 1970's if any stories were to be told of homosexuality it was usually by doctors or moralists and almost always couched in the most negative terms. At one time cast as criminal, immoral and pathological, the struggle for liberation (gay and otherwise) has centred upon claiming the right to represent ourselves. Hence, from the earliest days of the liberation movement much of the published work and other outputs from LGBT groups and individuals have been about telling the stories of our lives (Plummer 1992; Porter & Weeks, 1997). As many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, that battle continues today, in many domains of everyday living it is by no means certain that LGBT people are granted the freedom to define ourselves or to govern how representations of us circulate and are deployed.

A particular focus for this book is upon the everyday act of representation. The majority of chapters contained herein are based upon papers given as part of a seminar series on "LGBT Lives" that took place between 2008-2010, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The seminars attracted a diverse mix of academics, activists, community representatives and other allies, providing a forum for debate across disciplines, sectors, professions, regions and cultures. What these seminars demonstrated was that the politics and practices of representation imbue many different domains of our everyday social experience. Whether it be the arts, public services, popular culture or large state institutions such as medicine or the judiciary, the representation of sexuality and gender identity is an integral and constitutive activity in all these contexts. On this basis, we found that we had a shared and common interest despite our varied backgrounds and differing specialisms. The question of how sexuality and gender identity is taken up and re-presented according to the different cultures, discourses, traditions and interests of the various environments in which we worked became a central and over-arching theme to the entire seminar series. Recognising this led to the production of this book in the knowledge that what was common ground for all those who attended the LGBT Lives seminars was undoubtedly be shared by many others with an interest in how the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people are represented.

Out of the Ordinary

Throughout the seminar series, we were struck by how different some peoples' lives had been, not only from our own as out gay researchers and academics, but also from those they passed on the street daily. Academia offers privileges and a degree of safety for its members that can be found in few other walks of life. It was a salutary lesson for us to hear of the challenges that faced other LGBT people who perhaps did not have the advantages to which we had become accustomed, and the resources that we had come to expect within an academic community, for example LGBT literature. As authors and editors we have spent much of our professional lives surrounded by literature that opens the mind to alternative discourses and viewpoints that perhaps we too easily forget do not exist outside the walls of a university or college. For many LGBT people access to information remains a daily challenge which, as Jacq Goldthorp illustrates in her excellent chapter (Chapter Three), extends to the public library – a universal service that is, for many, not at all universal.

The title of this book is, thus, recognition that some of the experiences and perspectives described in the following pages are not features of our daily existence, and are not features of the daily existence of many people - LGBT and heterosexual. How many of us have, for example, interrogated the heterosexism that underlies medical education? How many of us have considered the implications of a founder of a faith being transgender, of not representing the majority, of welcoming all without the biased protectionism inherent within of the proclamations of our religious leaders today? Indeed, how many of us presume that those who sit in judgement of us within the courts are not only of the establishment, maintaining the *status quo*, but are also people who would not understand the lived experiences of LGBT people? There is much to be learned from those who can facilitate changing the establishment from within as well as those who fight to change it from without.

According to the more normative representations of social life, we are used to binaries: male and female; heterosexual and homosexual; right and wrong; good and evil. Yet, not all people live in a binary world, and we are not all born into one sex or another. For some there is a need to transition, for others there is a desire to stand outside the confines society has imposed upon us in terms of gender. Many of the academic writings that exist on issues of transgender and cisgenderism have a distinctly medical feel to them, even those writings that are autobiographical or biographical. Consultations, psychiatric evaluations, hormone therapies

and surgeries are often part of the discourse of transgender lives, and yet there is so much more to know and understand of trans experiences. Are we truly reliant upon the presence or absence of a particular genital formation to live a rich and fulfilled life today? The Native Americans did not think so; they saw gender and, ultimately, sexual orientation as fluid and thus not necessarily bound to the gender of a human being at birth (Williams, 1992).

