KINKY BOOTS: HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEX WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT SEX

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"One never knows what joy one might find amongst the unwanted."
—Lola, *Kinky Boots*

In our cultural library of films about drag, there is a little-known gem called *Kinky Boots* that is often lost in the shuffle. *Kinky Boots* is a 2005 British film about a young Englishman named Charlie Price who inherits a struggling shoe business from his deceased father. In a gamble to resuscitate his ailing company, Charlie hires a feisty drag queen named Lola to advise him on how to diversify into a new product line: women's stiletto boots with a heel sturdy enough to support a man's weight. After watching *Kinky Boots*, I found it to be a powerful film that successfully challenges mainstream perceptions of gender and drag, while telling a heartwarming story to boot. But many critics didn't share my enthusiasm when they reviewed the movie after its theatrical release (Holden; Puig; Thomson).

Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* criticizes the movie for lacking "genuine sexual provocation" and argues that Lola isn't convincing as a protagonist because she "never behaves seductively, nor is there even a hint of sex in her life. Because her flouting of convention doesn't extend beyond sartorial display, her brand of gender-bending subversion is almost reassuring." Holden believes that the creators of *Kinky Boots*, inspired by the financial success of thematically similar British films, neutered their drag queen in an attempt to produce a family friendly film with mass appeal. However, Holden's gripe with *Kinky Boots* cannot be understood to pertain to a simple lack of sex in the movie: after all, many classic films that enjoy universal critical acclaim don't focus at all on the sex lives of their characters. What is it about *Kinky Boots* that makes sexual provocation a "crucial ingredient" to the success of the movie when it isn't for so many others?

Kinky Boots is held to a different standard as a drag film, a unique genre of cinema that is usually oriented around an organizing motive of challenging the prevailing gender and sexual norms. One way that drag films have traditionally done this is by putting the homosexuality of their drag queen protagonists on display (*The Birdcage* or *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*). Since drag in the real world is usually (but not exclusively) performed by the gay community (Holcomb 415), it makes sense for most cinematic drag queens to be gay as well. Holden's issue with *Kinky Boots* cannot be just that it doesn't show sex; sex has become such a mainstay of contemporary Western cinema that audiences are no longer the least bit scandalized by seeing a man and a woman making out on the big screen. Rather, Holden's grievance with the movie much more likely concerns its failure to depict gay sex, the expected next step in the

"flouting of convention" that he argues is conspicuously absent from Lola's role. Through this lens, *Kinky Boots* appears to be an overly conservative film that keeps its drag queen lead in the closet in order to avoid ruffling the feathers of potentially sensitive moviegoers.

Holden is correct on three counts and wrong on one. He is right that *Kinky Boots* needs to be sexually provocative to qualify as a meaningful drag film. He is right that Lola doesn't exhibit much sexuality in the movie other than a few saucy song-and-dance numbers on stage, and he is right that the choice to de-emphasize her sexuality obscures her sexual orientation. However, contrary to Holden's argument, this obscurity is decidedly not "reassuring," nor is it a move of conservative prudishness. Lola may not be identifiably gay, but it is a mistake to assume that films which showcase the homosexuality of their drag queens are automatically more provocative in doing so.

In a way, the opposite is true: a gay drag queen makes it all too easy for straight viewers to walk away from a film with the comfortable thought that no matter how controversially drag may be presented in the movie, it is a fringe element that is safely quarantined within the gay community and therefore doesn't apply to those outside it. By diverging from the tradition of setting its protagonist up to be immediately and obviously gay, *Kinky Boots* introduces the possibility that Lola, a man who dresses like a woman, may actually be straight. Holden might believe this approach to lack the necessary provocation, but anthropologist Ether Newton argues that the provocative nature of drag stems from its "double inversion," where the gender of the clothes inverts the gender of the body, and the gender of the body inverts the gender of internal identity (Newton 103). When the drag queen is sexually ambiguous, like Lola, this disruptive effect of drag is amplified because the audience is now threatened by a potential triple inversion, where the presumed homosexuality of the drag performer may be inverted as well. By adding this third layer of inversion, the movie unleashes the concept of drag from the boundaries of the gay community, challenging mainstream viewers with a drag queen who cannot be easily dismissed.

Kinky Boots accomplishes this feat not only by camouflaging Lola's sexual orientation, but by doing so intentionally, feeding its audience key snippets of scrambled signal that are open to interpretation. In a scene where Lola meets the workers in Charlie's factory, one of them asks her with genuine befuddlement, "If you don't want to get off with blokes, why would you put a frock on?" Lola responds with her characteristic blend of sass and insight: "Ask any woman what she likes in a man. Compassion, tenderness, sensitivity. Traditionally the female virtues. Perhaps what women secretly desire is a man who is fundamentally a woman." In this scene, the film consciously draws the audience's attention to one possible motivation for a heterosexual man to dress in drag and asks us to reconsider our immediate assumption that the drag queen is gay. Holden claims that drag for Lola is "all just an act," which is likely a thinly veiled reference to her perceived failure to come out. But the automatic

presumption of homosexuality is exactly what the movie seeks to challenge. However, the film also executes the scene in such a manner that it doesn't quite identify Lola as straight either—since the audience is not privy to the earlier part of the conversation, we don't know if the "you" in the factory worker's query refers to Lola herself or to a hypothetical drag queen.

