Giving a Voice to Transgender People: Exploring the Possibilities of Self-Expression in Contemporary North American Theater.

GABRIELIUS ANDRIJAUSKAS

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Sous la direction de

Sophie Maruejouls-Koch

UNIVERSITÉ TOULOUSE JEAN-JAURÈS

DÉPARTEMENT DES ÉTUDES DU MONDE ANGLOPHONE

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Outline

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Thesis Summary

In recent decades, transgender identities have gained increased visibility in public discourse, including within the domain of artistic expression such as theater. Despite this progress, representations of transgender experiences on stage remain limited in scope, often lacking diversity, nuance, and complexity. Frequently, transgender characters are reduced to stereotypical roles rather than being portrayed as fully realized individuals. This study investigates how transgender experiences are represented in contemporary US theater, drawing on theoretical frameworks of gender identity, in-depth textual analysis, and critical discourse. Focusing on three contemporary plays by US playwrights, this research examines how transgender narratives are constructed and how these portrayals influence both public perception and the transgender community. Guided by key questions—particularly regarding the representation of transgender protagonists and the societal impact of these portrayals—the analysis reveals that these narratives offer a range of trans voices that challenge reductive stereotypes and assert multifaceted identities. By analyzing narrative structures, character development, and thematic content such as identity, empowerment, and visibility, the study highlights how theater can serve as a powerful medium for expressing the complexities of transgender life. The findings, further supported by a critical examination of audience reception and public discourse, demonstrate that such representations foster empathy, provoke dialogue, and contribute to the gradual normalization of gender diversity in broader society. While theater may not directly incite sweeping legal or cultural reform, it plays a vital role in reshaping societal attitudes by presenting transgender characters as nuanced and authentic human beings. This affirms the central argument of the thesis: contemporary North American theater functions as an influential platform for challenging traditional gender norms and promoting deeper understanding and acceptance of transgender identities. Future research may build on this work

by exploring transmasculine narratives in greater depth and by critically examining casting practices involving transgender performers.

Keywords: transgender characters, contemporary plays, US theater, identity, discrimination, gender norms, gender diversity.

Résumé de la thèse

Au cours des dernières décennies, les identités transgenres ont gagné en visibilité dans le discours public, y compris dans le domaine de l'expression artistique, notamment au théâtre. Malgré ces avancées, les représentations des expériences transgenres sur scène restent limitées, manquant souvent de diversité, de nuance et de complexité. Les personnages transgenres sont fréquemment réduits à des rôles stéréotypés, plutôt qu'incarnés comme des individus pleinement réalisés. Cette étude examine la manière dont les expériences transgenres sont représentées dans le théâtre contemporain américain en s'appuyant sur des cadres théoriques liés à l'identité de genre, ainsi que sur une analyse textuelle approfondie et une réflexion critique. En se concentrant sur trois pièces contemporaines écrites par des dramaturges américains, ce travail de recherche se propose d'analyser la construction des récits transgenres et l'impact de ces représentations sur la perception du public ainsi que sur la communauté transgenre elle-même. Guidée par des questions clés—notamment autour de la représentation des protagonistes transgenres et de l'effet sociétal de ces mises en scène—l'analyse révèle que ces récits offrent une pluralité de voix trans affirmant des identités complexes, en rupture avec les stéréotypes réducteurs. À travers l'étude de la structure narrative, de la construction des personnages et de thématiques telles que l'identité, l'autonomisation et la visibilité, cette

recherche montre que le théâtre constitue un médium puissant pour exprimer la richesse des vécus transgenres. Les conclusions, renforcées par une analyse critique de la réception du public et du discours social, révèlent que ces représentations favorisent l'empathie, suscitent le dialogue et participent à l'acceptation progressive de la diversité des genres dans la société. Bien que le théâtre ne soit pas en mesure de provoquer à lui seul des réformes légales ou culturelles majeures, il joue un rôle essentiel dans la transformation des mentalités en présentant des personnages transgenres de manière nuancée et authentique. Cela confirme l'argument central de cette thèse : le théâtre nord-américain contemporain constitue une plateforme influente pour remettre en question les normes de genre traditionnelles et promouvoir une meilleure compréhension ainsi qu'une plus grande acceptation des identités transgenres. Dans la perspective de futures recherches, il serait intéressant d'approfondir l'exploration des récits transmasculins et d'analyser de manière critique les pratiques de distribution impliquant des artistes transgenres.

Mots-clés : personnages transgenres, pièces contemporaines, théâtre, États-Unis, identité, discrimination, normes de genre, diversité de genre.

Introduction

Since ancient Greece, the expression of gender identity has played a significant part in theater, dating back to the 6th century BC. During that period, all performers were male, which led to the performance of female characters through the use of masks to indicate gender. Male actors assuming female roles would also, on certain occasions, wear a wooden structure on their chests and stomachs to imitate the look of breasts and to make them appear more ladylike.[1] Another illustrative example pertinent to Greek mythology is Tiresias, a notable character who was transformed from male to female to settle an enduring debate regarding the nature of sexual pleasure. After being transformed into a woman and living as one for a while, Tiresias was eventually restored to his original male form by other gods at the end of the play, thereby testifying to his experiences as both male and female. These transformations depicted in ancient Greek theater can be interpreted as forms of gender transitions, that is, as ways of representing the journey of becoming a transgender individual. While the development of personal identity was not as openly explored in ancient times as it is today, the concept of being transgender has become more widely acknowledged and discussed across many areas of society. This growing awareness is also reflected in the arts, where transgender themes are increasingly appearing, especially in theater. Notably, modern theater has witnessed the inclusion of transgender actors, beginning with pioneers like Christine Jorgensen, one of the first well-known transgender individuals who opened the door for such representation on stage. After her transition in 1952, she made her living as an entertainer, actress, and nightclub singer. She performed "I Enjoy Being a Girl" and wore a Wonder Woman costume. Her visibility

[1] Lloyd, Ellen. "Ancient Greek Costumes, Masks and Theater in Focus." *Ancient Pages*, 21 Apr. 2021, www.ancientpages.com/2016/11/25/ancient-greek-costumes-masks-and-theater-in-focus/.

helped pave the way for more complex and meaningful representations of transgender lives in theater. Building on this legacy, contemporary works such as John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1997), Anna Ziegler's *Boy* (2016), and Paul Lucas's *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* (2017) follows on from this evolution by centering transgender narratives and offering deeper explorations of gender identity on stage. After all, the depiction of transgender narratives is still far from being widely discussed or accepted as a 'norm.' Representations often remain limited, stereotyped, or marginal. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to shed light on contemporary theater plays featuring characters undergoing gender transition. The examination of the specificities of these new voices on stage is meant to define the contours of the representation of the transgender experience and thus contribute to the broader discourse within contemporary society.

Significant evolutions have occurred since the early era of ancient Greek civilization, particularly in the understanding of gender norms, personal identity, and sexuality. Theatrical productions have also evolved. Within this broader transformation, perceptions of transgender individuals have gradually developed, from being misunderstood or erased altogether to becoming increasingly recognized as part of the complex spectrum of human identity. To clarify, transgender individuals are those whose gender identity diverges from the conventional association with the sex assigned to them at birth. It most generally refers to any kind of variation from gender norms and expectations. Furthermore, the term "transgender" itself has become widespread in the last decade, reflecting societal changes. This term falls within the broader category of the term "queer," which is often used for individuals "with aspects of social transgression, whether involving a variety of same-sex relationship and/or cultural confrontations" (including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender and/or intersex

people).[2] Although the term "queer," which will be occasionally used, is often employed to refer to any or all of the subcategories within this umbrella term, the focus of this work remains specifically on transgender people. Nevertheless, the precise definition of the term "transgender" and other related terminology will be elaborated in greater detail in the subsequent literature review part. Since the early 1930s, when the first modern "sex-change" surgeries were performed by Hirschfield and his medical staff, transgender individuals have gained increased visibility. Yet, apathy and discrimination arise due to transgender individuals' deviation from conventional gender norms, leading to obstacles in their integration into various professional and social groups, or even simply in participating in the art world, where usually "the misunderstood" and artistic individuals often congregate. After all, advances in LGBTQ+ rights movements, from the Stonewall Riots in the 1960s to Bill Clinton's 1998 statement advocating for the prevention of employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, the fight for legal recognition over the years does not guarantee complete acceptance of freedom of expression for such individuals. As noted by Kate Bornstein, an American actress and gender theorist, "It's strange that while there are so many queer people in theater, the institution of mainstream theater is, like most of today's world, homophobic."[3] It is not surprising that transgender actors frequently encounter discrimination and bias during casting processes, knowing that their personal experience is still largely underrepresented on stage. To say the least, transgender characters in theatrical productions often lack diversity and nuance and are frequently chosen to perform stereotypical roles rather than more complex portrayals: "Trans women said they often get offers to play sex workers with little depth or get scripts with outdated or inaccurate terms like "transsexuals" and "crossdressers."[4] Furthermore,

[2] Cooper, Emmanuel (1996). "Queer spectacles." In *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, edited by Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, 13–27. London: Routledge.
[3] Bornstein, Kate (2013). *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. p. 158.
[4] Sam Levin, "'Third-Class Citizens': Trans Actors See Stereotyping and Exclusion in Hollywood," *The Guardian*, July 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jul/09/third-class-citizens-trans-actors-see-stereotyping-and-exclusion-in-hollywood.

transgender characters' portrayals are notably scarce or entirely absent in contemporary plays, in contrast to the prevalence of cisgender characters' portrayals. In addition, those plays seem to be almost inaccessible. Following this disparity, questions are raised that could be considered as problem statement for this thesis: How is the transgender experience represented on the contemporary American stage? And to what extent do such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular? Through the analysis of a selection of examples that feature transgender experiences on stage, this study aims to bring attention to the voices of transgender individuals who are often marginalized.

Each of the three contemporary American plays under study evinces a different representation of transgender experiences: John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1997), Anna Ziegler's *Boy* (2016), and Paul Lucas' *Trans Scripts, Part 1: The Women* (2017). These works will serve as guiding frameworks throughout this thesis. The examination of their scripts, together with their staged productions and their reviews, aims to explore how theater conveys transgender identities and amplifies the voices of communities that remain largely underrepresented in mainstream media and popular culture. Focusing on North American plays calls for an exploration of the US cultural dynamics and their correlation to the issue. The work is structured as follows: firstly, in the literature review part, I will examine the theoretical context and academic discourse on transgender individuals and their portrayal on stage. This will lead to the analysis of intrinsically related subjects, such as intersectionality, gender performance in society, and transgender theory so as to provide a deeper insight into the issues and challenges faced by queer/trans individuals. These theoretical frameworks will prove useful in selecting an appropriate approach to analyze the three plays under study. Additionally, the inclusion of critical articles and reviews of the plays will offer insights into broader societal perceptions and responses to transgender representation in theater. By synthesizing these various perspectives, I will be able to answer my previously raised

questions: How is the transgender experience represented on the contemporary American stage? And to what extent do such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular? In light of these considerations, I would like to consider the following hypothesis: *Through the exploration of transgender experiences on stage, contemporary North American theater serves as a platform for challenging traditional gender norms and fostering greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity within society*. This hypothesis will be further examined and refined through the course of this research work, with the ultimate goal of contributing to ongoing dialogues surrounding transgender representation and its inclusion in the performing arts.

While several scholarly works have addressed issues of transgender representation, their focus tends to lie outside the specific context of contemporary U.S. theater. For instance, Natalie Jessica Murphy's study, "'Your Transness, Your Otherness Is Your Superpower': Transgender Identities, Power and Representation in the UK Theatre Industry," (2024) explores representation within a British theatrical context, while Hanne Van Haelter, Frederik Dhaenens, and Sofie Van Bauwel, in "Trans Persons on Trans Representations in Popular Media Culture: A Reception Study," (2022) examine media portrayals in broader popular culture rather than live performance. These contributions, though valuable, highlight a gap in existing research regarding the portrayal of transgender experiences on the contemporary US stage. This thesis seeks to address that gap by analyzing how transgender individuals are represented and perceived within the specific cultural and theatrical landscape of the United States.

I. Literature Review

This literature review will focus on key concepts, such as gender performance, identity politics, and transgender theory, all of which contribute to the understanding of transgender issues within their contemporary context. Beginning with an exploration of theoretical frameworks surrounding gender, the attention will then be directed to the historical representation of transgender identities in contemporary US theater. Through the establishment of a robust theoretical framework, this literature review seeks to provide a solid foundation for the analysis of transgender representation in contemporary US theater.

1. Definitions

Before delving into the discussion of transgender frameworks, it is crucial to first comprehend the terminology pertinent to the topic. As noted in the introduction of this thesis, the term "transgender" implies a movement away from an initially assigned gender position. Initially, the term "transsexual" was employed, introduced in 1923 by Magnus Hirschfeld, a German sexologist. However, over time, the term "transgender" became more widely recognized. As suggested on the Stonewall website, the LGBTQ+ community magazine, "Transexual was used in the past as a more medical term (similarly to homosexual)."[5] This shift occurred within the past decade, with the contribution of trans activist Holly Boswell, who popularized the term "transgender" in an article claiming that "it encompasses the whole

[5] "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," *Stonewall*, March 4, 2024, https://www.stonewall.org.uk/list-lgbtq-terms.

spectrum" of gender diversity.[6] Another relevant term that Hirschfeld also coined is the word "transvestite," signifying "the erotic urge for disguise," which is how he understood "the motivation that led some people to wear clothing generally associated with a social gender other than the one assigned to them at birth."[7] Typically, this term refers more to men than to women who wear gender-atypical clothing but do not engage in other kinds of body modification. A transvestite could be seen as someone who desires to live a "dual role." Over time, the word "transvestite" declined in usage and instead, the term "crossdresser" gained increased visibility, and so did the adjectives, "transexual" and "transgender." Crossdressers and transsexuals, along with various cross-gender practices and identities, contributed to a radical expansion of the meaning of "transgender" in the early 1990s. In transgender communities, individuals commonly employ terms such as "transmen," "transgender men," or "transsexual men" to refer to those born with female bodies who identify and live socially as men. Likewise, the words "transwomen," "transgender women," or "transsexual women" stand for people born with male bodies who identify and live socially as women. These terms emphasize the individual's social category rather than their original biological sex. Pronoun usage similarly reflects social gender and gender identity, with "she" and "her" being appropriate for transgender women, and "he" and "him" for transgender men. These pronouns are typically used when referring to a "cisgender" person, someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth, and who is not a transgender person.

Other prominent relevant terms to this work are "queer" and "intersex." While queer culture is concerned with aspects of social transgression, "it is often used as an umbrella term by and for persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, and/or transgender, or by and for individuals who use the term as an alternative to LGBTQ+ labels."[8] With one of its

[6] Boswell, Holy (1991). "The Transgender Alternative," *Chrysalis Quarterly 1*, no. 3 (1991): 29–31.
[7] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 16.
[8] Gieseking, Jen Jack (2008). *Queer Theory*. *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*. p. 737-738.

main aspects being the rejection of fixed notions of sexuality, queer theory is committed to criticizing and problematizing previous ways of theorizing identity. Many individuals have also begun identifying themselves as "genderqueers." Some individuals use "genderqueer" to describe those who resist gender norms without changing their assigned sex, although this usage is not universal among those who identify as transgender. The term "intersex" describes a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female.[9] Sometimes this condition refers to hermaphroditism: "Some transgender people who think their desire to cross gender boundaries has a biological cause consider themselves to have an intersex condition (current theories favor sex-linked neurological differences in the brain)."[10] This expansive view of transgender identity aligns with Jamison Green's perspective on the adoption of the term "transgender." In the end, he describes it as "an attempt to get beyond identity politics by invoking a term so broad and inclusive as to make room for multiple identities and expressions, and still refer to the specific oppressions that transpeople faced."[11]

Additional terms worth mentioning are "drag" and "butch" which both come from gay and lesbian subcultures. "Drag" takes up the meaning of clothing associated with a particular gender or activity, often worn in a parodic, self-conscious, or theatrical manner. It differs from the terms "transvestite" or "crossdresser," which specifically imply dressing for erotic pleasure. Conversely, "butch" is the expression of traits, mannerisms, or appearances usually associated with masculinity, particularly when expressed by lesbian women or gay people.[12] Both of these terms will be reintroduced in subsequent sections to further explore other subcultures within the queer community and their distinctive characteristics.