LGBT lives, just like heterosexual lives, are defined by sexual behaviour. There is an inherent assumption in the world in which we live that heterosexuality is good and pure and that homosexuality represents something other than goodness and purity. Similarly, historically, society has looked upon those who have sex in public places with a degree of repugnance. Sex in public places, such as public lavatories or municipal parks, has often been associated with homosexuality, but that is not the case today. Indeed, public sex, as part of a heterosexual repertoire of sexual practices seems to be thriving with "dogging" becoming an increasingly visible feature of the sexual landscape for heterosexual individuals and couples.. Thus, it may be timely to think about how we all describe ourselves, and not assume that terms such as "lesbian", "gay", "bisexual" or "heterosexual" have any currency beyond identifying us as a category for audit and census purposes.

How we are viewed by others, and indeed how we are viewed by members of our own communities, sometimes with their own belief systems and cultural mores, is at the heart of much of the discrimination that goes on both in the UK and elsewhere. For some young LGBT people being a member of a particular ethnic or cultural group brings with it its own trials and tribulations, limitations and expectations. For many Black and minority ethnic (BME) people who are LGB or T, there are few formal or sanctioned opportunities to meet others and share experiences. Being "out" to others can mean isolation from family, friends, community and religion for all LGBT people but, as Antoine Rogers demonstrates there are particular nuances attached when race and sexuality intersect. As BME LGBT people grow older there may be even fewer opportunities to interact with people from similar cultural backgrounds except in venues that exist for all members of the LGBT population, which are marked by ethnocentrism and an orientation to youth. It is perhaps surprising for many of us to learn that there has only been one Black gay men's conference ever in the city of London, held in 1987. In the fourth chapter of this book, Antoine talks about his research following a reunion of attendees from that first and only conference. He illustrates how this coming together of Black gay men in London in 1987 was an incredibly

positive experience but one that ultimately was not sustained. The issues brought forward were not universal, nor were they similarly prioritised by delegates. Ultimately, acknowledging that diversity exists within as well as between groups means that the struggles LGBT people face are not uniform and the intersectionality of race, culture and sexual orientation brings to the table a myriad of issues that have perhaps yet to be understood fully.

Representations of LGBT Lives

A distinctive feature of this book is undoubtedly the different voices that are heard throughout; a mix of academic and advocate, activist and ally. Each author has a distinct style that underpins her or his discipline or interest. This book has four key themes: performance and representation; invisibility; the public/legal face of sexuality; and sex and the body in relief.

In the first section, which focuses on performance, Jo Clifford discusses her experiences of staging her play, *(The Gospel According to) Jesus, Queen of Heaven* at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow in 2009. Portraying Jesus as a trans woman, Jo describes how her play was both lauded and condemned – the latter often by those who had not seen a performance. Picketed by evangelical groups, Jo describes the way in which challenges to orthodox views of Christ are seen as blasphemous or sacrilegious and how such groups failed to understand the message contained within the play – that of understanding the world of trans people. She interweaves her discussion of the play with short extracts from the text, and discusses her motivations behind her solo performances. Ultimately, Jo argues that the misunderstandings arising from her play are those that are mirrored in society's lack of understanding about the experiences of transgender people. This play, which some described as uplifting, provides a creative insight into the world of transgender people and the challenges they encounter daily.

In the following section, which focuses on invisibility, Jacq Goldthorp and Antoine Rogers focus on two very different issues, but issues that ultimately question how representative local authority services and LGBT organisations are of those of us living in the UK.

In her chapter, Jacq Goldthorp focuses on the relationship between the public library service in Scotland and the provision of books for leisure reading that have a LGBT focus and/or strong LGBT characters. She provides a brief summary of the current situation in public libraries in terms of the promotion and provision of LGBT fiction; the challenges

public libraries face when attempting to make their services more inclusive of LGBT people; and she discusses examples of good practice being developed elsewhere in the UK. Jacq also discusses some of the issues surrounding fiction marketed as gay and lesbian and asks questions such as, why do we need LGBT fiction? She explores why many authors who identify as LGBT are choosing not to have their novels characterised as such but as broad genre fiction. Additionally, she considers the psychological advantages of having access to fiction that describes LGBT lives and experiences. Jacq questions whether the apparent failure to address this need by public libraries is grounded in social exclusion and considers the potential gains to authors, publishers and book-sellers if public libraries stocked LGBT fiction. Finally, she argues that LGBT fiction is an important community resource that reflects the lives, experiences and fantasy landscape of LGBT readers.

