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An Examination of Gender Roles in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

by Lauren Challinor

(English 1154)

The *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, a 1994 film directed by Stephan Elliott, is a campy movie-musical with a poignant plot, following two transvestites and a trans-woman on a journey through the Australian outback in a tour-bus they christened Priscilla, travelling from cosmopolitan Sydney to the remote outpost of Alice Springs in the heart of the continent. My focus in this essay shall be to explore the personal journey of each of the three main characters, as well as their interactions with each other and other characters throughout the film, through the lens of shifting gender roles and gender role behaviors. As a source, I refer to an article published in 1998, authored under the name Holly Devor, and entitled “Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes”.

1. Character Overview

The character played by Terrence Stamp is an aging transgender woman, having forgone her previous life as Ralph, and now fully committed to her female gender identity as Bernadette. She has had more than her share of hostile receptions, and has little patience for prejudiced or bullying behavior, having fought her way to hard-earned acceptance from the Sydney community.

Hugo Weaving plays the conflicted character of Anthony Belrose, a married man who spends his time performing as a drag queen named Mitzi; for the purpose of this discussion, I will refer to him by the gender-neutral name Tick, which he uses throughout the film and emphasizes the uncertainty regarding his gender identity. In comparison to Bernadette, Tick is a more ambiguous character possessed of a dualistic nature. Tick is caught between the life of a drag queen and his life as husband and father, and his personal journey centers on self-discovery and the resolution of his inner doubts.

Guy Pearce takes on the role of Adam Whitely, a young, gay drag queen who makes his way through life by manipulating his mother into giving him money, antagonizing other people, and making a spectacle of himself. Adam holds the dominant status within the group, having establishing himself over the others mainly as a defense against his own insecurities and conflicted emotions about his identity. While Adam joins the group in a search for adventure and entertainment, the trip ultimately gives Adam much more than he expected- both good and bad.

One additional character of singular importance is that of Bob Spart, performed by Bill Hunter. At first blush, Bob plays a fairly typical male role: an aging mechanic who rescues Priscilla, the stranded tour-bus and her motley crew. Bob is very down to earth upon encountering our unlikely trio and responds to them with nonchalant respect. As unexpected as this may be, his reaction to Bernadette is even more surprising. When he learns that she was the pre-imminent performer of ‘Les Girls’, his glowing admiration for her appears in sharp contrast to with the derision they receive from the townies at the local pub. Despite his appearance of a typical outback bloke, Bob’s response reflects his well travelled and worldly experience.

2. Bernadette

Bernadette’s relationship with Tick can best be described as one of mutual respect and empathy. Both Bernadette and Tick have dealt with the challenge of gaining acceptance from peers, family and society; each seeks and receives reassurance and support from the other throughout their travels. Tick turns to Bernadette as a mentor-figure as he struggles with his uncertainty over taking

on the role of a husband once more, and Bernadette consistently finds comfort in Tick as a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to lean on. Bernadette's relationship with Adam, on the other hand, could be aptly reduced to two words: fragile tolerance. Adam's irrepressible love of the dramatic, his juvenile attitude, and his obnoxious behavior regularly push the limits of Bernadette's patience. Where Tick and Bernadette bond over their shared struggle for acceptance from society, Adam thrives on creating conflict, shocking the public, and upsetting the balance of society.

In many ways, Bernadette is a classic example of demure femininity, casting a shadow of irony over the more conventional women in the film, as her femininity is derived from affectation. These affectations—Bernadette's frequent and methodical application of lipstick, the way she carries her purse, the expressive yet dainty hand gestures, and the carefully controlled softness and lilt of her voice—have been painstakingly cultivated over the years.

Perhaps it is because Bernadette has had to fight so hard and for so long to secure her female gender identity, both physiologically and in the eyes of society, that she appears the height of composed femininity. Most certainly, Bernadette's battle to secure her gender identity as a female has toughened her resolve and shaped her into the strong fighter that lies behind the feminine delicacy she projects. Indeed, this hardened side of Bernadette shows through in times of conflict; her voice deepens and takes on a harsher tone, she doses out acidic, intellectual jabs and, occasionally, threats of physical violence, while maintaining her feminine dignity.