[9] "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," *Stonewall*, March 4, 2024, https://www.stonewall.org.uk/list-lgbtq-terms.
[10] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 9.
[11] Green quoted in Stryker (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 9.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

2. Becoming Through Repetition. Judith Butler and Gender Norms

After having defined the terms relevant to the main subject, it is now necessary to examine the key concepts and their implications for transgender individuals. One of the concepts that brings essential value to the self-understandings of many transgender people is highly related to gender performance. "Gender performativity" was indeed first used by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990). She argues that while sex is typically understood as biological, gender is a cultural construct, although many people use the terms interchangeably in everyday speech. Through her theory, Butler suggests that the understanding of gender is shaped through repeated actions, particularly the stylization of the body. This idea challenges the notion of an inherent gender identity. Instead, it suggests that our perception of gender is largely influenced by learned behaviors and cultural norms. Essentially, this means that gender identity is constructed through societal interactions and performances, rather than being an innate trait. "We experience and perform our lives and bodies."[13] When the constructed status of gender is theorized as separate from biological sex, it follows that gender is a fluid construct, wherein masculine traits may be embodied by individuals with female anatomies, and feminine traits by those with male anatomies. According to this idea, transgender individuals, whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth, epitomize the notion of fluidity and complexity that such a definition of gender implies. Further exploration reveals that some individuals transition away from their assigned gender at birth because they strongly identify with another gender, believing it offers

[13] Donna Haraway, "Gender for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), quoted in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), preface xxxiii.

a more suitable life for them. Others seek to explore new, undefined spaces beyond conventional gender norms, while some simply wish to escape the traditional expectations associated with their assigned gender. Susan Stryker, in her work *Transgender History* (2008), discusses Judith Butler's concept that "being something" equates to "doing it," which has been misinterpreted within the transgender community as the assertion that gender is merely a performance and therefore not real:

> For trans people, who often suffered a great deal to actualize for others the reality of their gender identities, the idea that gender was just a game of sorts, with a wardrobe full of possible gender costumes to be put on or taken off at will, felt galling.[14]

However, Butler intends to highlight that gender is fundamentally constituted by the actions individuals undertake to express it. Rather than being an objective quality of the body (defined by sex), gender is constituted by all the innumerable acts of performing it: how one dresses, moves, speaks, interacts, or looks. Gender functions similarly to a language through which an individual conveys their identities to others and gains understanding about themselves and others. This perspective suggests that transgender identities are as authentic as any other gender identities since they are achieved through similar foundational processes.

At the same time, this point of view raises questions about the traditional understanding of gender roles and norms. What defines a woman or a man in society? These definitions are often shaped by socially accepted gender norms, perpetuated by heteronormative patriarchal structures. For instance, societal norms dictate that a man should be a doctor and a woman a nurse. While feminist and LGBTQ+ movements challenge these norms, they remain deeply rooted in society, impacting daily life and causing inequality. As a result, gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men

[14] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 131.

and women. Looking further into the subject leads to the idea that standardized gender roles are the creation of heterosexual patriarchy. As noted by Butler in her book, gender norms, defined by a heterosexual patriarchal structure, contribute to inequality and reinforce established power dynamics in society. Policing gender, as the imposition of normative gender expressions, is occasionally employed as a means of reinforcing normative heterosexuality. However, the aim here is not to criticize prevailing heterosexuality but rather to acknowledge its profound influence on daily life. Conventional gender roles dictate that failure to adhere to prescribed socially constructed gender expectations results in individuals being considered inadequate in their gender expression as either women or men. Queer individuals face even greater challenges, for instance, encountering discrimination in employment opportunities due to their failure to conform to accepted gender norms. In addition, the situations of sexual harassment targeting queer individuals often put emphasis on the need to enforce gender normativity rather than reinforce gender hierarchy. For this reason, cultural practices such as drag or cross-dressing have emerged, offering parodic interpretations of traditional gender identities. Similarly, the sexual stylization of butch identities challenges conventional notions of gender expression. If one perceives a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, one tends to regard the initial term in each perception as the "true" gender. The gender implied by the comparison is considered lacking in "reality" and is viewed as an illusory semblance: "Drag is an example that is meant to establish that '"reality"' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be."[15] The example aims to reveal the fragility of gender "reality" as a means of challenging the oppressive nature of gender norms. If we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, it reveals the inability to make assumptions about stable anatomy based solely on external appearance. The body in question may be preoperative, transitional, or post-

[15] Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble.* p.xxiv.

operative. In that case, one can only speculate their gender from his or her acts that, once again, are performed by already socially constructed norms. If those norms are disregarded, then the whole gender becomes an act. In other words, gender emerges through a series of performed acts, and without these acts, the concept of gender would cease to exist.

3. Identity Politics: Power, Privilege, and Intersectionality

This section follows the discussion about gender identities by examining gender norms and illustrating how various aspects of identity shape society. While we possess a biological capacity to identify with and learn from a specific location within cultural gender systems, our gender identity is not predetermined at birth. Sex is an inherent attribute that distinguishes us, with every human being sexed. Sex serves as a fundamental qualification of humanity, distinct from gender, as discussed in the preceding chapter emphasizing Butler's notion that gender is not caused by sex, nor does it simply reflect or express it. French philosopher Michel Foucault suggests that power attribute accompanies sex: "Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex".[16] This means sex is categorized as either acceptable or not acceptable. Power establishes a structure for sex, making it understandable in relation to these rules. Moreover, power maintains control over sex through language and discourse, which, as Foucault has it, effectively expresses the rules. This control is primarily exercised through legal means, with power acting as a legislator in the realm of sexuality. In the context of gender portrayal through sex, societal norms and expectations influence how individuals are perceived and treated, reinforcing power dynamics and hierarchies. Within this patriarchal

[16] Foucault, Michel (1976). *History of Sexuality*, *Volume I.* p. 83.

culture, gender appears to be foundational to patriarchy. Society tends to favor the majority, consciously or unconsciously, leading to discrimination against minority groups, including those identified by non-conforming sexual orientations. As a result, queer individuals are often more vulnerable and face bias. For this reason, queer movements are increasingly incorporating the concept of intersectionality to address not only race and racism but also other issues such as biphobia and the inclusion of transgender individuals within the movement. When considering transgender individuals, who challenge traditional gender norms and undergo a change in their assigned sex, along with those who belong to marginalized racial or social groups, they experience multiple layers of marginalization. This complex dynamic is best understood through an intersectional framework. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge define it, "intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences."[17] When examining social inequality, it becomes clear that people's lives and the organization of power in society are shaped by multiple intersecting axes of social division, such as race, gender, and class, rather than a single axis. These categories: race, gender, class, and the dominant practices linked to them, such as racism, sexism, and classism (along with imperialism and homophobia), interact and influence each other. Kimberle Crenshaw illustrates this idea in the following example: "Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both."[18] Analytical frameworks typically focus on single issues by neglecting others. Crenshaw goes further to explain that the problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not addressing the "additional" issue of race or patriarchy; rather, the discourses often fall short of fully articulating the complexities of racism and sexism. Women of color experience racism

[17] Collins H., Patricia & Sirma Bilge (2016). *Intersectionality.* p. 13.
[18] Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

differently from men of color and sexism differently from white women, making antiracism and feminism limited in addressing the full scope of these issues.[19] In an article, Elizabeth Evans and Éléonore Lépinard note that while feminist and queer movements may frame their issues differently, "they both tend to center the analysis on race, broadly understood as encompassing issues of migration, citizenship, religion, and colonialism."[20] This suggests that racial issues remain deeply embedded in human history and are not easily overcome. Evans and Lépinard's examples show that feminist movements continue to be predominantly white, as well as middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual.[21] Unfortunately, queer LGBTQ+ movements are similarly affected by societal power dynamics, particularly regarding gender and race. This could lead to the marginalization of voices within the community, such as those of people of color and transgender individuals, who face compounded layers of discrimination. Additionally, the marginalization is worsened by the assumption that anyone who deviates from traditional definitions of "man" and "woman" automatically belongs in the transgender category. Such a perspective reinforces shared gender concepts between homosexual cultures and "mainstream society," further marginalizing transgender people both in society and within the LGBTQ+ movement. However, embracing intersectionality has become a way to signify new gender, non-conforming identities. It serves as a method to address ongoing patterns of marginalization within queer organizations, highlighting the differences, inequalities, and privileges present in each sub-culture.

[19] *Ibid.,* p. 1252.
[20] Evans, Elizabeth, and Éléonore Lépinard (2020). "Introduction." In *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements*, edited by Elizabeth Evans and Éléonore Lépinard, p. 4. New York: Routledge.
[21] *Ibid.,* p. 202.

4. Trans Lives and Politics. Theory in Practice

This part explores in greater detail cultural presentations, political movements, social organizations, and everyday realities of the transgender community. It covers a diverse range of gender expressions, including various forms of gender non-conformity. As Susan Stryker indicates, numerous cultural shifts, societal changes, and historical events have contributed to make "transgender" a hot topic. Some individuals believe that there is an increase in the number of transgender people. Those who favor biological theories point to environmental factors while others argue that the heightened visibility of transgender individuals is simply a consequence of the internet era—a phenomenon where previously isolated and socially unnoticed individuals can now connect and share information about themselves.[22] From a broader perspective, similar to the connection between gays and lesbians as a non-conforming sexual community, historian John D'Emilio asserts that modern gay and lesbian communities did not emerge until the mid-nineteenth century. He argues that gay men and lesbians have not always existed:

> Instead, they are a product of capitalism and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism, which has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives.[23]

While it is true that globalization and the internet facilitated increased interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those with different experiences of gender and sexuality, it is important to acknowledge that queer individuals existed even before the rise

[22] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 25.
[23] D'Emilio, John (1993). "Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. p. 473.

of capitalism. Many examples such as Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum, the first known same-sex couple in Egypt dating back to as early as 2400 B.C.,[24] or Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a theologian, who admitted in 1862, "I may have a beard, and manly limbs and body," he writes in Latin, "yet confined by these, I am and remain a woman,"[25] demonstrate the existence of queer identities long before the nineteenth century. However, indeed, sex change surgery was not legally or medically viable until the early 20th century due to advancements in medicine. Nonetheless, this does not contradict the existence of transgender individuals, as in examples like Ulrich's, who expressed their transgender identity even in the absence of medical procedures. As Stryker indicates, medical institutions wielded significant social power during that era, determining what constituted sickness or health, normality or pathology. Consequently, neutral aspects of human difference were often transformed potentially into unjust social hierarchies. This exercise of medical authority played a pivotal role in transgender history. Extensive medical and psychological literature was released pathologizing transgender phenomena as deviations from healthy gender expression. Access to medical services for transgender individuals frequently relied on framing transgender experiences as symptoms of mental illness or physical abnormalities. Typically, illness was justified for medical intervention. Accordingly, individuals began seeking out doctors to request surgical modifications of their bodies. In the 1950s, only a small number of sex change operations occurred in the United States, primarily conducted by Los Angeles urologist Elmer Belt, often under secret circumstances.[26]

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[24] Harper-Hugo Darling, "Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum," *Making Queer History*, June 21, 2023, https://www.makingqueerhistory.com/articles/2016/12/20/khnumhotep-and-niankhkhnum-and-occams-razor.
[25] Donald Munro, "< Back," *Trans Media Watch*, accessed June 26, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20191218150249/http://transmediawatch.org/timeline.html.
[26] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 36-45.

However, according to Foucault, the growing challenges faced by gender non-conforming individuals prompted the emergence of discourses on various forms of non-heteronormative sexuality in the nineteenth century. These discourses, in fields such as psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature, not only categorized phenomena like homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphrodism," leading to increased social regulation of such "perversions." At the same time, it also facilitated the emergence of a countervailing discourse: homosexuality itself began to articulate its own validity or "naturalness," often using the same language and concepts previously used to pathologize it within medical contexts.[27] For decades, transgender activists have argued that the challenges faced by individuals with "disabilities," which were often attributed to their sexual orientation, stem not from their bodies but from societal structures. Similarly, transgender activists have directed their efforts toward physical, legal, and social frameworks—ranging "from sex-segregated bathrooms to legal sex-classification systems—that prevent trans people from functioning as equal economic, social, and civic actors,"[28] as suggested in the work *Transgender Rights* (2006) by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter. Therefore, transgender politics started to emerge in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These politics strived to challenge a set of struggles about privacy, censorship, political dissent, minority rights, freedom of expression, and sexual liberation. However, it is crucial to mention that the emergence of such a movement would not have been possible without the prior establishment of feminist movements, which laid the groundwork for the queer movement itself. Feminist movements set up a template for identity issues, private stereotypes, prejudices, inequalities, and limitations in the public sphere. These same issues have also been the focus of advocacy by transgender individuals. Back in the

[27] Foucault, Michel (1976). *History of Sexuality*, *Volume I.* p. 101.
[28] Currah, Paisley, Richard M. Juang & Shannon Price Minter (2006). *Transgender Rights*. p.xviii.

1970s, the feminist movement popularized the slogan: “The personal is political.” Many feminists at that time viewed transgender practices, such as cross-dressing and hormone therapy to alter bodily appearance, with a critical eye. They believed that masculine individuals with male bodies should advocate the acceptance of effeminate traits and proudly embrace femininity, rather than striving to conform to the societal norms of a “normal” or “authentic” woman. According to Stryker, feminism, on the other hand, aimed to systematically dismantle the social structures that created gender-based oppression in the first place and that made women the “second sex.”[29] These structures have long subjected women to discrimination, placing them in a subordinate position to men. Within feminist and gay movements, there has been a reevaluation of how these social spheres may reproduce gender norms. As a result, transgender issues, that might otherwise go unnoticed, emerged as cutting-edge concerns for some within the gay, lesbian, and feminist communities. As transgender movements gained momentum, society was still grappling with changes spurred by the rise of feminism, further complicating matters for individuals undergoing sex-change operations or transitioning from male to female. The feminist movement of the 1960s was a reaction to socially conservative approaches to these issues, and transgender concerns have been integral to these debates since Christine Jorgensen, the first transgender celebrity who became a public figure. Transgender feminism, rooted in the radical feminism of the late 1960s, is part of what is now termed the third wave of feminism. It raised questions about how each person experiences and interprets their gender identity—whether as a man, a woman, or something that transcends those categories—highlighting the deeply personal and individualistic nature of gender identity. Stryker expands on Butler’s ideas, emphasizing that a transgender perspective highlights another dimension of gender oppression. Our contemporary culture attempts to narrow the

[29] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 2.

diverse spectrum of body types into just two genders, both of which are defined by biological sex. Among these, one gender faces greater social control than the other.