In the fourth chapter, Antoine Rogers explores the intersection of race, sexuality and national identity. The year 2007 marked several important anniversaries including the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and the 40th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act which decriminalized homosexuality and homosexual acts. Another important, less well known anniversary was the 20th anniversary of *In This Our Lives* - the first and only Black Gay Men's Conference to take place in London. Unlike the other anniversaries identified in this chapter, little physical evidence remains of *In This Our Lives.* This reality, Antoine argues, demonstrates the need to document whatever physical evidence could be found to preserve the memories of those who attended the original conference. Those who attended the 1987 conference were invited to London South Bank University (LSBU) for an event to mark the anniversary. In the three years that followed the 2007 reunion LSBU hosted additional events including film nights and panel discussions. Collectively these activities brought together a range of perspectives to expand our knowledge of the complex intersections of race, sexuality and identity in a British context. Primarily this chapter provides an account of themes that emerged from the reunion. Additionally in follow up interviews with black gay men, Antoine explores themes from the reunion as well as additional concepts and ideas that were not discussed in 1987. He identifies those factors which significantly impacted on the men's racial and sexual identity. He also interviewed younger black gay men who, like Antoine, were too young to have known about or been able to attend the conference in 1987. He seeks to understand how younger black gay men view and define their racial and sexual identity today and he provides readers with an opportunity

to fill a significant gap in their knowledge of black male sexuality both historically and in a contemporary context.

In the following section, Les Moran and Chris Ashford explore the public face of sex and sexuality from the perspective of those who practise the law and those who are perceived to transgress it. Les Moran describes how, during the course of undertaking empirical research on the sexual diversity of the judiciary, key stakeholders reported that sexual orientation was different from other strands of diversity; sexuality had nothing to do with judicial office. From this point of departure the chapter explores how, if at all, sexuality is represented as a virtue of judicial office. It pursues this objective by way of an analysis of judicial images. As art history scholars have noted images of institutional figures such as the judiciary are always images of the virtues and values of the institution. His chapter explores how heteronormativity influences and informs the judicial image. It explores a number of images of gay men who hold judicial office and reflects on the challenge and the possibility of "gay" being represented as a virtue of the institution of judicial authority.

By way of contrast, Chris Ashford explores the visual presentation of public sex, an issue that occupied legislators for a number of years, through pornography and considers how the representation of law and sexuality as cultural phenomena are documented. He discusses the pivotal role of the text *Tearoom Trade* (Humphreys, 2005) in exploring the operation of public sex – in this case, within the confines of the public lavatory. Chris argues that, as a textual document, *Tearoom Trade* defined the activities that, today, can be found commonly depicted on the Internet. He further argues that it is the portrayal of public sex in films and television programmes - and more recently stage plays and pornography - that present public sex, not as illegal, but as documented "truth" and as "erotic play". Chris suggests that pornography in particular has sought to record and visually present the public sex environment. In the context of the "dogging" phenomenon, whereby parties (predominantly heterosexual) gather in isolated locations, typically rural rest areas for sexual play, this is particularly acute. In the absence of academic literature recording the behaviour, he suggests that it is the role of pornography to define such behaviour and provide a historical visual record. He also argues that activities such as gay men "cruising" challenges a politically, and legally dominant discourse of assimilation and equality, portraying such men as outsiders and sexually deviant.

In the next two chapters of this book Gavriel Ansara and Paul Woodland explore the body in relief and challenge those representations and definitions that underpin medical education and practice. In the