For example, upon trying to order drinks at a bar in the town of Broken Hill, Bernadette is verbally accosted by a grimy, hostile woman, known as Shirl. After enduring a slew of vulgar insults and the woman's insistence that the trio leave town, Bernadette responds to her comments in kind, drawing laughter from the crowd of locals. Embarrassed but determined, Shirl slams her dirt-crusted hand down on top of Bernadette's, which rests on the bar. Again, Bernadette rises to the occasion, prying back Shirl's meaty fingers with her own larger, but delicately manicured hand; she leaves the woman stunned at her show of strength. In one final effort to disgrace her opponent, Shirl attempts to best Bernadette in a drinking challenge. She fails, leaving Bernadette the drunk, but dignified victor.

3. Tick

Just as in the straight community, we make assumptions about the gender identity and sexual preferences of others, projecting our own socially constructed views onto them, so too apparently does the LGBT community have their own projections of gender identity and sexual orientation. This pattern of community behavior is exemplified by Bernadette's and Adam's assumption that Tick is fully committed to a female gender identity and homosexual orientation, on the basis of his choice to be a drag queen. However, as it happens, Tick's previous role as a husband and his potential role as a father challenge this notion. When it is revealed that Tick is married—and married to a woman, no less—this socially projected female gender identity is actively threatened. This causes a shift in the gender dynamic of the three main characters.

Adam interprets this shift in group dynamics as a direct threat to his status. Viewing Tick as a married man alters the image of his feminine role, and thus, it appears to Adam that Tick is encroaching on his territory as the dominant member of the trio. In response to this threat, Adam ridicules and mockingly objectifies Tick's marriage, personifying both Tick and his wife in female roles. In doing so, Adam undercuts Tick's masculinity, and openly trivializes his capacity to take on the role of a husband.

Throughout the film, Tick displays both strength and weakness. When confronted by conflicts with a source outside the LGBT community, — the beer can thrown by an audience member in the first scene of the film, or the offensive graffiti emblazoned on the tour bus in Broken Hill— Tick struggles to conceal his distress, appearing vulnerable. When Adam repeatedly mocks Tick's marriage, Tick shows real strength and defends himself, even demanding Adam stop his ridiculing.

Throughout their journey, much of Tick's anxiety and uncertainty focus on the impending reunion with his wife and son. He struggles to conceive of how he can possibly reconcile his wish and need to be a good father with his life as a drag queen and active member of the LGBT community. The surprise for Tick is that his son, Benji, is completely untroubled by his father's lifestyle. The compassion and uncompromising acceptance from his son reassures Tick that he can be a father, without having to give up his lifestyle or hide who he is.

4. Adam

Our knowledge of Adam's past is a relatively vague. One flashback scene between Adam and his lecherous uncle is the only glimpse of his childhood. It reveals a degree of malevolence surprising in a boy so young. Adam exhibits a certain level of self-loathing, tied up in a deep reluctance to appear feminine or assume a female gender role, despite his lifestyle as a drag queen. Adam's negative conception of femininity leads him to unleash the violent force of his conflicted emotions on the person he perceives to be the most feminine, and therefore stereotypically vulnerable, of their trio: Bernadette. Adam pointedly antagonizes her from the very start of their expedition, and blatantly threatens her gender identity by calling her "Ralph". Bernadette's ultimate reaction to this direct threat to her identity is pure rage and fury; the resulting fight is one of only two instances in the entire film where Bernadette engages in a physical confrontation.

Adam's inner conflict and self-hatred manifest themselves in his dominant personality, egomaniacal attitude, and pathological need for attention; when combined, all these actually supercede the relevance of his gender identity. Although Adam's aggressively dominant personality might seem like a clear display of masculinity and power (as described by Devor on page 484), much of his behavior is deeply childish and immature, particularly that which is bullying or manipulative, or which attracts negative attention. Adam routinely lashes out by insulting or humiliating others. Motivated by his inner anger and conflict, he gains pleasure from their anger, and engages in risk-taking behaviors.