So, feminism has already established the ethical and legal foundations for gender equality, which includes transgender people. Therefore, it may seem redundant to argue for their specific inclusion in nondiscrimination legislation. In theory, transgender individuals should already be protected by existing gender nondiscrimination laws since discrimination based on gender nonconformity is inherently gender discrimination. However, in practice, courts, civil society, and the media have often failed to apply the principle of gender equality to transgender people. This failure stems from the perception of transgender individuals as sexual "deviants," similar to how homosexuals have been viewed as gender inverts.[30] For transgender individuals, the legal system has frequently been a significant source of disempowerment and harm. As illustrated by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter in their book, *Transgender Rights*, the case of a young girl, "Pat Doe," exemplifies extensive efforts to express an individual's identity that, ultimately resulted in losing a legal battle. Like many seventh-grade girls, "Pat Doe" wanted to wear skirts, makeup, and high-heeled shoes to school. However, at South Junior High in Brockton, Massachusetts, her gender presentation as a male-bodied girl upset school administrators. The principal repeatedly sent her home to change, citing the dress code, and eventually required her to check in daily for clothing approval. By the eighth grade, Doe had stopped attending school due to this treatment, effectively causing her "constructive expulsion," according to her lawyers.[31] There are numerous instances of the law mistreating transgender individuals. For example, a trans woman legally identified as male might be unable to update her identification documents, such as her birth certificate, driver's license, or passport, to reflect her true gender. This situation

[30] Currah, Paisley, Richard M. Juang & Shannon Price Minter (2006). *Transgender Rights*. p.xxiii.
[31] *Ibid.,* p.7.

exposes her to discrimination, harassment, and violence in many everyday interactions. In addition, housing and employment discrimination against transgender people remains legal in most parts of the United States, and such discrimination was even more widespread in the past. In the 1960s, a visibly transgender person would have faced even greater challenges in securing housing and employment than they do today.[32] Over the years, trans activists have established numerous social service and advocacy organizations, including the Transgender Law Center in California, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York, and the International Foundation for Gender Education. Support for transgender activism and various organizations advocating individual expression has prompted more states to enact laws protecting transgender people:

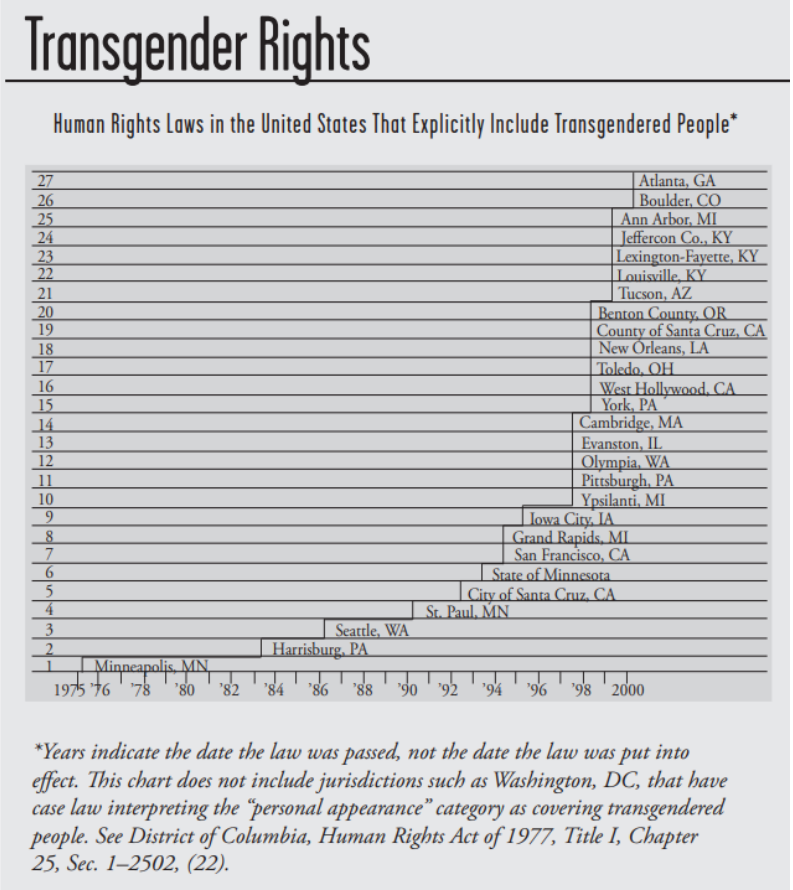

Figure 1. Transgender Rights. Reprinted from Paisley Currah and Shannon Minter, *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers* (Washington, DC: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2000). p. 149.

[32] Kattari, K. Shanna, Darren Whitfield, Eugene N. Walls, Lisa Langenderfer-Magruder & Daniel Ramos (2016). *Policing Gender Through Housing and Employment Discrimination: Comparison of Discrimination Experiences of Transgender and Cisgender LGBQ Individuals*. p. 66.

Since the first of such laws was passed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1975, similar laws have been enacted in dozens of local jurisdictions and eight states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Washington.[33] As for some other states, more socially conservative, such as Texas or Florida, to name just a few jurisdictions with negative case law, one's sex at birth is one's legal sex for the entire life:

> Gender should exist in a predictable relation to birth sex even as the social norms for gender expand; and those who cross those boundaries should not be protected from discrimination or have any legal recognition of their gender.[34]

Although this quote was cited in 2006, Texas and Florida have since passed various laws concerning transgender rights, yet, full recognition and protection for such individuals are still lacking, "By 2006, 30 percent of the U.S. population lived in areas with 'transgender rights' legislation, though many municipal laws have limited legal impact."[35] Legal recognition of transgender individuals holds significance only within the context of broader cultural change. For instance, despite Minnesota's inclusion of transgender individuals in its nondiscrimination law since 1993, the state's highest court ruled in 2001 that Julie Goins had not faced discrimination when her employer denied her access to the women's restroom.[36] The effectiveness of rights-based arguments relies on constructing a culture where transgender individuals are not viewed merely as anomalies or deviations from nature. On a positive note, over the past forty years since their first public movements, transgender individuals have progressed from secret gatherings to organizing public demonstrations against transphobic violence and securing legal protections. However, as noted by the authors previously

[33] Currah, Paisley, Richard M. Juang & Shannon Price Minter (2006). *Transgender Rights*. p.21.
[34] *Ibid*. p.17.
[35] *Ibid.* p.21.
[36] Jennifer M. Ross-Amato, "Mitchellhamline," Transgender Employees & Restroom Designation—Goins v. West Group, Inc, accessed June 26, 2024, https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1654&context=wmlr.

mentioned in the work, there is a unanimous agreement that still significant work remains to be done in supporting transgender rights.

5. How Has Theater Historically Represented Gender and Sexual Diversity?

After exploring various theoretical frameworks related to gender roles, sex-power dynamics, intersectionality, and transgender rights, the focus now shifts to the central theme of this thesis: the representation of transgender identities on the theater stage. Such an exploration requires an understanding of the interconnected knowledge of theater and its production. This part delves into sexual representation in three dimensions: firstly, the depiction of women in theater; secondly, the portrayal of homosexuals (both male and female); and thirdly, the rise of queer productions, particularly highlighting transgender individuals. Although these issues are sometimes viewed as separate, there are compelling historical and stylistic connections among them.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, male cross-dressing in the previous ages came about as a consequence of society's taboos on women in the theater. For instance, in the Elizabethan era, women were officially prohibited from participating in 'serious' drama in England, largely due to the opposition of the Christian Church to theater. In many Western countries women were forbidden to act on the "respectable" stage until a mere 400 years ago. Significant developments of this nature occurred in the mid-20th century, with various feminist movements and constitutional reforms, that accorded women status in many fields, including theatrical performances. These advances, however, took some time. The male-to-female ratio at work reveals what still stands as the underpinning assumption in terms of the structure in the

theater industry—social and sexual divisions of work and roles. Hierarchies of status mean hierarchies of gender. Men still overwhelmingly dominate both the artistically authoritative roles of writer and director, as well as the technological and manual areas of backstage production. Michelene Wandor notes in her book *Carry On, Understudies: Theater & Sexual Politics* (1986), "Across the board in the cultural industries men far outnumber women in positions of power; artistic status and artistic power are dominated by men."[37] For example, although women have worked as designers since the beginning of the 20th century, almost all "top" theater designers are male. In theater, women tend to assume roles that reflect their positions in other industries, such as middle management, personnel, casting, or wardrobe. On the technical side, women remain a minority, hindered by both prejudice and their hesitancy. This dynamic not only addresses the intersectionality that women often face but also connects to women's status in the artistic world. This is particularly relevant when one thinks of transgender people, for whom it is inescapable to understand the role of a woman for the purpose of a better and more cohesive reflection on gender and their representation at the theater.

After all, one cannot deny that throughout history, gay men and women have consistently worked in theater, as well as in other industries. However, societal taboos against publicly acknowledging women's rights and homosexuality have often forced their contributions into a covert realm. Male homosexuals found the theater to be an effective space for challenging culturally dominant notions of masculinity, as it allowed them to adopt feminine or effeminate roles. Within artistic professions, many male homosexuals occupied a paradoxical space: recognized within the industry as homosexual yet exempted from public exposure. This worked, especially in visual, domestic, and theatrical arts, because the combination of "traditionally" masculine and feminine characteristics made it an eminently

[37] Wandor, Michelene (1986). *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre & Sexual Politics*. p. 29.

feasible professional space for gay men, so long as they manifested these qualities. This was noted by Caroline Sheldon in *Gays and Film* by Richard Dyer:

> The artistic sphere has long been claimed by gay men as legitimate territory: in this area the male homosexual has found the means to pass by identifying himself as artistic/ romantic rather than simply gay. So the social rejection on the basis of sexuality is refocused by the justification of art.[38]

Efrat Tseëlon in her book *Masquerade and Identities. Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality* observed:

> The theatre is attractive to the stigmatized and to those of uncertain identity because it offers a tolerant and amorphous refuge from an often hostile and rigidly structured and bounded world; it is tolerant and amorphous because it is the home of disguises. Those with a stigma can take a refuge in the view that they have the freedom to represent themselves as, or indeed to be, whatever they choose.[39]

This notion gave an ideal opportunity for homosexuals to express their effeminate sides and try cross-dressing. The different roles that cross-dressing has taken on have been marked by the theatrical and social conventions of different times: from the functional aspect of performance to a creative response to societal suppression or even a form of freedom of expression. In most cases, these practices are, in one way or another, a great revelation of the tension that exists in society between the expectations of gender behavior and personal identity. This tension was often both reflected and addressed through cross-dressing, at times seeking even to contain rebellion against accepted gender norms through ridicule of deviations from the status quo. It is primarily the gay subculture to which many of the traditions involving cross-dressing are related. Since it is composed of, those whose emotional and sexual lives are lived out in same-sex relationships—a fundamental challenge to the expectations posed by a heteronormative world—cross-dressing in theater has become a powerful emblem of that

[38] Sheldon, Caroline. 1997. "Gays and Film." In *Gays and Film*, edited by Richard Dyer, 10–25. London: Routledge.
[39] Tseëlon Efrat (2001). *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, p. 44.

challenge. Although gay men have found limited acceptance and sometimes have benefited from male dominance in high-powered professional worlds and free artistic realms, women have faced greater barriers. The increased focus on activism for the rights of LGBTQ+ people and for women's rights that accelerated in the middle of the 20th century brought a new political consciousness to the experiences of being female and gay. This matured and constantly developing awareness filled the "alternative theater" with the whole multifaceted texture of sexual-political questions and interests in general, more broadly reflecting global social changes and the struggle for equality and representation.

This shift in political and social awareness set the stage for one of the earliest known LGBTQ+ themed plays featuring a queer character—*The Drag* written by Mae West in 1927. The play, which cast exclusively gay actors from a Greenwich Village club, faced significant controversy and was ultimately banned, preventing its Broadway debut.[40] The landscape began to change with Mart Crowley's groundbreaking play *The Boys in the Band* (1968). Premiering off-Broadway, this play portrayed gay men in New York and was later adapted into a feature film.[41] It premiered a year before the Stonewall Uprising in 1969, a pivotal event recognized as the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement in the USA. Following this movement, numerous plays featuring queer characters emerged, reflecting the evolving social attitudes and influencing the theater industry. Pioneering artists such as Mart Crowley, Lillian Hellman, Jane Chambers, Tennessee Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Oscar Wilde contributed significantly to this cultural transformation. However, plays featuring distinctly transgender characters have been less prevalent. One of the earliest films addressing themes of cross-dressing and transvestism was Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953). On stage, significant representations came much later. Richard O'Brien's musical *The Rocky Horror*

[40] Zoe Paskett. "10 Plays that Have Shaped LGBTQ+ Theatre History", *The Standard,* 8 February 2019 (https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/10-plays-that-have-shaped-lgbtq-theatre-history-a3879486.html;
[41] Jim Colleran. "Pride Timeline: 50+ Years of LGBTQ+ Plays and Musicals", *Concord Theatricals*, 8 June 2022. (https://breakingcharacter.com/pride-timeline-50-years-of-lgbtq-plays-and-musicals /.

Picture Show (1975), though it falls short of featuring a fully acknowledged transgender character, as the main protagonist describes himself as a "sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania."[42] In subsequent years, there was a significant rise in stage presentations, particularly after 2000. This increase was driven by a growing global interest in individual sexuality and identity, facilitated by various gay and feminist liberation movements.

6. Plays in Focus: Introducing the Dramatic Texts

The contemporary era has embraced more liberal and modern perspectives on sexuality, advocating the expression of love and pleasure both within and outside of marriage. This shift has coincided with the rise of queer-adapted productions, leading to the creation of various theatrical plays addressing these themes. Although there has been a gradual increase in plays featuring transgender characters, their visibility and public acceptance remain challenging. Headlines such as "New Survey Suggests General Society Not Willing to Allow More Rights for Transgender People"[43] or "Americans Divided Over Restroom Policies for Transgender People"[44] reflect the ongoing societal discomfort with transgender issues, which also influences their portrayal in theater. Therefore, this thesis aims to highlight contemporary plays that feature transgender narratives, raising awareness about individuals often excluded from conventional gender norms. Three plays inspired by real-life events have been selected

[42] Raven Snook. "Trans Characters Have Been Thrilling Broadway And New York Theater for Decades", *Timeout*, 5 November 2015. (https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/trans-characters-have-been-thrilling-broadway-and-new-york-theater-for-decades /.

[43] Sally Strong. "New Survey Suggests General Society Not Willing to Allow More Rights for Transgender People," University of Houston, October 9, 2023, https://uh.edu/news-events/stories/2023/august-2023/08292023-transgender-rights-survey.php.

[44] Justin McCarthy. "Americans Split Over New LGBT Protections, Restroom Policies", *Gallup Press*, 18 May 2017. (https://news.gallup.com/poll/210887/americans-split-new-lgbt-protections-restroom-policies.aspx;

for analysis: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* by John Cameron Mitchell, produced in 1997 in Off-Broadway, is the oldest of these three contemporary plays. It was inspired by Mitchell's childhood babysitter, a woman named Helga, who was "a German army wife but also a prostitute."[45] This rock musical defies expectations with its raw and honest portrayal of gender identity and self-discovery. By creating Hedwig, Mitchell paved the way for more theatrical presentations about gender non-conformity and transsexuality, sparking meaningful conversations about gender identity and acceptance both on stage and in public. The play *Boy* by Anna Ziegler (2016) is inspired by "David Peter Reimer's case when his gender reassignment went wrong."[46] It explores the interrelation between medical intervention and gender identity, examining gender expectations and norms and their psychological and emotional impact. *Boy* provides a platform for discussing the need for societal acceptance of diverse gender identities. The third most recent play by Paul Lucas, entitled *Trans Scripts, Part 1: The Women* (2017), is once again, a play inspired by true facts. Based on "material assembled from more than 75 interviews conducted with people from around the world who identify as transgender woman,"[47] Lucas's work highlights the personal stories of transgender women, exploring themes of intersectionality, healthcare, and legal issues that are often less visible to the general public.

All of these plays have been carefully chosen, each addressing the transgender narrative from distinct perspectives. The purpose of this selection is to show, that transgender characters are more multi-faceted and complex than what is commonly thought. For instance,

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[45] Lindsay, Champion. "The Origin of Hedwig and the Angry Inch! Follow Her Journey from Underground Rock Club to Broadway," Broadway.com, April 17, 2017, https://www.broadway.com/buzz/175571/the-origin-of-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-follow-her-journey-from-underground-rock-club-to-broadway/.

[46] Jones, C. "'Boy' Based On True Story Of Gender Reassignment Gone Wrong", *Chicago Tribune*, 18 January 2018. (https://www.chicagotribune.com/2018/01/18/boy-based-on-true-story-of-gender-reassignment-gone-wrong/; consulted on 17 June 2024).

[47] "A Samuel French, Inc. Title. Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women". *Concord Theatricals*. (https://www.concordtheatricals.co.uk/p/65207/trans-scripts-part-i-the-women#:~:text=Paul%20Lucas's%20Trans%20Scripts%20is,level%2C%20and%20age%20at%20transition; consulted on 17 June 2024).

Hedwig and the Angry Inch explores identity through the use of wit and musical performance, presenting a complex character who navigates gender and self-discovery with an unfiltered and genuine portrayal. *Boy* delves into the complexities of gender identity through the story of Adam Turner, a young boy dealing with the repercussions of a gender reassignment that went awry. *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* emphasizes the specificity of each transgender experience, conveying the idea that there is no singular "transgender experience." Having established the theoretical framework for my thesis, I will now conduct an in-depth analysis of these three plays. This will include a thorough script analysis, supplemented by online reviews, to gain a broader understanding of public reception and the critical evaluation of the plays. This approach will help me to answer my previously raised problem statements: How is the transgender experience represented on the contemporary US stage? And to what extent do such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular?