seventh chapter, Gavriel Ansara focuses on *cisgenderism* which is increasingly defined by activists as a form of discrimination against those whose self-designated gender differs from a prior or current gender assignment. Focusing on the practical relevance of cisgenderism social and care settings from an informal evidence-based perspective, Gavriel uses data from a quantitative content analysis of empirical data, conversations and correspondence to explore how elements of ethnocentrism, ableism, author/itarianism, body normativity and paternalism pervade, and how health (and particularly psychological) practitioners construct their service roles (e.g., "expert", "provider"), the roles of people engaging with services (e.g., "patient", "service user") and the ethical principle of autonomy. Potential strategies for challenging cisgenderism in service settings are discussed which include the scrutiny of the predominant roles of "service user" and "service provider", exploring the practical dimension of those roles that promotes mutual service engagement. This chapter concludes by presenting a new model of *collaborative service engagement* as an effective strategy for decreasing cisgenderism in social and care services. Ultimately, the aim of Gavriel's chapter is to improve health professionals' comfort and proficiency when working with people whose bodies do not fit with normative assumptions about sexual bodies, including people who may be labelled as "transgender", "intersex" and/or "disabled".

In chapter eight, Paul Woodland introduces art practice as a way of exploring the medical model of the sexed body from a queer theoretical perspective. He argues that the medical model of the sexed body is problematic yet influential despite the existence of critiques particularly in terms of notions of normality and abnormality. He argues that gender and sexuality theorists rarely distinguish between sites of production of knowledge and sites of dissemination, yet, it is here myths are perpetuated through the medical classroom where scientific "facts" and social preconceptions intermingle. Using various works of art he has created, he explores the images and meanings behind each work using a queer theory lens, explaining each piece of work's theoretical background and suggesting ideas about the intention behind each piece. One piece is entitled *Becoming Doctor* and explores the power of knowledge; the creation of the medical cabal with the "Doctor" as archetype. Here Woodland argues that the eponymous lab coat represents a symbol of distance and objectivity wherein subjectivity is denied. A second piece is entitled *Attempts at Holism* where he explores anatomical discourses that idealise the generic athletic, white, male body. By way of contrast he argues that the female body is often reduced to biologically deterministic

elements: old, young, and intersex and is innately pathological in description. He suggests that medical students must reconcile idealisation with the need to be non-judgemental. In his piece *Baby Machines* he argues that scientific physiology is based on reproductive teleology. Non-reproductive bodies are pathologised, sexual pleasure is minimised or even denied, perhaps indicating a fear of sexuality. In *Maquette for Pillars of Society*, Paul explores the authentication of the medical model of the sexed body based on the notion of authority: it is grounded in abstraction, containment and mediated dissemination through text. Finally, a piece called *Battlefields* is a reminder that subjectivity is inescapable, and it is a call for greater acknowledgement of the diversity of real bodies. To conclude, Paul considers the pros and cons of art practice as a new approach to disseminating critiques of the medical model, and he poses the question, does it work?

In the final chapter of this book, we summarise the key messages from this book and consider ways in which the lived experiences of LGBT people can be understood and celebrated not only through academic research but a whole array of everyday representational practices.

The Book

Ultimately, *Out of the Ordinary: Representations of LGBT Lives* represents a collection of novel essays that we hope provides a starting point for discussions about how we as a society view LGBTs and also how we are programmed to only see as abnormal or challenging that which is different or deviates from a socially constructed norm of life for human beings. The images the authors use to illustrate the central themes within their arguments are telling and, as we hope, provide a means of altering the lens through which we see our world and those who live and work around us.

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CHAPTER TWO

(THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO) JESUS QUEEN OF HEAVEN: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF A CONTROVERSIAL PLAY

JO CLIFFORD

Introduction

When I produced and performed my play *(The Gospel According To) Jesus Queen of Heaven* in the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, in November 2009 I did not seriously anticipate any controversy (Figs. 2-1 & 2-2). In retrospect, this was remarkably naive. But it arose from my general artistic practice: to recognise the needs of the story as paramount. In other words, the story has to be told. It has to be told with clarity, skill and strength. The audience only comes into consideration because it is important the story is communicated clearly and in a way that at least permits the possibility of pleasure. As to what the audience understands, or even whether the audience really does enjoy and understand: that, ultimately, is not my responsibility or concern. My job is to tell the story. The right to judge belongs to the audience.

As for this particular play, it was born from another earlier work, my *God's New Frock.* Both plays arose from the need to understand. Not so much understand my condition as a transsexual as understand the prejudice that surrounds it. Looking at the bible seemed to be one place to start. This was in 2002, soon after I had come out to my friends, not as transgendered, but as "bigendered", which is how I understood myself then[1].