Kinky Boots sustains this theme of deliberate ambiguity as the story progresses. Although Lola gradually develops a strong bond of camaraderie with Charlie, one that may be interpreted as having homosexual undertones, she also becomes close to Charlie's assistant, a spunky, business-savvy young woman named Lauren. At the end of the movie, after the titular boots are successfully pitched to fashion moguls in Milan, Charlie and Lauren share their first kiss on the runway in Lola's presence, and she looks upon the couple with a bittersweet smile. If Lola did indeed fall for either Charlie or Lauren over the course of the movie, the audience does not know which one. And that is exactly the point. The key takeaway from the scene is that it demonstrates that Lola, rather than being the asexual creature that Holden believes her to be, is instead ambiguously sexed. The fact that she could be any of us is what endows Lola with the unique capacity to move between cultural barriers as an ambassador of drag.

Lola's role as such an ambassador brings a new question to light: is the role even necessary? Drag has always been associated with the gay community, so why should straight people care about drag? To determine whether or not heterosexual audiences stand to gain something valuable from an exposure to drag, we must become acquainted with two opposing schools of thought that queer theorist Eve Sedgwick argues are central to the modern "homo/heterosexual definition" (2). The first is the "minoritizing view," where gay culture is seen to be "an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority" (1). The second is the "universalizing view," which interprets gay culture to be "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (1). Lola's sexual ambiguity in *Kinky Boots* essentially destabilizes the minoritizing perception of drag and advances the universalizing one: in order to break away from critics like Holden and recognize the film as an important, revolutionary work, we must prove that drag should be universally considered in the first place.

We should begin by defining two terms that are frequently and mistakenly conflated: "drag queen" and "transvestite." According to the *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, a transvestite is "a cross-dresser, or someone who wears the clothes of the other gender" (Hovey 1482), whereas a drag queen is "one variation of male-to-female cross-dressing" (Holcomb 415), with the term presently being "closely associated with theatrical performance" (415). Some drag performers may be reluctant to be identified with transvestitism since it is often conjoined with the pathological term transvestic fetishism, which is characterized by sexual pleasure induced by cross-dressing (Hovey 1482-1483). Since sexual arousal isn't a motivation for dressing in drag for most drag queens and kings, or even for many off-stage cross-dressers, we will employ the term

transvestite in the more general sense as outlined above, which includes those who cross-dress for any purpose.

Lola identifies as both a drag queen and a transvestite in Kinky Boots, which makes her sexual ambiguity a particularly astute reflection of real world dynamics, because although drag is usually performed by gay men (Holcomb 415), transvestitism is actually a behavior predominantly associated with straight men. Magnus Hirschfeld, the German physician who coined the term "transvestite" in 1910, conducted his studies on participants that were primarily heterosexual males (Bullough). Since Hirschfeld conducted his experiments in a time when homosexuality was simultaneously less recognized and more stigmatized in the Western world than today (Wolf), a cogent argument can be made that some of these straight men were possibly closeted gay men who were disinclined to identify otherwise due to fear of social backlash. However, despite the broad advances made by the gay rights movement since the early twentieth century, the heterosexual dominance of transvestite demographics has not changed: a 1997 study by sexologists Bonnie and Vern Bullough discovered that 67.4 percent of their sample group of 372 transvestites identified as heterosexual, with only 2.4 percent as strictly homosexual, with the remainder categorizing themselves as either bisexual or asexual.

Drag is clearly an "issue of continuing, determinative importance" to the parent population of transvestites, who either cross-dress on stage as drag performers or cross-dress in their personal lives. By divorcing the terms "drag queen" and "transvestite," we establish the theatrical artifice of drag as an object of relevance not only to the gay community, but also to the mostly heterosexual community of off-stage transvestites. However, we still have yet to demonstrate the universality of drag—after all, most people do not identify as either gay or transvestite. Why, then, would drag be relevant to this majority population?

Lola herself has the answer. In a scene where she's explaining drag culture to Charlie and Lauren, she tells them, "You're never more than ten feet away from a transvestite." Both Charlie and Lauren are taken off-guard by this comment and do not know how to respond, but Lola keeps talking without giving her two companions the opportunity to unravel this puzzle. If transvestitism is indeed as prolific as Lola claims it to be, then the universality of drag becomes self-evident. Although it is easy to dismiss Lola's comment as hyperbole, we as viewers owe it to her and to ourselves to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume for a moment that her statement is both intelligent and deliberate. How can it be true that we're all never more than ten feet away from a transvestite, even in the privacy of our own homes? The only way this can possibly be so is if we are all transvestites.