II. Analysis of the Plays

The analysis of these plays is organized into five key segments, each designed to illuminate different aspects of transgender representation, thereby aiming to deepen the understanding of the research subject. The first segment explores the plays' historical and cultural contexts and recurring themes, providing a comprehensive foundation for further analysis. Following the provided contextual groundwork, the second segment closely examines the portrayal of transgender identities by focusing on character analysis, using specific excerpts from the scripts to capture nuanced depictions of gender and identity. In the third segment, societal expectations and critiques within each play are studied to reveal the challenges faced by transgender characters, highlighting the social tensions and opposition they might endure. The fourth segment explores themes of empowerment, assessing how each play reinforces the characters' identities and underlines the significance of diverse representation. Finally, the fifth segment focuses on narrative techniques, analyzing each play's storytelling methods, structure, and stylistic choices. This approach aims to demonstrate how these elements contribute to the complex portrayal of transgender experiences while addressing core thematic questions. This section involves in-depth script analysis, including direct quotes from interactions, with each quoted line referenced by the original script's page number. It is important to mention that the contextual section will present each play independently for a clear understanding of their distinct foundations. However, in the following sections, themes and character insights from each play will be interwoven to facilitate comparative and thematic analysis, highlighting shared elements and recurring motifs across the works.

1. Contextual and Thematic Overview

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

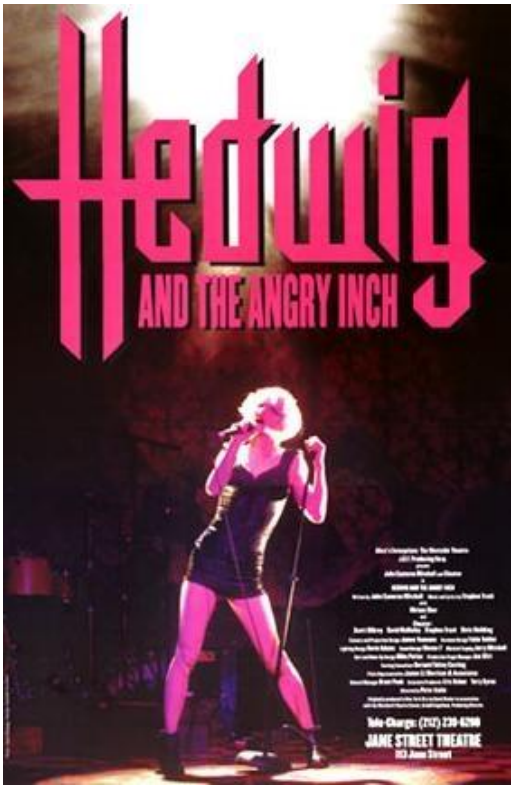

Figure 2. Hedwig and the Angry Inch. Original Off-Broadway Production (1998). From Ovrtur catalogue. https://ovrtur.com/production/55552/poster.

The first play presented in this research is *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, created by John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask in 1997. As the earliest of the selected works, it does not fall within the 21st century, making it distinct from the others in terms of historical and social context. At the time, representations of transgender characters were infrequent, often limited to sensationalized portrayals in talk shows rather than nuanced storytelling. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is thus a pioneering work in late 20th-century theater, following in the footsteps of earlier experimental groups like The Ridiculous Theatrical Company and plays

like *Sweet Evening Breeze* (1998), both of which included transgender narratives. This play diverges from traditional theater by weaving rock music into its structure, thus making it a rock musical. The storyline is driven by songs that reflect themes of personal identity, rebellion, and the quest for self-acceptance. Unlike conventional theater, which typically focuses on themes of love, family, and personal development, rock musicals such as *Hedwig* challenge societal norms and reflect on themes of identity and the critique of social structures. Such plays encourage a more interactive audience experience, where cheering or applauding mid-performance might feel natural.[48] *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* initially premiered at the Westbeth Theatre Center on February 27, 1997, and was produced by David Binder. Nearly a year later, it debuted Off-Broadway at the Jane Street Theatre on February 14, 1998, with producers Peter Askin, Susann Brinkley, and James B. Freydberg. The play has since been performed in theaters worldwide, including a recent 2023 production at *Théâtre du Rouge Gorge* during the *Avignon Off* festival. The musical narrates Hedwig's story as a German immigrant from East Berlin, who moves to the United States driven by her ambitions for a music career and her journey toward self-discovery. Born Hansel, a male, Hedwig's body reflects the disruption of the city of Berlin, first divided and then reunified, a situation that mirrors her own struggle for self-discovery. Through her concerts—part storytelling, part cabaret, and part confessional—Hedwig engages her audience with raw humor, emotion, and rock ballads. Hedwig's sense of loss and search for completeness becomes evident as she recalls feeling like a part of herself was always missing. The musical emerged from Mitchell's personal inspiration, particularly from a babysitter, Helga. "She was a German army wife but also a prostitute," Mitchell, who was the son of a general in the army, told the BBC, adding that "she provided the visual inspiration for Hedwig."[49] As well as Mitchell's own experiences

[48] Wollman, Elizabeth L (2006). *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig*. p.76.

[49] Lindsay, Champion. "The Origin of Hedwig and the Angry Inch! Follow Her Journey from Underground Rock Club to Broadway,"

within the LGBTQ+ community who at the age of 22 they came out as gay, but in the latest interview they came out as a non-binary "I'm not trans, I'm non-binary…" reaffirming Mitchell's relations to the play's narrative[50] (the pronoun "they" is used here to address people who identify themselves as non-binary). Moreover, the narrative also reflects the disorientation inherent to the post-Berlin Wall era, which turned out to be an identity crisis for many Eastern Europeans, including Germany, where the story is set. The Wall represented a significant structure of political distrust and repression of free expression. Its fall in 1989 not only ended the Cold War but it was also a call for freedom, which found an echo in Hedwig's journey, particularly in her opening song, "Tear Me Down" (*Hedwig* 10). Mitchell combines these elements to tell the story of Hedwig, an East German rock singer with a botched gender reassignment surgery, leaving her with what she calls the "angry inch," which ultimately lends its name to the play. It is important to bear in mind that the analysis will focus on the theatrical play itself rather than on the film adaptation released in 2001. However, there will be occasional references to specific scenes from the movie as supplementary material.

Broadway.com, April 17, 2017, https://www.broadway.com/buzz/175571/the-origin-of-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-follow-her-journey-from-underground-rock-club-to-broadway/.

[50] Beatrice, Fanucci. "'Joe vs. Carole' Star John Cameron Mitchell Comes Out As Non-Binary", *GCN (Gay Community) news*, March 8, 2022, https://gcn.ie/joe-vs-carole-star-john-cameron-mitchell-comes-out-non-binary/.

Boy

Figure 3. BOY at TimeLine Theater Company, Chicago. Photo by Lara Goetsch (2018). From https://annabziegler.net/featured-plays/boy/.

Over a decade later, amid growing protections and legislative advances for gender identity across the United States, Anna Ziegler's play *Boy,* was published in 2016 with two other plays. Since then, prominent theater companies like L.A. Theater Works, Keen Company/Ensemble Studio Theater, and Theatrical Outfit in Atlanta have staged productions of *Boy*, exploring the complex story of a young child raised as a girl. The play is inspired by the life of David Reimer, a Canadian boy born in 1965 who, following a botched circumcision, underwent an experimental gender reassignment and was raised as a girl at the advice of psychologist John Money.[51] Through dramatized scenes from the life of the main character, Adam, also known as Samantha during childhood, Ziegler's play parallels Reimer's experiences, revealing the psychological challenges of navigating gender identities under these circumstances. Although *Boy* is inspired by Reimer's life, Ziegler adapted the framework

[51] Andrew, Alexander. "Review: "Boy" Tells Its Story Respectfully and Emotionally, But Feels Painfully Voyeuristic," *Arts Al*, October 4, 2017. https://www.artsatl.org/review-boy-tells-story-respectfully-emotionally-feels-painfully-voyeuristic/.

creatively to craft Adam's unique journey. As she noted in an interview with the Ensemble Studio Theater, the play freely draws on Reimer's experience rather than recreating it directly:

> I set the play during the same time frame as the Reimer story because it is also a chronicle of where science was during those years—if the play were set now, for instance, no one would believe that such a decision could be made, and indeed, it likely wouldn't. But the play departs quite radically from Reimer's story in almost all other respects. For instance, the John Money/David Reimer story seemed to lack the particular angle in which I was most interested—a story in which love is the blinding force, as opposed to greed or ambition or cruelty.[52]

Therefore, the play *Boy* examines the early and often contentious practices of gender assignment and the deep psychological effects on those impacted. It is especially pertinent in the context of transgender issues and current debates on gender identity and fluidity. Set in the 1960s, a time when traditional perspectives on gender were dominant, the play situates itself in a period when topics like gender reassignment were rarely addressed publicly. Medical advancements were only beginning to make such procedures possible, and surgeries were often conducted secretly. Through her sensitive view of this era, Ziegler invites audiences to consider how far society has come and to reflect on past attitudes and their lasting impacts. Adam's journey, the central narrative of *Boy*, is emblematic of the challenges individuals face when societal expectations about gender conflict with personal identity. His story serves as a reminder of the ways societal norms can deeply shape and sometimes harm individual self-perception, making Ziegler's work a thoughtful meditation on cultural shifts surrounding gender and identity.

[52] Rich Kelly. "Anna Ziegler on the Blinding Power of Love, Gender Reassignment, Parenting, Betrayal, and BOY," Ensemble Theatre Studio, March 9, 2016. https://www.ensemblestudiotheatre.org/est-blog-1/2016/3/9/anna-zieglers-boy-this-week#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20David%20Reimer,fifteen%2C%20to%20being%20a%20boy.

Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women

Figure 4. Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women Production Photos. The company of Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women. Photo: Gretjen Helene Photography (2017). From https://americanrepertorytheater.org/shows-events/trans-scripts-part-i-the-women/.

Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women, written by Paul Lucas, was first introduced in a staged reading at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in November 2013 and April 2014 as part of its developmental process. The work made its debut at the Pleasance Courtyard during the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where it featured a partial cast of characters and an evolving script. The play's full premiere occurred in 2017 at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This production at the Loeb Drama Center included all seven characters (Eden, Josephine, Luna, Sandra, Tatiana, Dr. Violet, and Zakia) using the finalized 2017 script, which serves as the basis for analysis in this research. *Trans Scripts* is a documentary-style play derived from over 75 interviews Lucas conducted with transgender women from various cultural and social backgrounds worldwide.

By assembling real-life narratives, Lucas brings these stories to the stage, offering a close, multifaceted exploration of transgender identities. Each of the seven transgender women represents a unique journey and perspective, collectively capturing the diversity and complexity within the transgender community. Paul Lucas, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, explains his motivation behind creating the play:

> I wanted to go out and speak to people and have them tell me about their experience and put their experiences onstage, and not to fictionalize anything. There's this LGBT umbrella, and obviously the T is outside it.[53]

Stories about self-acceptance are threaded throughout *Trans Scripts*, with playwright Paul Lucas describing his role as a "custodian" of the authentic narratives entrusted to him by the interviewees. The script is constructed verbatim from the accounts of seven transgender women he interviewed and is then carefully edited for coherence. As Lucas puts it, "I'm not a cis person telling anybody's story. I'm a cis person listening to dozens of stories and then trying to honor what I have heard onstage."[54] The work emerged during a pivotal time for trans rights and representation in media, reflecting ongoing challenges the transgender community faces with visibility, healthcare access, and safety. A central theme is the intersectionality of transgender lives, explored through each character's unique experience with race, socioeconomic background, and age. Discussions between characters reveal how access to healthcare, legal recognition, and social acceptance—or its lack—profoundly shape their lives. The play resonates with themes of resilience and empowerment as the characters navigate societal barriers, misrepresentation, and judgment. Lucas has indicated that a planned second part of *Trans Scripts* would expand to include stories of trans men and gender-nonconforming individuals, though no updates on this project have yet been released.

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[53] Paul Lucas quoted in Diep Tran article. "Transgender Characters, in Their Own Words," *American Theatre.org*, January 17, 2017. https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/01/17/transgender-characters-in-their-own-words/.
[54] *Id.*

Of the three plays analyzed, *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* is distinct in that it has consistently featured transgender actors portraying the play's characters on stage, allowing them to share their own lived experiences through the roles. This choice enhances the play's authenticity and aligns with its documentary-style format. In contrast, casting choices for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Boy* have varied depending on the director's vision and production context. While some productions of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* have cast transgender actors in the title role, the part has often been portrayed by cisgender actors. Similarly, *Boy* has mostly featured cisgender actors in the role of Adam.

2. Character Analysis and Representation of Identity

Across all the plays, the portrayal of transgender characters and their identities varies significantly. The elements that signify a character's transgender identity can range from subtle hints to explicit representation. Given that the plays follow a non-linear narrative structure, frequently shifting between the present and the characters' childhoods, I have chosen to divide this section into several sub-parts to ensure a cohesive analysis: First, I will examine how the transgender character(s) are initially introduced in each play. Then, I will explore their phase of childhood and struggles with identity issues. Finally, I will delve into the portrayal of the character(s) in the post-transition period.

The initial introduction of a transgender character in the play serves as the audience's first encounter with someone who has either undergone or is in the process of undergoing a gender transition. This sub-part aims to explore how the characters are introduced in the plays and portrayed first-hand, revealing important details about the plays' general

context and the societal norms they engage with. For instance, in the case of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig and the band, Angry Inch, are introduced for the first time through Yitzhak's words: "whether you like it or not… Hedwig" (*Hedwig* 9) as they take the stage. Then Hedwig immediately responds "Don't you know me? I'm the new Berlin Wall. Try and tear me down!" (*Hedwig* 9) before launching into the opening song. The whole concept of such a dramatic introduction suggests the rebellious, provocative, and shocking value-containing personality of such a character, which some spectators might not agree with or understand. Throughout her first song, "Tear Me Down" Hedwig provides more insights into her journey, and how she came up to this point, with the lyrics "I rose from off the doctor's slab/Now everyone wants to take a stab/ and decorate me/with blood graffiti and spit" (*Hedwig* 10). These lines highlight two significant aspects of her story: her experience with medical transition and the hostility she faces from society. The song itself draws parallels between Hedwig's struggle and the Berlin Wall, a symbol of division and conflict, that many people tried to "tear down" like Hedwig's personality. Yitzhak's later interruption of her song further contextualizes Hedwig's identity: "Ladies and Gentleman, Hedwig is like that wall, standing before you in the divide, between East and West, Slavery and Freedom, Man and Woman, Top and Bottom." (*Hedwig* 11). From these early details of the script, it can be understood that Hedwig exists between rigid binaries, challenging traditional gender classifications while fully embracing her identity.

In the play *Boy*, very few details about Adam—who was raised as a girl—are revealed in the introductory scene. He first appears at a Halloween party in 1989, dressed as Frankenstein. At this point, there are no explicit indications of his identity, though his choice of costume carries subtle implications. He remarks, "Frankenstein was the guy who made the monster. I'm just the monster." (*Boy* 17) In the opening pages, the play's central theme remains unclear. However, Adam's reference to himself as a *monster* suggests that others may perceive

him this way. But why? What led to this perception? These questions unfold through an analysis of his identity representation. Additionally, the reasons behind society's view of him as a *monster* will be further explored in the third section of my analysis, which focuses on societal expectations.

Conversely, in *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*, the characters are introduced directly in the preface, with each identity clearly outlined before they even appear on stage. For example, the script states: "**Eden** – white intersex female, forties, British… / **Josephine** – White Australian trans female, fifties… / **Luna** – African American/Latinx trans female, mid-to-late twenties… / **Sandra** – White trans female, sixties…" and continues until all seven characters—**Tatiana, Dr. Violet, and Zakia**—are introduced along with their defining traits. In this way, this explicit introduction immediately establishes the subject of the play and the identities of the characters the audience will encounter. By doing so, the play openly presents its themes and discussion points, ensuring that viewers are aware of the central focus before the performance even begins. As the play unfolds, following the original script, each character takes the stage one by one, sharing their personal stories with the audience.

a) The phase of childhood and the struggles with identity issues

In each play, the theme of growing up and reflecting on childhood is explored to offer the audience a deeper, more personal comprehension of the characters, raising empathy towards them. These reflections reveal key aspects of identity formation, shedding light on how each character perceives him/herself and the world around them. Childhood is a crucial stage in shaping dreams, interests, and aspirations, making it essential to understand their initial journeys.