By that stage I had been working as a professional playwright for just over twenty years, had written about sixty plays, and had become a little weary of the unending stream of commissions[2]. I wanted to stop simply

responding to other people's ideas: I wanted to develop some of my own. In particular, I think, I wanted to make some kind of public statement of my gender non-conformity.

Fig. 2-1 Jesus Queen of Heaven

Fig. 2-2 Jo Clifford Performing

In general, transsexuals are encouraged to become invisible in our culture[3]. In part this is due to the extraordinary deep hostility we tend to arouse and the discrimination from which we suffer. I have often had the experience of being shouted at, abused, and threatened with violence on the street when it has been noted that I am biologically male. This is a common experience. In many countries the physical danger is far more acute and leads to torture and death[4].

Visibility is a Form of Resistance.

My own childhood was marred by an utter lack of positive role models. People such as me were either portrayed as ridiculous - dames in the English pantomime tradition - or evil (Ginibre, 2005). It seemed important to me to try to investigate the origin of these distressingly negative stereotypes and see if it was possible to replace or at least subvert them. I was reading a great deal about the rise of patriarchal culture and the accompanying suppression of matriarchal culture. There seemed to be a connection here with the establishment of the Jahwist religion -the worship of God the Father - and the suppression of the worship of the Mother Goddess in the ancient Middle-East. It seemed likely, then, that this process is reflected in the Old Testament and in the particularly savage prohibitions against people like me that the Old Testament

allegedly contains (see Eisler, 1987; Sjoo & Mor, 1987). The connection might not be strong enough for academic purposes, but was certainly strong enough for artistic ones.

I began to see a parallel with God's suppression of His Female Self and the hugely painful suppression of my female self that occurred in my adolescence. This gave rise to the first play *God's New Frock*, which I finally performed in the Tron Theatre Glasgow and the Traverse Theatre Edinburgh in 2003.The play contained lines and ideas that I feared many people would find disturbing or even blasphemous:

> God is like a middle aged man with a wardrobe full of frocks. A closet he keeps firmly locked because he dare not open the door (Clifford, 2008, p. 189).

Later the play briefly surveys the human damage caused by its patriarchal attitudes to sex and gender and concludes:

> All this shocking damage is only a tiny fraction of the shame and anger and guilt that's been caused by the infinite pornographer going under the name of God. For this book, this so-called holy book, is pornography. Prima facie. Pornography (Clifford, 2008, p. 196).

No-one, however, seemed concerned about this at all. Indeed, the play enjoyed moderate success. The performances sold out, a short film version followed, and the script was finally published, first by the Scottish literary magazine *Chapman* and then finally in a volume of queer liberation theology published (posthumously) by Marcela Althaus-Reid.

In the meantime a hectic series of commissions followed: a new translation and adaptation of *Celestina* for the Edinburgh International Festival (Clifford, 2004) and then *Faust Parts One and Two* (Clifford, 2006) for the Royal Lyceum Theatre. Professional success was accompanied by personal tragedy. In August 2004, my wife and life-long partner Sue Innes was diagnosed as suffering from a brain tumour, and she died in early March of the following year[5]. It became clear in the months following her death that I could no longer bear to continue living as a man; but then my transition from male to female was interrupted by a serious, and near fatal, heart condition in June 2006. In the midst of all this *God's New Frock* was forgotten about and would probably have remained on the shelf for ever without the intervention of the Playwrights' Studio Scotland who happened to send the script to a theatre company in Florence, Teatro della Limonaia[6], who had the play translated into Italian (Clifford, 2007) and then performed it in 2008. I was able to see for myself the extraordinary

success of the play, which subsequently went on a national tour. Watching the performance one night in the company's beautiful theatre in the outskirts of Florence inspired me to write a sequel. *God's New Frock* was about the God of the Old Testament, and so it seemed logical for its sequel to be about the God of the New.

At first I was reluctant to engage directly with the figure of Jesus. My male name had been “John”; and I had always been attracted to the fact that traditionally he was the only Apostle portrayed without a beard. And that he was "the disciple whom Jesus loved"[7]. Perhaps he was Jesus' transsexual lover. Perhaps I might portray him, or perhaps I might portray Mary Magdalene as a transsexual prostitute.