A perfect example of this occurs during their overnight stay in the remote mining town of Coober Pedy. Bernadette recognizes the potential danger Adam's reckless nature poses and insists that Adam remain in the hotel room for his own safety and theirs. In direct opposition, Adam chooses to take illicit drugs, and go out looking for trouble. After he unsuccessfully masquerades as a thrill-seeking woman in front of a gang of brutish townsmen, Adam is seriously shaken by the ensuing mob that threatens to, at the very least, castrate him. The social construct that "ideal maleness (masculinity) must remain untainted by female (feminine) pollutants" serves as a clear illustration for the genesis of the violent mob mentality (Devor 487). Shortly after Adam approached the group, he notices Bob in their midst and calls out to him, but Bob turns away, choosing not to acknowledge their familiarity or reveal that he has any association with the interloper. Bob's attempt to "eliminate any similarities to feminine people from [his] own personalit[y]" reveals his desire to protect his masculinity—a status which he later jeopardizes in his attempt to defend Adam against the mob (Devor 487). Once the mob turns on Adam, Bob tries to do the right thing and steps up to protect him, at great personal risk. But ultimately, it is Bernadette, rather than Bob, who succeeds in rescuing Adam. This is a turning point for Adam's character. Although Bernadette confronts the mob as a woman, the power she brings to bear draws on the hardened strength she gained throughout a lifetime of fighting the prejudice of a heteronormative society. The strength of Bernadette's compassion and nurturing instincts, which are revealed through her tender, motherly role with Adam just after the Coober Pedy incident, contain a naturalness and authenticity which reinforce Bernadette's innate femininity, despite being born in a male body. Adam's reckless behavior forces him to accept his own vulnerability and he comes to see Bernadette (a trans-gender woman) in a different light and treats her with newfound respect.

The incident in Coober Pedy once again alters the group dynamic. The simple fact that Adam's jaw was dislocated in the attack silences him both physically and metaphorically. Tick is then in a position to claim a more dominant role, raising his status over Adam. This reversal is visually underscored by the scene in which Tick literally stands over Adam as he lays in the grave-like tanning chamber.

In spite of Adam's fall down the hierarchical ladder, his relentless need to assert his dominance over others resurfaces when he interacts with Tick's son, Benji. Perceiving the young boy as a target for his poisonous anger, Adam attempts to bait Benji about his father's life as a drag queen. Benji's earnest acceptance and appreciation of his father's lifestyle serve to neutralize Adam's redirected self-loathing, and reveals to him that not everyone subscribes to a gender schema that values masculine roles over feminine ones, as laid out by Devor's article (485).

Conclusion

The Adventures of Priscilla is a lens through which to examine the traditional views of masculine and feminine gender roles. The viewer is encouraged to reflect upon these roles, their origins, and how they are portrayed in the context of our three main characters. In spite of the many conflicts and consistent competition within the trio, there are moments of real camaraderie and unity within the group. Primarily, these moments are their drag performances; together, they put themselves and the creative expression of their otherness at risk, becoming exposed and vulnerable before their audiences. Despite their conflicts, they depend upon one another. An amusing example is the scene where the trio gives a quite theatrical and exuberant performance for the aboriginals, which leads to much merriment by all. In contrast, the performance Bob arranges in his hometown leaves the audience thoroughly unimpressed and unamused, soon to be overshadowed by the vulgar display by Bob's wife, leaving the trio humiliated and stunned. Both scenes bring the group closer together, whether through enthusiastic self-expression or disappointment and shame.

Ultimately, the scene where they climb King's Canyon is the most impactful depiction of the uniting force which acts upon the trio. The idea of three drag queens climbing up the rocky slopes of the most remote Australian desert, in full drag makeup and costume seems ludicrous at first, but their stubborn determination to reach the top together, setting aside their differences, presents a different picture. One might think that they would appear completely out of place, yet somehow, when they reach the summit and face the vastness and rugged beauty of the Australian wild, they seem to become part of this glorious display of natural beauty, leaving the competition and constant bickering of the tour-bus far behind.

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