For instance, Hedwig first recalls her childhood through a provocative question: "How can I say who touched me the most? My father"? (*Hedwig* 15). Abandoned by her father and raised by her mother, Hansel (Hedwig's birth name) grows up feeling incomplete, searching for a missing part of himself.[55]

This sense of longing first takes shape when his mother sings "The Origin of Love" (*Hedwig* 20), where the story about a body having two sets of arms, two sets of legs, and two faces is evoked. It used to be the third sex before Zeus separated it and cut it in half. The story refers to the Greek myth, the Missing half, where humans were once created with four arms, four legs, and a single head bearing two faces. However, fearing their strength, Zeus divided them in two, dooming them to wander through life in search of their missing halves. Hansel internalizes this idea, spending his childhood grappling with existential questions:

> It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she? Is it Daddy? He went away. Or Mother? / Does my other half have what I don't? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary? And what about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? (*Hedwig* 23)

Not only did it spark Hansel's initial thoughts about searching for his other half through his family members, but it also foreshadowed his eventual decision to undergo a sex change later in the story. His quest for completeness leads him toward the idea of the so-called *"third sex"*—existing somewhere between male and female.

Throughout the story, Hansel frequently evokes the image of his father, yet there is no physical description or personal portrayal of him. Hansel only references his father in relation to the pain he feels, often expressing it through questioning or uncertainty: "Is it Daddy? /We would wash our feet and brush our teeth and lay down on the narrow pallet that we had shared since Daddy left/ Daddy, when I grow up, I'll kill you?" (*Hedwig* 16-17, 23).

[55] Here, I will be using masculine pronouns such as he/his/him to refer to Hansel before the sex-change operation, as it is done the same way in the script, and feminine pronouns she/her/herself when speaking about Hedwig.

The image of the father in Hansel's mind brings forth a clear sense of anguish, yet there is also a disturbing undercurrent of melancholia and affection, as he still refers to him as "Daddy." This complex emotional response aligns with an idea explored by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she applies Freud's psychoanalysis to explore the deep, conflicted emotions tied to parental figures:

> The identifications consequent to melancholia are modes of preserving unresolved object relations, and in the case of same-sexed gender identification, the unresolved object relations are invariably homosexual. Indeed, the stricter and more stable the gender affinity, the less resolved the original loss, so that rigid gender boundaries inevitably work to conceal the loss of an original love that unacknowledged, fails to be resolved.[56]

As a consequence, the absence of the opposite-sexed parent can result in either identifying with the sex of the absent parent or rejecting that identification, leading to a deflection of heterosexual desire. This is clearly the case in Hansel's story. As a young boy who never knew his father, he was unable to form a connection with that paternal figure, leaving his understanding of love unresolved. This lack of resolution may have driven him to explore non-conventional gender norms and express non-traditional sexuality.

Another important aspect of Hansel's expression of sexuality and identity in his early years is his connection to music, particularly the artists he tended to listen to.

> Late at night, I would rest my head on the top rack … And listen to the American masters/ … Toni Tenille! … Debby Boone! …Then there were the **crypto-homo** rockers: Lou Reed! … Iggy Pop! … David Bowie! / These artists left as deep an impression on me… (*Hedwig* 17)

Hansel's musical taste was shaped by artists rumored to have non-conventional sexualities, mostly bisexuals, whom he refers to as "crypto-homo." This is another sign that influenced Hansel to identify with those outside traditional sexual norms, incorporating this aspect into his own music.

[56] Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble.* p. 86.

After all, the examples that most clearly reflect Hansel's early sexual development and identity can be found in his early twenties, particularly when he meets Corporal Luther Robinson. Luther encourages Hansel to question his sexuality, saying: "Damn, Hansel, I can't believe you're not a girl, you're so fine." (*Hedwig* 27), more of these sexual references appear through the lyrics of the song "Sugar Daddy." In the song, Luther repeatedly views Hansel through a feminine lens, suggesting that he wear women's clothing:

> LUTHER: "Oh baby, something's crossed my mind
> And I was thinking you'd look so fine
> in a velvet dress
> with heels and an ermine stole.
> HANSEL: Oh, Luther darling, heaven knows
> I've never put on women's clothes
> except for once
> my mother's camisole. … So, you think only a woman
> can truly love a man.
> Then you buy me the dress
> I'll be more woman. (*Hedwig* 29)

Through this song, Hansel not only expresses a willingness to conform to Luther's view of him as more feminine, but he also inadvertently reinforces conventional gender norms, implying that to be more "womanly," one must wear a dress, heels, and an ermine stole. His use of affectionate terms like "Luther darling" and *"Giant-Size Sugar Daddy named Luther"* (*Hedwig* 27) further highlights his desire for Luther. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, a *sugar daddy* is "a rich older man who gives presents and money to a much younger woman, usually in return for sex"[57]. In this case, however, the relationship is between two men, signaling Hansel's attraction to and fantasizing about someone of the same sex. During this phase of adulthood, Hansel becomes more direct about his sexual intentions, using phrases like "Hansel needs some sugar in his bowl" and "polish up the chrome" (*Hedwig*

[57] *sugar daddy noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com*. (s. d.). https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/sugar-daddy

28). These metaphors clearly represent Hansel's sexual awakening and desire for same-sex relationships, with expressions like "sugar" and "polish up the chrome" symbolizing sexual acts, as defined in the Urban Dictionary, particularly those related to male genitals.

The following storyline explores Luther's engagement with Hansel and introduces the first mention of the medical examination Hansel undergoes in order to change his sex. It becomes clear that Hansel's decision to undergo the sex change is, in a way, influenced by Luther, who insists: "But I got to marry you here. In East Berlin. And that means a full physical examination." (*Hedwig* 31) Due to national laws, Luther cannot marry Hansel immediately in the context of late-90s Germany. His solution is for Hansel to change his sex in order to escape East Berlin: "Baby. To walk away, you gotta leave something behind" (*Hedwig* 31). Hansel's mother appears to support this decision: "to be free, one must give up a little part of oneself. And I know just the doctor to take it" (*Hedwig* 31). Here, the phrase "leaving a part of oneself" not only suggests abandoning some of Hansel's masculine traits but also hints at the potential transformation of his body. Hansel already agreed to adopt a more feminine appearance, including wearing dresses and other items to enhance his femininity. This scene makes it clear that Hansel is now encouraged to undergo a sex reassignment surgery, a choice reinforced by the marriage laws of the time. Taking into account the historical context, same-sex marriage in Germany was only legalized in 2017, which underscores the barriers Hansel faces in the late 90s when the play is set. What could also be interesting here, which will be more explored in the third section on societal expectations, is the mother's acceptance and support for Hansel to not only fall in love with a same-sex man but also to undergo a sex change to comply with the laws of post-war East Germany. This example contrasts with the reality for many parents today, who often struggle to accept their children's non-conventional sexuality, let alone a gender transition. In cases of parental disapproval, children frequently face emotional challenges after coming out. However, the character of the mother in this play,

fully supports Hansel's transformation, even encouraging him: "Get me my passport and my camera, Hansel. I know a certain party" (*Hedwig* 31). The playwright appears to intentionally avoid adding any further familial conflict for Hansel, as his life is already portrayed as complex and difficult from the outset of the play. Instead, the play highlights Hansel's right to explore and express his identity in any direction he chooses.

In *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*, the characters' childhood experiences are portrayed in a more direct and raw manner, with fewer subtle hints about their transformations. The subject of transsexuality is tackled head-on. In the opening section of the play, titled *Earliest Childhood Memory*, each character shares the earliest memory that indicates their non-conventional identity. One character reveals: "Ever since I remember, all of my natural instincts were towards the female/You know? I'm an I Love Lucy Girl" (*Trans Scripts* 11), while another shares: "And I wanted to be a witch because, as someone who felt like a girl, I related to this character" (*Trans Scripts* 11). Another adds, "I'd prance around the house in her shoes, her makeup, her clothes" (*Trans Scripts* 12). At first glance, these memories might seem like typical expressions of a young girl's fantasies—desiring to emulate a favorite female character or wear feminine clothing. However, the context is very different: these are the experiences of males assigned at birth who have undergone or are in the process of undergoing body transformation. The play emphasizes that these characters were very different in their childhood and have transitioned in ways that are almost unrecognizable. As the story progresses, the characters reveal more personal details, such as Eden saying, "I dropped it on my mum in the car. I said 'I'm not a boy'" (*Trans Scripts* 12). Dr. Violet shares a similar sentiment: "There was a sense of certainty, something inside of me which said 'I am a girl' […] 'Dear God, when I wake up in the morning, can I *please* be a little girl?'" (*Trans Scripts* 13). These statements highlight the psychological, emotional, physical, relational, societal, and spiritual complexities involved in gender identity confusion. Many of the characters admit

feeling uncomfortable in their male bodies and have idealized feminine traits since childhood. Some also experience bodily distortions, as one character recalls, "you had hernia […] I was not growing up the way little boys should be growing up" (*Trans Scripts* 15). Such distortions further shape their psychological and emotional experiences. This highlights the deep, multifaceted nature of identity and transition, as explored by Stryker:

> Some transgender people share this belief and assume that their need to cross gender boundaries has a physical, sex-linked cause. Other transgender people understand their sense of being transgendered to be entirely unrelated to biological sex differences and to be related instead to psychological and cultural processes.[58]

In the play, *Boy*, the protagonist's experience of being considered transgender differs significantly from the other plays. Adam's story, involving being raised as a girl and undergoing treatments, is revealed through flashbacks featuring the character of Samantha. Unlike in Lucas's play, where the protagonist's identity and transition are discussed openly from the start, *Boy* takes a different approach. Here, Adam's story is not one of self-awareness or a conscious choice to transition, but rather an experiment imposed by his parents and the doctor following an accident that damaged his genitalia. With the assistance of Dr. Wendell, Adam's parents decide to raise him as a girl when he is just eight months old, fearing that the damage to his body would cause irreversible psychological harm: "an incomplete boy, which could well do irreparable damage to the psyche" (*Boy* 28). This decision is presented as a burden placed on the child, with Adam being described as being "not normal:" "He will never be a father. He will never be normal" (*Boy* 27). It is important to note that the play is set in 1968, a time when societal judgments were harsh, and primitive. Risky experiments were performed in the hope of conforming to societal norms and creating a "healthy, normal" child. Dr. Wendell suggests: "Penile reconstruction isn't advanced, so the option remaining to you is to raise your son as a

[58] Stryker, Susan (2008). *Transgender History*. p. 8.

female" (*Boy* 28). The parents echo a sentiment that reflects the play's theme, saying: "You said we are shaped by society and not biology" (*Boy* 27), implying that society, rather than biology, dictates how people should behave or act. This idea underpins the construction of Adam's feminine identity as Samantha.[59] From then on, Adam is continuously taught how to behave as a girl: "Let's have you sitting up straight. Yes—that's good. Oh —remember to cross your legs—like this" (*Boy* 23), and is encouraged to engage in traditionally feminine activities, such as playing with dolls and taking an interest in activities like gymnastics and figure skating: "you know, cook with her, play with dolls, watch gymnastics or figure-skating, talk openly and honestly about our bodies" (*Boy* 41). These instructions rely on conventional gender norms, with the dialogue reflecting the expectations placed on Adam. "But then my mom told me: "No playing with the truck. That's boy stuff"" (*Boy* 24). Dr. Wendell refers to Samantha as "his primary interest" (*Boy* 26), comparing the character to an experimental subject in a scientific study, where his transformation is regarded as something to be closely observed and shaped according to his ideas of femininity. As part of the experiment, Adam is continually urged to take hormones to develop more feminine characteristics: "I know it's important in the same way I know that it's important that you take your medicine so that your breasts develop" (*Boy* 61), and is constantly encouraged to follow Dr. Wendell's directives to fully transition into a woman: "You need to be made whole. You were born with a vagina that wasn't quite finished, and you have to have one that's fully functioning" (*Boy* 52). However, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Adam rarely identifies with the femininity being imposed upon him. He consistently pushes back against the identity his parents and Dr. Wendell try to force on him, saying: "I hate that! / I want to be Luke Skywalker. Be him" (*Boy* 59). By the time he reaches thirteen, the image of Samantha begins to crumble: "She doesn't fit in with anyone. Hates

[59] Here, though the play uses female pronouns for Samantha in flashbacks, I will continue to refer to the character using male pronouns *he/him* to avoid confusion, as Samantha is essentially a constructed image of Adam's life.

wearing girl's clothes. Stands up to pee. Did you know that? She stands. What girl does that? Trudy says she won't wear her little bra" (*Boy* 67). This rebellion reflects Adam's internal struggle between two conflicting worlds, as well as the failure of the experiment to transform him into a complete woman. It highlights the psychological complexities involved in forcing an individual into a gender identity that doesn't align with their inner sense of self. Ultimately, Adam's parents bear the responsibility for trying to shape him into something he could never become, driven by societal pressures—a theme that will be explored further in section 3 of my analysis.

Ironically, the reference to *Jane Eyre*, the heroine of Charlotte Bronte's novel, and the theme of becoming what one desires are recurring elements in the play, even coming from Dr. Wendell himself. He remarks, "She is such a wonderful symbol, isn't she, of independence and freethinking…" (*Boy* 49), highlighting Jane Eyre's role as a groundbreaking figure who thought ahead of her time, even in comparison to other literary figures of the same period. The irony deepens as Dr. Wendell continues to explain Eyre's example to Samantha, "she's a very modern woman, don't you think? 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will'" (*Boy* 49). These passages introduce the idea of freedom and independent will, implying the ability to choose one's own life path. However, Dr. Wendell's words take on an ironic tone, knowing that he is the one imposing a feminine identity on Adam, restricting his freedom to develop his own sense of self, and constantly regulating his behavior. Another symbol of freedom and self-determination emerges in the script through Jenny, Adam's partner later in life, as she sings him a song:

> Some daddies are writers, or grocery sellers
> Or painters or welders, or funny-joke tellers
> Some daddies play cello, or sail on the sea
> Yeah, daddies can be almost anything they want to be. (*Boy* 45)

It comes from the song “Free to be You and Me” that Jenny usually sings to her son while encouraging him to become anyone he aspires to be when he grows up. The core message of the song was to promote gender neutrality in the post-1960s era, celebrating values like individuality, tolerance, and self-acceptance. Its underlying message is that anyone—regardless of gender—can achieve anything. While the song does not explicitly promote gender neutrality, it still presents a heteronormative perspective, advocating acceptance of others’ choices without imposing restrictive boundaries, as Adam’s parents have done in his case.

Ultimately, the whole process of being a woman, according to Dr. Wendell is “a long process, Trudy. Full of ups and downs” (*Boy* 64). It raises questions, such as: What makes someone a woman? Is it having fully functioning female body parts? Wearing women’s clothing? Exhibiting feminine behavior in society? These are crucial questions that arise across the plays. In each of them, we witness a man’s transformation into a woman, sparking a broader conversation about gender roles and societal norms. But after all, what truly defines someone as male or female? This continuous inquiry lies at the core of the playwright’s efforts to interrogate and discuss these conventional notions critically.

b) The portrayal of the character(s) in the post-transition period.

As demonstrated throughout the plays, each transgender character embarks on a distinct childhood journey, one that is uniquely personal to them. This journey involves the exploration of their identities, culminating in the point where each chooses a path that leads them toward the gender they most identify with. These diverse and individual experiences underscore the complexity of transgender representation, illustrating that, even within the same category, the backgrounds and stories of transgender individuals are highly varied. In this section, I will explore the later lives of key characters who have transitioned, either fully or

partially, from their assigned sex at birth, examining whether they have accepted their "new identity" and other pertinent elements contributing to those identities.