My plays have their origins deep in the subconscious mind, which means I can never really account for the fact that some idea seems to take while others do not. The play about the transsexual prostitute re-surfaced as *An Apple a Day* [8] - with the sacred dimension transposed to the biblical *Song of Songs*. The idea of John as Jesus' transsexual lover simply disappeared. I persuaded the Teatro della Limonaia to pay for me to spend a month in Florence that summer, which is when I wrote the first draft of the play; that was when it became clear that the main character needed to be Jesus.

The idea of Jesus as a transsexual woman provokes strong reactions, as exemplified from these (frequently mis-spelled and not altogether grammatical) comments from the play's Facebook page:

> this is heresy and this is satanism these man are dead souls brainwashed
>
> this is pure satanism to led astray the children of GOD
>
> Don't believe this on your life never believe this this is an abomination and a lie this is forgery and many of men shall perish for these and likewise lies of man
>
> This is the gospel according to the self-styled Twister Worp.

A certain Rob Essensa is equally dismissive:

> WTF?? have you all lost your noodle? seriously, jesus a transexual? I got nothing against transexuals but this is just insulting!!![9]

Clearly the transphobic find it difficult to reconcile their prejudices with the association between Jesus (the most sacred and holy and elevated

figure our culture has produced) and a transsexual woman (possibly the most despised).

In fact, of course, portraying Jesus as a transsexual is not nearly as shocking or offensive or outrageous as it may at first appear to be. Indeed, it belongs very firmly to mainstream Christian tradition. We are taught that Jesus, being the Son of God, took on human form and so engaged fully with human experience:

> Jesus completely lives the human experience as we do, and by doing so, frees us from the clutches of sin.[10]

This must logically include my experience as a transsexual woman. Furthermore, we are taught that Jesus constantly associated with the downtrodden and the excluded members of his society. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia:

> The moral weaknesses of man move His heart still more effectively; the woman at Jacob's well, Mathew the publican, Mary Magdalen the public sinner, Zacheus the unjust administrator, are only a few instances of sinners who received encouragement from the lips of Jesus. He is ready with forgiveness for all; the parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates His love for the sinner. In His work of teaching He is at the service of the poorest outcast of Galilee as well as of the theological celebrities of Jerusalem.[11]

Serious study of bible texts indicates that its condemnation of homosexuality is both problematic and exaggerated (Boswell, 1994) and there is evidence that even the apparently unequivocal condemnation of cross-dressing in Deuteronomy (22:5) can be read and understood in more nuanced and subtle ways and in particular as a commandment to respect whatever gender we truly and deeply consider ourselves to belong to[12]. Indeed, one need only scratch the surface of the Bible to find many references to gender non-conforming individuals. These are normally translated by the word “eunuch” and are often presented in approving contexts. In the New Testament, also, far from condemning gender non-conformity, we find Jesus approving of it in the Gospel of Matthew; and in *Acts* we find Philip, one of the first apostles, baptising a eunuch who had requested it without hesitation or doubt (Reay, 2009).

It is worth remembering also the tradition of *Imitatio Christi*, or imitation of Christ, which encourages the devout to use the figure of Jesus as a model for their daily life. As the Catholic Encyclopedia puts it, “Its purpose is to instruct the soul in Christian perfection with Christ as the Divine Model”.[13]

One has to assume that women are not counselled to become men in order to do so. Similarly, those of us who are transsexuals are not called upon to betray or change our gender identity.

I would not claim that any of this was present in my conscious mind when I was actually writing the script. My concern was, as ever, to connect with the character I was creating, identify with her as fully and as passionately as possible, and listen to what she had to say. An approach to Steven Thomson, the director of Glasgay!, resulted in a grant of £2000, which enabled the production to go ahead.

I approached the photographer and film-maker Neil Montgomery (besite-productions.com) to create a publicity image. It was difficult to conceive an appropriate image; eventually, at my suggestion, I borrowed a white skirt and top from a friend and posed in my basement garage. Stigmata and a halo were photoshopped in later and a publicity image was born in time for the launch of the Glasgay! programme.