The *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*'s definition of a transvestite as a person who "wears the clothes of the other gender" implicitly assumes the existence of a true, natural, and original gender against which there is something to be "other" to. Judith Butler refutes this concept of an original gender in her book *Gender Trouble*, which is

now widely cited as a foundational text of queer theory. Butler argues that gender, rather than being the external manifestation of an internally encoded, immutable essence of self, is instead "manufactured through a sustained set of acts" (*Gender* xv) governed by social and cultural norms, and that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" ("Imitation" 127). In other words, dressing like a man isn't any more "original" or natural to men than dressing like a woman—the set of norms that determine what it means to "dress like a man" and what it means to "dress like a woman" are both socially constructed, rather than the inevitable product of one's "internal essence of gender" (*Gender* xv).

If the concept of an original gender is indeed a fabrication, then every gender must by extension be an "other," which means all forms of dress that are informed by gender expectations fall under the category of transvestitism. Lola's cryptic statement that we're never more than ten feet away from a transvestite is thereby fully realized and validated when we apply Butler's theory of performed gender to unmask us all as transvestites. As celebrity drag queen and pop culture icon RuPaul likes to say, "You're born naked and the rest is drag" (Koski 1). Butler herself recalls being profoundly enlightened by Esther Newton's idea that drag "is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed" ("Imitation" 127). Butler takes this concept further, arguing that drag effectively "constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation" (127). If drag exposes gender as an impersonation, then those who "do" gender are likewise exposed as impersonators, as Lola's ubiquitous transvestites that we are never more than ten feet away from.

The artifice of drag reveals the artificiality of gender, and demonstrates how the seemingly substantive divisions of identity that separate the mainstream from the subcultural, the heterosexual from the homosexual, and the masculine from the feminine are nothing more than a shared fiction of our own invention. Drag shatters the illusion of substantiality by intentionally mismatching different signals of gender, drawing attention to the malleable nature of gender itself. It is no coincidence that drag was embraced first by the gay community and that it continues to be a celebrated part of gay culture today. Due to the gay population's status as a disenfranchised minority historically perceived to represent "an inversion of normal gender development" (Kimmel 27), gay men and women have long been cognizant of the notion that there is no such thing as "normal" when it comes to gender. However, this is a concept that the heterosexual population has yet to internalize—according to Butler, one of the enduring compulsions of heterosexuality is that it "sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic" ("Imitation" 127). Drag may be a celebrated form of self-expression and entertainment in the gay community, but for straight people, it is also a means through which this longstanding compulsion can finally be challenged. The value of *Kinky Boots* lies in its deliberate exportation of the pedagogical device of

drag from the gay community to the film's heterosexual audience, using its sexually ambiguous drag queen as the cultural intermediary.

Some in the gay community may interpret this exportation of drag to be an appropriation of what rightfully belongs to gay culture, but to believe so is to fall into a dangerous trap described by Butler: the trap of using one's identity category to segregate and discriminate against others outside that group ("Imitation" 125). The oppression of minority groups exists because of the tendency of those in the majority group to fall into this destructive mode of thinking, but Butler argues that the drive to rally around a common identity to facilitate political resistance can lead those in minority groups to participate in the same kind of discrimination that they struggle to combat (125). Butler questions the value of identity definitions themselves, arguing that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (121). Although she is a lesbian, she notes that to identify herself by such a label results in "anxiety" and "discomfort" (125), and that the act of declaring her lesbianism often feels like nothing more than coming out of one closet to step into another (122).

Kinky Boots shares Butler's awareness of the dangers of attempting to police identity categories. Although the film doesn't set Lola up to be explicitly gay, it doesn't set her up to be straight either, purposely leaving viewers with just enough hints that an argument of equal merit can be advanced either way. In doing so, the movie is saying that it doesn't matter whether she's gay or straight, that what she has to teach the film's audience about gender and drag is universal. Ultimately, it isn't about keeping Lola in the closet or taking her out—*Kinky Boots* strives to eliminate the closet altogether by removing the door.

Despite critic Stephen Holden's assessment, *Kinky Boots* is neither "formulaic" nor "reassuring." The choice to not talk about sex allows the film to make a deceptively profound sexual statement, forcing viewers to cope with the ambiguity by engaging with the conceptualizations of drag, heterosexuality, and homosexuality simultaneously. This is a meaningful undertaking because we all have something valuable to learn from drag, which, as Butler writes, functions as an imitation and parody of the ways in which everybody performs gender, regardless of sexual orientation. The ultimate message of *Kinky Boots* isn't about heterosexuality or homosexuality: it's about the porous nature of identity boundaries, and how, as the real-life drag queens of Key West's famous 801 Cabaret like to say, we are all "One Human Family" (Taylor 12).

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