In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch,* Hansel, now known as Mrs. Hedwig Robinson, following her mother's approval and marriage to Luther Robinson in Berlin in 1988, expresses his entire experience of the sex-change operation through the lyrics of "The Angry Inch":

> My sex–change operation got botched
> My guardian angel fell asleep on the watch
> Now all I got is a Barbie Doll–crotch
> I got an angry inch.
> …
> My mother made my tits out of clay
> My boyfriend told me that he'd take me away
> They dragged me to the doctor one day
> I've got an angry inch
> …
> When I woke up from the operation
> I was bleeding down there
> I was bleeding from the gash between my legs
> My first day as a woman
> and already it's that time of the month
> But two days later the hole closed up.
> The wound healed
> and I was left with a one inch mound of flesh
> where my penis used to be
> where my vagina never was.[60]

The lyrics of the song depict the transition and sex-change operation, highlighting its complex implications. Hansel undergoes a sex-change procedure, but the operation is botched, and the attempt to create female genitalia fails. This reflects the challenges of the transitioning process, where one begins transitioning, takes hormones, and eventually undergoes surgery—an endeavor that rarely results in complete success and often carries significant consequences. The line in the play, "(A projected little HANSEL gains a wig and dress)" (*Hedwig* 35), symbolizes the acceptance and imitation of her new female identity, marked by the addition of feminine attire. However, this new identity also signals the beginning of a new phase in her

[60] Mitchell, J. C. (1998). *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. p. 32-33.

life, as she states, "'Cause I'm just an embryo, with a long, long way to go" (*Hedwig* 35). Here, Hedwig reflects on her transition, comparing herself to an embryo, symbolizing the process of learning and growing into her new gender—it's like viewing the world through entirely new eyes.

Similar to Ziegler's *Boy*, Dr. Wendell informs Adam's parents that transitioning into a female identity is a long and challenging process with significant implications. He explains, "It's a choice both radical and scary, with a long road ahead—a surgery now to begin construction of the vagina, hormone treatments, a final surgery down the line" (*Boy* 28). However, in Adam's case, the imposition of a feminine image on him ultimately fails. Adam did not consciously choose to change his gender or sex, as evidenced by his ongoing rejection and lack of interest in feminine ideals from childhood onward. While some feminine traits were forced upon him, these efforts caused lasting damage to his sense of identity. Even as an adult, Adam shows no inclination to express himself as a female. His conversations with his parents and Jenny reveal his enduring interests that align with more traditionally masculine activities. For example, he expresses enthusiasm for cars, saying, "That's pretty nice—front wheel drive, four-cylinder engine, four-wheel independent suspension—that's a good car" (*Boy* 21), and "Like Doug is always showing Stephen how the car works, looking under the hood, you know, explaining everything, and Samantha's always dying to be out there too" (*Boy* 43). Here Adam indicates that he has always been interested in cars, even when he was treated as a girl, and later, through his conversation with Jenny, this idea confirms his interest. "Or I could look at your car. See if I can't get to the bottom of the battery problem" (*Boy* 31). His continued interest in cars can be seen as a reflection of a socially constructed stereotype, where boys are expected to be interested in mechanics, while girls are not. Similarly, Adam's fascination with sci-fi and war-related topics further highlights these gender expectations, as he states, "But, you know…I loved sci-fi, fantasy. Childhood's End. Narnia. Lord of the Rings. War stuff. Anything to do

with war, really" (*Boy* 32), and recounts a violent incident which made him feel a sense of euphoria (*Boy* 47). The play *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*, also offers examples of conventional gender norms and of labels placed on others. Many men who transition to women do so with the intent of being categorized as female, which requires them to adopt gendered behaviors to appear more "ladylike." One character, for instance, reflects on the subtle mannerisms required to embody femininity: "It's a matter of ticking of all the little things you can change. Mannerisms. How do you sit when you're on the tube? How do you hail a taxi? … Is your elbow out? Is your elbow down? It's the subtleties" (*Trans Scripts* 39). Dr. Violet also comments on the societal dismissiveness of women, stating, "When you're asked your opinion, they ignore it of course, because, after all, you're only a woman" (*Trans Scripts* 39). These examples highlight how society enforces gender norms, imposing expectations on how individuals should behave or what they should become. These societal pressures also affect transgender individuals, who, in transitioning, often feel compelled to conform to the gender norms imposed on them, whether that means adopting a more submissive and gentler demeanor or, conversely, displaying aggressivity and emotional restraint. Through these examples, the plays propose a critique of the persistence of gender stereotypes.

Certain moments in Adam's adult life reflect the lasting effects of his childhood treatment. When Jenny attempts to kiss him unsuccessfully, she questions his sexuality, asking if he is gay and listing her observations: "You sit with your legs crossed in this way that reminds me of this woman who came to teach manners one year at church. You talk a little gay, no offense; you walk a little gay" (*Boy* 46). This moment highlights how the early conditioning Adam underwent as a child had irreversible consequences on his later life. Jenny, embodying a traditionally feminine and nurturing role, seeks a male partner who aligns with conventional gender norms, one whose gender identity and masculinity are unambiguous. Adam's mannerisms, shaped by his upbringing, introduce uncertainty in Jenny's perception of him.

Despite these moments of ambiguity, the play also affirms Adam's masculine identity. In the scene where his parents meet Jenny, Adam is presented as a "guy" by the playwright, reinforcing his male identity. He even expresses his willingness to take on a paternal role, stating, "I'll be Brian's dad" (*Boy* 56), signaling his recognition of himself as a man and his desire to fulfill a fatherly role. However, Adam's internal struggle with identity persists, particularly when he reunites with Dr. Wendell after many years. He admits, "I don't know who I am" (*Boy* 80), suggesting a possible sense of non-binarity or an ongoing struggle to define himself within rigid gender categories. This ambiguity becomes even more apparent when Adam finally opens up to Jenny about his past:

> I was born a boy, but there was an accident, and then for fifteen years I was a girl, not knowing I'd been anything else, but also knowing, you know? And after that, I was a boy again, and I had three operations, and now I have a dick that doesn't really work. Not really. (*Boy* 83)

Adam's confession serves as both an acknowledgment of his past and an acceptance of the person he has become. He tells Jenny that it has been eight years since he underwent additional surgeries to restore his "male identity." However, as indicated in the script, his reconstructed male genitalia do not function properly, an outcome that aligns with the medical risks associated with detransitioning. The process of reversing a gender transition, known as detransition, often carries significant medical, psychological, and social challenges. Clinical Psychologist Laura Charlton explains, "Detransition is the process of reverting to one's gender assigned at birth after a period of transition and presents unique challenges in healthcare."[61] Beyond the physical implications—such as irreversible damage to reproductive and sexual function—detransitioning individuals often experience emotional distress, social alienation, and an ongoing struggle with their sense of identity. Adam's story exemplifies these challenges.

[61] Charlton, D. L., & Bond, D. R. (2024). Clinical considerations and endocrinological implications in the detransition process. *Best Practice & ; Research Clinical Endocrinology & ; Metabolism*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beem.2024.101932

His detransition is not a result of personal choice but rather a rejection of the imposed female identity that others forced upon him. Despite reclaiming his male identity, he remains uncertain about his sense of self and faces difficulties in his relationships, particularly with Jenny. The play *Boy* ultimately raises critical questions about gender identity and the consequences of externally imposed transitions. Unlike many transgender narratives that depict fulfillment in transitioning, Adam's experience highlights the complexities of gender identity, particularly when external pressures dictate a person's gender expression. His story underscores that not all individuals who transition find alignment or satisfaction in their "new" gender, especially when their transition was not self-determined but imposed upon them. Adam's struggle reflects the broader theme of the play—the psychological and social consequences of forcing an identity onto someone, leading to a profound sense of displacement and an inability to fully belong to a single, defined gender category.

In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig's transition, though initially imposed by Luther as a condition for marriage, is ultimately embraced as part of her identity. She explicitly defines herself as a woman, stating, "I sit in my mobile home… Divorced, penniless, a woman" (*Hedwig* 35), or "I look back on where I'm from look at the woman I've become" (Mitchell 37). As the play progresses, Hedwig no longer references taking hormones or undergoing further surgeries to "correct" the failed operation that left her without a fully functional female anatomy. Instead, the playwright consistently uses female pronouns (she/her) when referring to Hedwig, reinforcing her identity as a woman. In addition, throughout the play, Hedwig occasionally reflects on the concept of power, a notion first introduced by her mother during childhood with the words: "Absolute power corrupts. […] Better to be powerless, my son" (*Hedwig* 16). As she searches for her missing "other half," she begins to associate power with the idea of completeness, viewing the unification of male and female as a form of self-actualization. This is evident in her reflection: "Practical questions of wholeness. Completion.

Think of it. I thought of it. I thought of the power" (*Hedwig* 23). In this sense, her transition can be seen as an attempt to achieve this power—not by fully aligning with one gender, but by existing in a space that integrates elements of both—male and female. The idea of it haunts Hedwig, as she recalls the story her mother used to tell her, of Gods separating sexes. And so, in that way, her transition from male to female suggests that she obtained this power. From a Foucauldian perspective, "Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex," a statement that underscores how institutions such as medicine, law, and social norms establish rigid frameworks for gender and sexuality. Hedwig's journey challenges these constraints, as she seeks to reclaim agency over her identity through music and self-expression. The recurring theme of the "other half" reflects Foucault's notion that identity is shaped by external forces, while also implying the potential to challenge and redefine these structures. Ultimately, the play proposes that true power is not derived from conforming to societal expectations, but from self-acceptance and personal authenticity.

Another significant element in the play evoked in Hedwig's character and personality, is the concept of camp. As Kate Bornstein describes in *Gender Outlaw*, "Camp is a uniquely queer experience. It's a sense of humor developed in response to oppression based on a unique gender identity, and a minority sexual orientation."[62] Camp provides a means to navigate gender fluidity through humor, making the experience of being genderless more accessible. Fabio Cleto further refines this idea, stating that "Camp is a style (whether of objects or of the way objects are perceived is debated) that favors 'exaggeration', 'artifice', and 'extremity'".[63] It focuses on being dramatic and subversive, often challenging societal norms in a fun or exaggerated way. Hedwig embodies this spirit of camp through her bold and insolent performances, which include exaggerated gestures and shocking humor. For instance, moments

[62] Bornstein, Kate (2013). *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Routledge. p. 135.
[63] Fabio, C. (Dir.). (1999). *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: a reader*. Edinburgh University Press. p. 4.

such as: “She tears open her dress and pulls two tomatoes from her bra. She smashes them on her body and crumples to the floor” (*Hedwig* 56), or her sarcastic remark, “Some bitch stopped me on the way in, “‘What poor, unfortunate creature had to die for you to wear that?”’ ‘“My Aunt Trudi,”’ I replied.” (*Hedwig* 39). It exemplifies the over-the-top, defiant nature of camp. This aesthetic not only adds layers to Hedwig’s persona but also serves as a tool for challenging dominant gender narratives through parody and performativity with the inclusion of informal language.

Another key element related to the queer community is drag, which appears in both *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*. In the play, Hedwig describes Yitzhak, a member of the band The Angry Inch, as “the most famous drag queen in Zagreb” (*Hedwig* 40). While drag is hinted at early in the play, it becomes even more apparent throughout, especially in the movie where Hedwig performs in drag at various bars, wearing wigs and dresses, and entertaining the audience with her campy persona. All of this becomes even more evident as Hedwig expresses her sentiments in the song “Wig In A Box”:

> I put on some make–up and turn up the eight–track
> I’m pulling the wig down from the shelf
> Suddenly I’m Miss Farrah Fawcett
> from TV
> until I wake up
> and I turn back to myself. (*Hedwig* 38)

Although Hedwig has transitioned and identifies as female, she continues to perform in drag, which, like camp, exaggerates existing gender norms. As Butler observes, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.”[64] Drag, in this sense, challenges the distinction between inner and outer identity, mocking both the traditional expression of gender and the idea of a true, fixed gender identity. It serves as an example showing that “reality” is not as rigid as we often perceive it to be,

[64] Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble.* p. 187.

exposing the fluidity of gender to counter the restrictive nature of gender norms. In *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women,* Zakia recalls the emotional impact of witnessing drag performances: "They had a drag show, and I saw this performer, Victoria Snow. And I was just transfixed by this entertainer. […] when I went to this club, it was like, 'Wow. A whole new world'" (*Trans Scripts* 20). Though the concept of drag is not deeply explored in this play, it is presented as a natural part of queer performance culture. Created in 2016, the play reflects the ongoing evolution of drag, a tradition that began before the 21st century. It is common for individuals who witness a queer performer in their authentic space to feel a deep connection, sensing that a part of them belongs there, which inspires them to express their gender more openly.

In Lucas's play, the process of accepting one's identity after transitioning is vividly portrayed. The characters share their full transitioning stories and express pride in who they have become. One character reflects, "I would say that my journey really began around 1992," while another adds, "I first went for help in 19…59 […] I was forty years old, and I entered therapy. […] It was the 1980s, so there was no Internet" (*Trans Scripts* 20). Some characters, now in their sixties, began transitioning at a time when the concept of transgender identity was less understood. Many were inspired by Christine Jorgensen, the first person in the United States to undergo sex-reassignment surgery in 1952. One character recalls, "She was like the first person in the United States to have sex-reassignment surgery" (*Trans Scripts* 16). The story of Luna settles early in her teenage years when she was around 12, "And it was at that point where I was like, "Oh! I'm trans! I mean, I knew I was trans, but I didn't have the words…"" (*Trans Scripts* 21). Luna is one of the youngest characters to share her transition journey. She reflects on knowing from a young age that she felt she was crossing gender boundaries, though, as a child, it was difficult for her to fully understand gender and express it in complex terms. For all the characters, transitioning starts with taking hormones and frequent

visits to the doctor. Many of them discuss the difficulty of finding doctors willing to treat them, and the long wait before receiving prescriptions. Some sought alternatives, and, often, dangerous methods, like buying hormones online or attending illegal "pumping" parties where they received silicone injections. One character shares: "But there are a lot of health risks with silicone. A lot of the stuff they're using isn't medical grade. So if girls get their face hit too hard, it can shift" (*Trans Scripts* 25). As seen in previous plays, transitioning carries significant health risks, including complications with identity, organ dysfunction, and psychological challenges. This is also reflected in the play when characters reveal their struggles after transitioning: "I looked at the scary stories. People that regretted having it done. People that lost everything…" (*Trans Scripts* 31). Here, "it" refers to the sex-change operation. The emotional burden is evident as some characters express feelings of hopelessness: "I'm not gonna live past twenty-eight. That's my 'use-by' date", "It's like quicksand. The more you struggle, the more you just feel yourself sinking into it." And "I was looking for an accident to happen… something absolute, with no chance of survival." One woman ends with a poignant statement: "So I decided. '"Yes, I did die."' And I could now spend the rest of my life living as the gender that I'd always wanted to be" (*Trans Scripts* 35). These powerful statements highlight the struggles transgender people face due to societal critique. They often find themselves lost in their identities, not fully fitting into the gender they transitioned to, nor into the one they left behind. The idealized world they imagine is one in which they can be whoever they want, free from societal pressure and judgment. Unfortunately, reality often involves turning to substances as a form of escape from the stress and oppression they endure.

3. Transgression and Judgment: Social Critique of Trans Identities

All three plays highlight the societal expectations and criticisms faced by transgender individuals, ranging from subtle hints to overt harassment and disdain. However, while the scenes avoid directly depicting physical violence, these experiences are conveyed through the characters' narratives. This section aims to address the widespread misrepresentation and marginalization of trans identities in society. Transphobia arises from the perception that being cisgender is the norm, while transgender and other gender identities are viewed as inferior, devalued, or deviant.

For example, in Adam's case, the social dimension is highly evident, as the play spans from 1968 to 1990—a period when society was resistant to unconventional norms. A pivotal line from Adam's parents to Dr. Wendell captures this: "You said we are shaped by society and not biology" (*Boy* 27). This means that the society of that era adhered to rigid norms, leaving no room for those who deviated from them. Adam's upbringing as Samantha, which is part of Dr. Wendell's experiment, illustrates the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. This failure echoes through Adam's life, from being treated as a female in childhood to feeling isolated as a teenager: "She's thirteen years old and no one talks to her" (*Boy* 67). Adam's self-perception is further revealed when he says, "Frankenstein was the guy who made the monster. I'm just the monster" (*Boy* 17), highlighting his struggle with societal judgment and alienation. By dressing as Frankenstein's monster, Adam metaphorically expresses his experiences of being misunderstood and the complexities of living with an identity externally constructed by others. Much like Frankenstein's creature in Mary Shelley's novel—assembled from various body parts and rejected by society despite his longing for acceptance—Adam battles isolation and seeks understanding in a world that views him as different.