I was away in France at the time on a Robert Louis Stevenson fellowship to write a book of the heart based on my experience of cardiac surgery and so largely missed the furore that followed. This furore was partly fuelled by it coinciding with an exhibition of transgender related themes at the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art[14] which included a Bible. Visitors to the exhibition who felt themselves to have been marginalised from spiritual life because of their sexuality or gender were encouraged to write in the margins of the bible. The many moving testimonies that resulted were ignored, and the few disrespectful remarks were highlighted in a vicious homophobic and transphobic press campaign. This was typified by an article in the Times:

> GALLERY'S INVITATION TO DEFACE THE BIBLE BRINGS OBSCENE RESPONSE
>
> A publicly funded exhibition is encouraging people to deface the Bible in the name of art — and visitors have responded with abuse and obscenity. [15]

The existence of my play added to the outrage. An article in *Catholic Truth* is typical:

> Glasgow: Protest Against Blasphemous Play …
>
> N O T I C E . . .
> The Holy Family Apostolate have organised a prayer-protest against a blasphemous play entitled 'Jesus Queen of Heaven' which depicts Jesus as a transexual woman. Venue is the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, starting Tuesday 3rd November.

> Volunteers are meeting outside the theatre to pray a Rosary of Reparation from 7-8pm. Please do your best to join this protest against this calculated insult to Our Lord. If you can't make it, please remember us in our prayers during the day.
>
> Note: one of our readers distributed notices to encourage people to attend this protest, outside St Aloysius, Jesuit Church in Glasgow today, 2nd November – until one of the passkeepers told him that a priest had asked him to stop. Despite the fact that the notice consisted of the contents of an advertisement published in the *Scottish Catholic Observer* these past few weeks, still our reader had to move to the pavement. The passkeeper remained silent when asked if he'd read the notice and silent when asked for the name of the priest.
>
> So, if you can attend, please do. If you can't, pray the rosary…"[16]

There is a hint there of some disagreement within the Catholic Church as to the appropriate response, and in fact several Catholics wrote to me afterwards to express their regret at the involvement of their church. The play briefly united Roman Catholics with Evangelical Baptists, who stood outside holding banners that said:

> JESUS KING OF KINGS NOT QUEEN OF HEAVEN
> JESUS WAS NO TRANSEXUAL
> *and*
> GOD SAYS: MY SON IS NOT A PERVERT.[17]

Meanwhile, the "pervert" in question had evaded protesters gathered at the front of the theatre by entering the stage door at the back, and was sitting in her dressing room with the usual cards and flowers listening with increasing incredulity to the rumours allegedly flying around the protesters gathered outside. I was going to be stripped naked by leather clad lesbians who would tear the bible to pieces and stuff it up my anus. I was going to tear down a crucifix and urinate on it. And so on.

Needless to say, the truth of the matter was far less exciting. I performed in front of a giant mirror that reflected the audience, in the same way as the Bible very clearly acts as a mirror for its readers' values and prejudices. Beside me was a percussionist. The audience were restricted to thirty and placed on one side of a u-shaped table so that the playing area represented the last supper. I allowed myself some un-biblical latitude in my description of Jesus' disciples:

And that's how it started, this disciple business,
And I don't know why they started saying there were only twelve,
I mean there were sometimes less, but mostly more,
Or why they said they were only men.
Yes there was Matthew and Mark and Luke and John,
And the taxi driver whose name was Ethel,
and there were men and there were women, , and sometimes both at once, and sometime neither and they confused people, and I loved that in them most of all.
The hijra and the kathoey and the fa'faune and the muxe and and the travesti and the two spirit people from North America and the shamans from Siberia and the men women priests from Africa
because verily I say unto you because it is undoubtedly true
that very culture in every place and time has known of us, and celebrated us mostly,
except this one, which is in the minority.
And I don't understand why now in those few places on this tormented earth which permit us to flaunt our dear and beautiful selves we should have to live off the streets as harlots and whores.
And I honour us anyway, all of us.
For to be us, to embody this shame and disgrace,
Is a privilege
And it is an honour.