The subtle judgment from society is also reflected in Hedwig's story, as she conveys much of society's disdain through her songs:

> Enemies and adversaries
> they try and tear me down
> You want me, baby, I dare you
> Try and tear me down
> I rose from off of the doctor's slab
> like Lazarus from the pit
> Now everyone wants to take a stab
> and decorate me
> with blood graffiti and spit. (*Hedwig* 10)

This song and scene reveal Hedwig's struggles as an outsider. She draws a parallel between herself and the Berlin Wall, symbolizing division, exclusion, and political rejection. The lyrics imply that society relentlessly seeks to categorize and dismantle individuals who defy conventional norms. Other scenes, such as Hedwig and her band performing in small, run-down venues or struggling restaurants, illustrate how society disregards her talent. The moment when the audience hurls tomatoes at her (*Hedwig* 42) reflects rejection, though not explicitly due to her gender identity. It can be seen as society rejecting those who defy traditional norms, while simultaneously highlighting and embracing the rebellious, campy aspects of her personality. This interpretation is further reinforced by the presence of the character named Tommy Gnosis, a famous rock icon who, according to Hedwig, stole her songs and rose to fame. Hedwig insists, "I wrote every song on that album!" (*Hedwig* 15). Tommy erases Hedwig's influence from his public image to fit the mold of a "clean" Christian rock star. His rejection of Hedwig stems from societal expectations and the fear of being associated with someone who challenges gender norms. This rejection is further emphasized when Hedwig reveals, "I am suddenly very much aware that we haven't kissed in all the months we've been together. In fact, he has maintained a near-perfect ignorance of the front of me" (*Hedwig* 47). This suggests that Tommy's discomfort with Hedwig's gender identity prevents him from engaging in a fully intimate relationship. The scene suggests that Hedwig's partner struggles

to fully accept her transitioning body, avoiding physical intimacy with what he perceives as an "incomplete" transgender body. As a result, Hedwig channels her emotions and frustration through her music. Meanwhile, Hansel's mother and Lieutenant Luther represent complex forms of acceptance. While Hedwig's mother appears supportive of her child's identity, her actions reveal a controlling and detached nature. She pushes Hansel toward gender reassignment surgery not out of genuine understanding but as a means of survival and escape to the West. The lines, "when she touched me it was usually by accident," "She slapped me," and "(projection of a mom and little boy not holding hands)" (*Hedwig* 16), hint at a lack of warmth and emotional connection. Rather than allowing Hansel to explore his identity organically, she forces a life-altering decision upon him, prioritizing survival over self-discovery.

More overt examples of social rejection are evident in *Trans Scripts, Part 1: The Women*, as the characters openly recount the hardships they endured before and after transitioning, drawing from real-life experiences. Luna reflects on her childhood: "Honey, as SOON as you get off the bus from school, you can put this on in the house, and you can have it on ALL day. But you can't go to school in this… And she said 'Cuz they'll take you from Grandma." Another character confesses: "Not that it had much room for expression. I had no friends. I certainly couldn't talk to my parents. I couldn't talk to anybody" (*Trans Scripts* 11-13). These moments highlight the characters' struggle to express their true selves from a young age, their fascination with wearing clothing associated with the opposite gender, and the profound sense of isolation that resulted from defying societal norms. Challenging these expectations had lasting effects on their lives: "When I was little, people used to call me horrible names. 'Faggot.' 'Queer.' 'Homo...'" (*Trans Scripts* 17). Eden shares: "My dad used to beat me pretty regularly. He'd whip me with a plastic tent pole so hard I didn't go to school from it" (*Trans Scripts* 18). She continues, "But at least I wasn't getting fucked by my dad like

I was at home. […] Yeah, there was some particularly nasty summers with my dad. He certainly made up for lost time" Another character admits, "The best way to avoid this was to become very stiff and robotic in the way I comported" (*Trans Scripts* 18). By suppressing their true identities and conforming to cisgender behaviors and mannerisms, they seek to avoid the physical and verbal abuse inflicted by intolerant individuals. This constant need for self-erasure has a profound and damaging impact on their well-being. Even after transitioning, the struggle for acceptance persists. One character shares, "I was terrified. Because I knew how society was going to look at me," while another reveals, "I tried to find hobbies that people thought were a bit more masculine. I'd go deer hunting in New Zealand. […] I would cry, weep, every time, because I killed something just to take away people's perceptions of me" (*Trans Scripts* 32-33). So, these examples illustrate that even after transitioning, trans individuals continue to face judgment and criticism, which can lead to intense negative emotions and contribute to emotional and psychological distress. Throughout the play, numerous scenes depict the resistance and hostility directed toward transgender people, highlighting the lack of acceptance and equality they experience. However, the play also emphasizes the subject of intersectionality, as characters like Luna (an African American/Latinx trans woman in her late 20s) and Zakia (an African American trans woman in her late 30s, who began transitioning at twenty-one and works as a social worker by day and drag performer by night) bring diverse perspectives. Zakia reflects, "It's sad how much people can hate on someone that they don't understand. […] We have to deal with comments, how people look at you when you're in the bathroom, all of that…" (*Trans Scripts* 55). Luna further reveals the compounded challenges faced by transgender women of color, illustrating the layered discrimination they endure:

> But if I'm being realistic, I have to remember that for every step forward, most marginalized groups take two steps back. […] And you don't get more persecuted and oppressed than a trans woman, especially a BLACK trans woman, or a LATINA trans woman or a POOR trans woman. You're trapped in your body AND your circumstance. In 2016, there were more trans

> women murdered in this country than ever before, almost all of them women of color. (*Trans Scripts* 58)

Through these revelations, Lucas aims to emphasize how factors such as race, class, age, and access to healthcare affect the transgender experience in unique ways. As a Black trans woman, Zakia faces both racial discrimination and gender-based oppression, which makes her more susceptible to systemic bias, violence, and a lack of social support. Luna discusses the additional challenges faced by trans individuals of color, especially in terms of their social class. Given that trans women of color historically have less access to quality healthcare due to economic disparities, medical bias, and racial stereotypes, their experiences add depth to *Trans Scripts*, underscoring that trans identity is not a singular experience, but one shaped by a variety of societal and personal factors. The playwrights use their works to reflect societal issues, particularly the challenges faced by transgender individuals, critiquing norms and exposing harmful realities they endure. However, while highlighting trauma and alienation, they avoid reducing transgender characters to mere victims. Instead, the plays tend to emphasize their empowerment and agency.

4. How Do Marginalized Voices Claim Power Through Storytelling?

The themes of empowerment are deeply connected to the experiences of transgender individuals and any marginalized group. This section aims to reinforce the voices of these individuals, giving them power in the face of contempt and rejection from others. Across all three plays, moments of empowerment manifest themselves either subtly or more directly.

For example, in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the empowerment moment occurs when Hedwig fully embraces who she is at the end of the play, after enduring struggles in her love life, gender-affirming surgery, and seeking acceptance from those she cares about. This can be seen as her final journey toward self-acceptance, liberation, and embracing her personal identity without relying on external validation or societal expectations. Through her final performance of "Midnight Radio," it becomes clear that her self-realization and emotional freedom have finally found their place, as she sings:

> Breathe Feel Love
> Give Free
> Know in your soul
> Like your blood knows the way
> From your heart to your brain
> Know that you're whole
> And you're shining
> Like the brightest star (*Hedwig* 59).

This song, along with the stage directions that follow, serves as a powerful moment urging the audience to fully embrace themselves, much like Hedwig does in the lyrics, "lift up your hands" and "you're shining like the brightest star" (*Hedwig* 60-61). One of the key themes of the play is the quest for one's other half and the search for completion. By the end of the play, Hedwig no longer seeks Tommy's validation nor tries to reclaim her stolen music. She realizes that Tommy Gnosis is not the missing part of her, and she empowers herself by acknowledging that she has always been whole on her own. Another empowering moment occurs when she allows her life and musical partner, Yitzhak, to fully embrace his identity by placing the wig on his head—something he had longed for, feeling overshadowed by Hedwig's presence on stage. In the past, Hedwig manipulated Yitzhak, once known as Krystal, a drag queen from Zagreb, Croatia, by using Luther's words: "Krystal, to walk away, you gotta leave something behind. I'll marry you on the condition that a wig never touch your head again"

(*Hedwig* 40). In the end, through the stage directions, Hedwig releases the shackles she imposed on Yitzhak, allowing him to be who he always wanted to be:

> (HEDWIG retrieves the wig extension and begins to sing. She holds the wig out to YITZHAK. With a sigh, YITZHAK takes it and begins to put it on HEDWIG's head. HEDWIG stops him. YITZHAK hesitates, then places the wig on his own head.)
> (HEDWIG begs YITZHAK's hand. He grants it and they dance. She releases his hand, setting him free. YITZHAK is bewildered at first. Then he slowly descends the stage and exits into the house with the grace of new hope. HEDWIG waves goodbye.)
> (*Hedwig* 59-60)

These moments not only depict Hedwig literally shedding the drag, wigs, and persona she has created as a defense mechanism, but also demonstrate her empathy toward others, as she allows them the freedom to be themselves by liberating Yitzhak from the constraints of her own imagined control. The scene in which she removes her wig, standing vulnerable yet fully herself for the first time, can be seen as a pivotal moment of self-realization. She understands that she will never fully embody a female identity and that the external elements she uses are merely extensions of her persona. In this moment, she acknowledges that her identity transcends being female, non-binary, or any specific gender altogether. By the end of the song, as the script suggests, Hedwig departs with a sense of empowerment:

> The upstage door opens under its own power. Bright light and enormous cheers flood the stage. HEDWIG blows a kiss to the audience and walks through the door into the light. The projected male and female faces merge into a single one.
> (*Hedwig* 61)

While the moment of Hedwig's departure may seem somewhat ambiguous, it still conveys a sense of empowerment as she exits the stage and steps into the light. Unlike the darker, more painful phases of her earlier scenes, this moment signifies her newfound sense of happiness. Her kiss to the audience contrasts with her previous, more hostile and campy interactions with the crowd. This time, the audience's affection for her is stronger than ever.

Her walk into the bright light serves as a powerful symbol of hope and rebirth, marking a moment of catharsis when the audience, too, is invited to celebrate self-acceptance. Although the ending isn't fully resolved—leaving us uncertain of what comes next—it suggests a profound personal liberation. The image of "the projected male and female faces merging into a single one" (*Hedwig 61)* signifies that Hedwig has reconciled her masculine and feminine aspects, embracing wholeness from within herself, no longer searching for her other half.

In the play *Boy*, the script offers more subtle yet deeply empowering moments that are both inspiring and moving. Adam's consistent rejection of the gender roles imposed by Dr. Wendell through their conversations highlights his growing confidence and refusal to accept someone's authority over his identity. When confronted with discussions about what it means to be a "real girl," Adam resists these labels and asserts his own understanding of femininity. His repeated responses as Samantha, "Just let it go. I'm not gonna do it" and "Stop it!! Just stop talking" (*Boy* 61), reveal his discomfort with others referring to his past in ways that don't align with his truth. These moments reflect his developing ability to stand up for himself, even in small conversations that may seem insignificant to others. Later in the play, Adam further confirms his autonomy by choosing his name: "My name is Adam. I chose my name. I chose it. See, I was never Samantha. She never existed" (*Boy* 79). This scene acts as a powerful moment, demonstrating that Adam is in control of his identity and is embracing his true self. Rather than allowing his past to define him, Adam chooses to move forward, in love, in life, and in his identity. Additional moments of empowerment emerge when Adam advises Jenny, "You could un-stick it" (*Boy* 18) when others start calling her "Jen" instead of her full name. Jenny responds, "That's actually pretty hard. People start thinking about you in a certain way maybe," (*Boy* 18) implying that she is allowing others to impose an identity on her. Adam, in contrast, has spent his entire life trying to "un-stick" the labels and perceptions others have placed on him, indicating his growth and newfound freedom. The scene where Dr. Wendell

talks about art to Adam is also a powerful metaphor for Adam's personal transformation. The line, "Art can inspire you. It can move you" (*Boy* 35), serves as a metaphor for Adam's journey of self-redefinition. Just as art challenges perspectives and evokes emotions, Adam is starting to redefine himself beyond the constraints of his past. He's no longer a passive recipient of a constructed identity; instead, he is beginning to see the power in creating his own narrative. Ziegler's choice to name the protagonist "Adam" may carry symbolic weight, potentially evoking a biblical allusion. As the name Adam is traditionally associated with the first man, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for new beginnings, identity formation, and the search for origin. In this context, Adam becomes not only a personal name but a broader symbol of reclamation and rebirth. Yet, one of the most empowering moments occurs near the end of the play when Adam finally opens up to Jenny, the woman he likes. Up until this point, Adam has struggled with secrecy, shame, and the fear of rejection. However, by sharing his truth with Jenny, he takes a significant step toward self-acceptance and honesty: "*She stares at him; then she realizes*. I was born a boy, but there was an accident, and then for fifteen years I was a girl, not knowing I'd been anything else, but also knowing, you know?" (*Boy* 83). This moment marks his assertion of autonomy over his narrative, revealing who he truly is—a story that was previously dictated by doctors and his parents. Although there is a risk of rejection, Adam's decision to be open with Jenny affirms his right to be seen and loved for who he truly is, regardless of societal expectations. Ultimately, this moment leads to acceptance, as Jenny reconciles with Adam's past and continues to engage with him intimately, further underscoring the empowerment that comes from vulnerability and sharing one's personal story.

Trans Scripts, Part 1: The Women offers more direct moments of acknowledgment and self-acceptance. Since the entire play is based on true stories, the characters share their childhood memories of confronting societal expectations, defying norms, and demonstrating resilience. Each character's life, shaped by their diverse social and cultural

backgrounds, serves as an inspirational journey. The theme of embracing and taking pride in one's transgender identity is highlighted in several scenes. For example, one character shares, "I asked her, 'Do you think I'm transgender, or do you think it's something else?' And she said, 'No. I think you're transgender'" (*Trans Scripts* 23). Another character says, "I'm transgender. You just feel this feeling without it being articulated" (*Trans Scripts* 21). These confessions mark powerful moments in the play, where the characters discuss their journey toward self-acceptance. By fully owning their identity, they reclaim their power and refuse to let external labels dictate their sense of self. They take charge of their destiny, acknowledging who they are and how they feel. One character challenges societal norms with the statement, "It was like, 'You're making a big deal about a skirt! It doesn't matter what people wear!'" (*Trans Scripts* 38). This moment resists the policing of trans bodies and gender expression, emphasizing that clothing should not determine a person's legitimacy. The statement challenges rigid gender expectations and critiques the hypocrisy of how society judges gender expression based on attire. It can be interpreted as a moment when the character rejects societal pressures and asserts their identity with confidence. Another empowering moment occurs as one of the characters reflects on her transition: "It's a human experience that one has by walking through the door of gender. A quest to rebuild yourself in the way that you see that you should have been built, but you get to engineer it yourself this time." She continues, "It's just, this is an extremely rich experience. And I'm very, very grateful for it. […] I'm very, very proud of myself" (*Trans Scripts* 56). The phrase "a quest to rebuild yourself" emphasizes that transitioning is not just a physical or medical process but an act of self-construction and affirmation. It challenges the view that trans identities are "unnatural" or "artificial," countering the assumption that only cisgender individuals experience "natural" gendered lives. Rather than focusing on the suffering often imposed on trans people, this moment reframes transition as a journey of

fulfillment, strength, and joy—a celebration of gratitude. The play culminates in the final scene as all the women come together, raising their voices:

> We always were women. We're not transitioning. We're not going through a sex change. We're merely confirming who we always were. /
> Why should the complexity of my experience be able to be captured in some simple story that applies to everyone. We have hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of stories. I have my own story and my own journey that I'm on. (*Trans Scripts* 60)

This quote is profoundly empowering as it directly challenges misconceptions about transgender identity, emphasizing self-definition, individual experience, and the legitimacy of trans existence. The statement "We always were women" rejects the notion that transgender women were ever anything other than what they identify as. It challenges the prevailing idea that transition is about "becoming" something new, and instead presents it as an affirmation of an identity that was always there. This defies the cisnormative belief that gender is assigned at birth and fixed. The phrase "We're merely confirming who we always were" (60), emphasizes that transitioning is about recognition, not transformation. Furthermore, it rejects the idea that there is a singular, universal transgender experience. The speaker asserts that transgender identities are diverse and multifaceted, resisting oversimplification. "We have hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of stories" (60), highlights the vast range of individual experiences, reminding the audience that each transgender person has a unique journey. True to *Trans Scripts*'s diverse approach, some women present themselves in traditionally feminine ways, while others adopt more androgynous styles. Some are open about their identity, while others prefer to blend in. The central message is that there is no single, defining trans narrative, but rather, many. The play culminates with all the women coming together, calling out different female names that each carry their own story, reinforcing the themes of solidarity and community among transgender people. By sharing their personal

stories of resilience and self-affirmation, the play's conclusion becomes a powerful and triumphant moment of euphoria.