Our presence has been largely omitted from cultural histories, and it matters to correct this. Otherwise, the script contained truths that were no doubt unpalatable to the protesters outside, but which were, nonetheless, largely based on the Gospels themselves:

And remember this, all of you:
I never said beware the homosexual and the trans
Because our lives are unnatural
Or because we are depraved in our desires.
I never said that.
I said beware the self-righteous and the hypocrite
Beware those who imagine themselves virtuous and pass judgement
Those who condemn others and think themselves good.
Their lips are full of goodness but their hearts full of hatred.
And that is why I said
"Woe unto you scribes and hypocrites!
Whited sepulchres!
That on the outside look so sleek and smooth
But on the inside are a mass of filth and corruption!
And that is why I said beware of them

> And never never never beware the homosexual and the transsexual and the whore![18]

I retold various parables to give them a transgendered slant. The Good Samaritan underwent a transformation:

> And then a queen came past, staggering a little, because she'd been drunk as a skunk and bust her heel on the way home, and there was the taste of cum on her lips, and her dress was torn and her make-up was smudged and her stockings were all ladders and she saw the man and she thought: "Poor sod" and she phoned an ambulance on her mobile.
> And then she stayed with him till the ambulance came.
> And which of those was his neighbour?[19]

The Prodigal Son became a "son who knew he was his daughter" and was driven out because she came out to her family. The story concluded:

> This new daughter of mine was dead and is now alive.
> She was lost, and is now found. I have found her and she has found herself.
> And so of course we must celebrate.
> And so they did. Because the queendom is like that.
> The queendom is like a grain of mustard seed, tiny tiny tiny
> And you can try to hide it if you like
> But if you do it will grow inside you big big big
> Until it feels like there is no room for anything beside it.
> For I tell you that what was hid shall come to light.
> For inside us we all have a light, and it's maybe the very thing that we have been taught to be most ashamed of
> And when you have a light, do you hide it under a bucket?
> No! You bring it out into the open where everyone can see it
> And be glad it exists to shine in the world.[20]

As one initially very sceptical and certainly very straight churchman was forced to conclude, this is merely normal practice in the church. It's something he and his colleagues do all the time[21]. And it really is not that hard to see the Gospel as, indeed, a Gospel of Liberation.

Naturally enough, none of this made any impact on the protesters gathered outside. They posted their protest on YouTube[22] it was taken up by the BBC website[23] and within days had begun to spark furious controversy throughout the world. The play opened on a Tuesday; by the Friday a simple Google search revealed at least a quarter of a million blog entries worldwide, each one provoking many comments. They mostly make depressing reading. Here are some samples I collected at the time:

Exposing Liberal Lies, USA (Sunday, November 8, 2009)

Disgusting British Play

No wonder the Brits are losing their country to Islam. We reap the evil we sow.[24]

New British Play Features Jesus as Transsexual Woman

As Cassy Fiano says, “For some people, there is no low they won't sink to in order to defame Christianity.”

In the latest outrage Jesus is featured as a transsexual female.

The Times Online reported:

A controversial play which portrays Jesus as a transsexual woman was defended yesterday by its writer who has herself crossed the gender barrier to live as a woman.

Jesus, Queen of Heaven, has caused a storm of protest from Christian evangelical groups, who picketed the Tron Theatre in Glasgow when it opened this week.

However, their attacks have caused deep offence to the play’s author, who also acts the leading role. For Jo Clifford — formerly the playwright John Clifford — wrote the piece in an attempt to create greater understanding of transgendered people like herself.

The play's opening night was attended by about 300 demonstrators. Roman Catholics joined evangelical Christians for a two-hour protest during which they waved placards and sang hymns.

Yesterday Ms Clifford, 59, from Edinburgh, expressed deep disappointment in the reaction, “Most of it is happening because of a complete misunderstanding of what I am and what I am trying to do … They thought awful, sacrilegious things were going to happen on stage,” she said. Her critics, she added, ought to reread the Gospel. “Jesus said: ‘judge not’.”

At least the playwright won't have to worry about the theater being blown up.

One day Ms. Clifford will bow at the feet of Jesus. Wonder what she will say then?[25]