An important aspect that this play highlights is for members of the queer community to find support groups where they can feel a sense of belonging. Many women began joining activist groups and communities, sharing their struggles with one another, from self-esteem programs and self-love initiatives to HIV prevention and fighting against the injustices they face. Lucas' script refers to the Stonewall Riots, which took place on June 28, 1969, following police raids that targeted sexual minorities, particularly gay and transgender individuals. This event marked a significant turning point for the queer community, as it was the first time in the United States that people stood up to government oppression and fought for their rights to exist. The play also highlights key trans activists such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, who played significant roles in the LGBTQ+ movement. They helped establish STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) (*Trans Scripts* 37), the first-ever trans support organization, which became a crucial space for many transgender people, including some characters in the play. This support network allowed many to embrace their "new" identities and gain the recognition they had always desired. One undeniable truth remains: transgender people are still marginalized and denied full citizenship, as reflected in the experiences portrayed in the play.

5. Deconstructing Narrative Elements in the Selected Plays

After having examined the three plays through the lens of transgender identity representation, societal struggles, and themes of empowerment, it is now essential to delve

deeper into each work and identify additional elements that contribute to the overarching theme of this thesis. Each play—*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts: The Women*—employs unique narrative techniques to portray these issues. Though they all focus on gender identity, their storytelling methods vary in structure, perspective, and audience engagement. The table below provides a comparative analysis, highlighting key aspects of each play.

Comparative Analysis:

Play	Structure	Perspective	Style
Hedwig and the Angry Inch	Nonlinear, rock concert-style storytelling	First-person (Hedwig as narrator)	Theatrical, symbolic, musical-driven
Boy	Nonlinear (flashbacks)	Third-person dramatic realism	Intimate, psychological
Trans Scripts: The Women	Verbatim, documentary-style monologues	First-person (multiple real-life voices)	Minimalist, direct, authentic

Figure 5. The table of comparative analysis of all three plays.

a) Structure

This comparative overview reveals that *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Boy* employ a nonlinear structure, weaving scenes from the past into the present. In *Hedwig*, the narrative shifts between past and present through monologues, songs, and interactions with Yitzhak,

gradually unveiling her struggles with identity, love, and loss. Similarly, *Boy* alternates between Adam's childhood, when he was raised as Samantha, and his adult life, allowing the audience to understand how past experiences shape his present reality. In contrast, *Trans Scripts: The Women* follows a clear linear structure, composed of monologues based on real-life interviews with transgender women, and edited for clarity, each of them sharing their unique journey. This verbatim theater approach incorporates documentary material, with audio recordings integrated into the performance. As the play concludes, recorded voices gradually overpower the actors: "(As the names are spoken, the actors do not wait for the people before them to finish. Eventually, the sound of recorded voices comes in and drowns out the actors)" (*Trans Scripts* 60).

b) Narrative perspective

Two of the plays use a first-person perspective. In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig serves as the narrator, recounting her life story through the format of a rock concert. The songs are not merely there for entertainment but are central to the narrative, reflecting Hedwig's emotions, pivotal life moments, and symbolic themes. For instance, the song "The Origin of Love" delves into the concept of fragmented identity, while "Tear Me Down" and "Wig in a Box" (*Hedwig* 10 & 37) reveal her transformation, from her experiences at the Berlin Wall to her post-transition identity as she sheds her performer's costumes. "The Angry Inch" provides insight into her botched gender-confirmation surgery. The play's theatricality lies in its fusion of symbolism and performance art, with camp and wit used to provoke and engage the audience, prompting reflection on gender identity.

A similar first-person perspective is employed in *Trans Scripts*, where characters from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and generational backgrounds share their stories directly with the audience, with minimal interaction between them. This approach emphasizes the individuality of each character's journey. However, despite their distinct experiences, their narratives collectively resonate as a single, unified voice. The decision not to separate the seven characters' stories but instead present them as a cohesive whole, as one voice, reinforces the shared nature of their experiences. It is especially evident in the repetition of certain themes and phrases throughout the script. For instance, when one character begins with "my father…", another follows their story with "my dad…", continuing the thread but expanding on it from her own perspective. These layered reflections create a shared emotional landscape, allowing individual experiences to resonate collectively. The stage directions further emphasize this interconnectedness: "*it should feel as though EDEN and JOSEPHINE enter their own world and are almost finishing one another's thoughts, speaking in a similar rhythm as they trade off stories*" (*Trans Scripts* 31*)*. This becomes especially clear in the final scene, when the voices of the different characters blend into one, symbolizing unity and highlighting the subject's significance, when the personal "I" fuses into a collective voice "we." As the play draws from real-life experiences, it relies not on dramatic embellishments but on the raw authenticity of personal testimony, although the notion of collective voices is presented in a highly nuanced manner.

In contrast, Anna Ziegler adopts a third-person perspective, positioning Adam as an object of observation rather than as the sole narrator of his experience. Why is this approach taken? It reflects how others—particularly his parents and Dr. Wendell—attempt to define his identity, stripping him of the power to do so himself. This narrative choice underscores the play's core conflict: Adam's struggle to reclaim his agency after years of being told who he is. Additionally, it prompts the audience to critically examine Adam's experience rather than

becoming fully immersed in his internal perspective. Who holds the authority to define gender? Who should control a person's identity? In terms of style, *Boy* leans toward realism, using intimate, naturalistic dialogue and emotional tension—especially in the scenes between Adam and his parents—to explore the consequences of forced gender identity.

c) Stage directions

Another key element to consider is how stage directions in each play contribute to the flow, themes, tone, and emotional depth of the narrative. In *Trans Scripts: The Women*, the production relies on minimalistic staging to keep the focus on the speakers' words and emotions, ensuring a realistic and respectful portrayal of lived experiences. For instance, "*Zakia walks away and/or Luna steps forward in such a way to indicate that Zakia's job is done, and Luna can take it from here*" (*Trans Scripts* 37). These directions guide body language, eye contact, and interactions, making the performance feel dynamic rather than static. The frequent use of "*beat*" throughout the script allows for pauses in dialogue, giving emotions time to resonate with the audience. Additionally, shifting spotlights from one speaker to another symbolizes the fragmented yet interconnected quality of their stories, reinforcing the play's theme of diverse and intersecting identities. Furthermore, this use of lighting can be interpreted as enhancing the theatricality of the scene, suggesting a trial-like atmosphere where the 'accused' are spotlighted to deliver their testimonies, evoking a sense of staged interrogation. In *Boy*, the stage directions are more present and essential for navigating through flashbacks and time jumps. For example, "*He crosses into the scene with Wendell, where he now enacts SAMANTHA, his younger self. A Projection: 1973. SAMANTHA is 6*" (*Boy* 22) and "*The lights shift. A Projection: 1990*" (Boy 69). These directions often highlight subtle movements,

silences, and moments of discomfort, such as "*He reaches towards her face but doesn't actually touch her*" (*Boy* 20) or "*A moment of real connection. A long beat"* (*Boy* 39). This approach enhances the play's introspective and psychological tone, reflecting Adam's internal struggles and emotional depth. Conversely, in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the stage directions accentuate the performative aspects of the play, as the story unfolds as a rock concert. Lighting, sound, and Hedwig's body language are used to transition between past and present, as well as fantasy and reality. For example, "Bright light and enormous cheers flood the stage. HEDWIG blows a kiss to the audience and walks through the door into the light. The projected male and female faces merge into a single one" (*Hedwig* 61). Not only do these directions emphasize improvisation aspect, and direct engagement, but also interaction with the audience, making each performance unique. This mirrors Hedwig's personal journey, with each moment reflecting her evolving over time.

d) Use of projections

Additionally, the use of projections and visual storytelling, such as "*projection of a crude drawing of a dad and little boy holding hands*" (*Hedwig* 16), blurs the line between performance and confession, further immersing the audience in her emotional and physical experience. Here, the projections offer a form of subtext, commenting on the action in a rather poetic way. The frequent use of shifting visuals, like "*projected zoom to HEDWIG's mugshot*" or "*projected childlike drawings on a Berlin-like wall*" (*Hedwig* 15), contributes to a layered narrative structure, complementing the storytelling by highlighting key emotional beats. Rather than offering straightforward exposition, the projections invite interpretation, often underscoring psychological states or memories. For instance, the "*projection of bear*" (*Hedwig*

27) during the scene with Luther's gummy bears subtly enhances the moment's seduction and innocence, reinforcing how visuals work in tandem with spoken language to construct meaning. Ultimately, this multimedia approach enhances both the aesthetic and emotional complexity of the play, anchoring its fragmented narrative through evocative imagery.

In contrast to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the use of projections in *Boy* is minimal and primarily functional rather than emotionally evocative. While certain productions may incorporate visual elements to mark time or place, these projections are not central to the play's emotional or narrative depth. For instance, the script notes, *"Projection: 1989. Halloween"* (*Boy* 16), which serves mainly to orient the audience as the play transitions between past and present. These projections assist in navigating the nonlinear structure, but they do not carry the same poetic or symbolic weight found in *Hedwig*.

Following the analysis of the most recurrent themes, the next section will examine the reception and overall impact of these plays. This discussion will provide deeper insight into how the plays have been perceived by the public.

III. Reception and Impact

This section examines the reception of all three plays, drawing on a range of feedback from media outlets, articles, and online review platforms. It considers critical responses, audience reactions, and the overall public perception of each production. A particular focus is placed on how audiences engage with transgender characters, and the extent to which these portrayals influence empathy, awareness, and societal attitudes. The analysis is divided into three parts, reflecting the unique reception of each play. A fourth segment evaluates the collective impact of these works and the broader significance of their themes within society. This study aims to assess how effectively these productions convey their core messages and to what extent they contribute to shifting perspectives. Ultimately, it seeks to address the central question of this research: *Through the exploration of transgender experiences on stage, contemporary US theater serves as a platform for challenging traditional gender norms and fostering greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity within society.*

1. Audience Reception of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

More than two decades after its debut, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* continues to enjoy enduring cult popularity. The play has been adapted into hundreds of theatrical productions worldwide, and its success led to a 2001 film adaptation starring its creator, John Cameron Mitchell. Major review platforms such as *BBC Culture, Chicago Theater Review*, and *The Show Report* have consistently praised the show. Online news coverage in arts and culture, *BBC Culture,* describes it as “hilarious, heart-breaking and ha[ving] a phenomenal, timelessly cool,

soundtrack but also […] tap[ping] into the fundamental question of identity and how it's shaped by the relationships we have."[65] The reviewer of the *Chicago Theater Review* emphasizes the emotional power of the narrative, stating, "I can't think of a more fitting curtain call than this story about the power of art to help us survive anything."[66] Meanwhile, the theater news report, the *Show Report*, highlights the uniqueness of the production: "Brilliantly innovative, heartbreaking, and wickedly funny, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is shamelessly enjoyable."[67] Even regional outlets like *amNY* have lauded the play, calling it "a wildly enjoyable production of one of the most exciting and inventive rock musicals of all time."[68] Yet, according to Mitchell in an interview with *BBC Culture*, the play's success was hard-won. Early performances—often held in obscure venues at odd hours—were met with silence. "We often had very silent audiences, but it wasn't until people who didn't like musicals started coming, and celebrities like Glenn Close, Patti LuPone, Marilyn Manson, Barry Manilow, Lou Reed and David Bowie started coming, it became the thing to see."[69] The 2014 Broadway revival marked a particularly significant milestone, running for 529 shows and earning multiple Tony Awards, including Best Revival and Best Lead Actor for Neil Patrick Harris. Lena Hall won Best Actress, and Mitchell received a Special Tony Award after briefly returning to the role. Following successful tours in 2016 and 2017, Mitchell noted that the Broadway revival reflected cultural progress: "It was no longer too shocking to have Hedwig on Broadway." Across these reviews and productions,

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[65] Latif, Leila. *"Hedwig And The Angry Inch : A Love Story That Broke Taboos." BBC Home* - Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & ; Audio, November 12, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20211111-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-a-love-story-that-broke-taboos.

[66] Curran, Kevin. "*Hedwig and the Angry Inch" | Chicago Theatre Review*. Home for Chicago's Theatre and Cultural News, July 17, 2024. https://www.chicagotheatrereview.com/2024/07/hedwig-and-the-angry-inch/.

[67] TheShowReport. REVIEW : "HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH"—Chance Theater. *The Show Report*, 4 February, 2024. https://www.theshowreport.org/post/review-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-chance-theater.

[68] Windman, Matt. 'Hedwig And The Angry Inch' Review : Enjoyable, But Neil Patrick Harris Not Ready Yet | *amNewYork*, April 22, 2014. https://www.amny.com/entertainment/hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-review-neil-patrick-harris-not-fully-developed-but-enjoyable-1.7792607/.

[69] Latif, Leila. "Hedwig And The Angry Inch : A Love Story That Broke Taboos." *BBC Home* - Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & ; Audio, November 12, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20211111-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-a-love-story-that-broke-taboos.

what stands out is not only the show's artistic merit, but also how the themes of gender identity and transformation have evolved in public discourse. While once considered provocative, the play's focus on crossing gender boundaries is now received with a sense of normalized appreciation, as critics focus more on its emotional depth and innovation than on the gender identity of its protagonist.

Despite its lasting impact, some aspects of *Hedwig* have become more contentious over time. Lillian Crawford, a culture writer known for her podcast and newsletter examining gender representation in British cinema, recently revisited the film. While she found much to appreciate, certain elements felt increasingly uneasy or problematic:

> There's this sinister almost fetishization of her body by the GI who finds her and also her mother, which sort of buys into the thesis that trans people are only trans because their parents wished that they were another gender when they were born. Trans representation before and since [the film] has focused on kind of a traumatic event that makes you trans.[70]

As my analysis of the play demonstrates, while Hedwig's narrative is shaped partly by influences from both her mother and the American GI Luther, these figures do not strictly define her gender identity. Instead, Hedwig's journey is portrayed as complex and deeply personal, rooted in emotional longing, existential questions about love and selfhood (exemplified by the "Origin of Love" myth), and her own process of growth and self-discovery. Ultimately, despite the trauma surrounding her surgery and failed relationship, Hedwig reclaims both her body and her narrative. Her performance, storytelling, and the symbolic shedding of her persona on stage function as acts of empowerment rather than victimhood. This challenges interpretations that reduce her identity to fetishization or parental coercion, especially given that the play does not

[70] Lilian Crawford quoted in Latif article. "Hedwig And The Angry Inch : A Love Story That Broke Taboos." *BBC Home* - Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & ; Audio, November 12, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20211111-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-a-love-story-that-broke-taboos.

offer a literal or clinical depiction of transgender experience, but rather an expressive, metaphorical one.

More controversy surrounding the play resurfaced during the 2020 Sydney Festival, when the production was postponed in response to backlash over casting a cisgender male actor, Hugh Sheridan, in the role of Hedwig. While some praised the casting choice, the decision was met with criticism from the Australian transgender community, who voiced disappointment and distress: "This is offensive and damaging to the trans community, and continues to cause genuine distress and frustration amongst trans and gender non-conforming performers all across Australia."[71] In light of this, the producers ultimately postponed the production, supporting the community's concerns. However, creators John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask have maintained that they do not view Hedwig strictly as a transgender character, asserting that the role should be "open to anyone who can tackle it and, more importantly, anyone who needs it."[72] This tension raises a central question: should *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* be understood solely as a transgender narrative? Considering the statements of the original creators and a close analysis of the play itself, it becomes clear that the work intentionally embraces ambiguity. The play deliberately avoids defining Hedwig in strictly medicalized or binary terms. While it does depict a male character who undergoes a sex-change operation, the focus is not on transitioning in a conventional sense. Instead, the narrative aims to challenge rigid gender categories rather than reinforce them. Hedwig can be interpreted as trans, genderqueer, or even as a broader metaphor for fragmented identity and the universal search for selfhood.

[71] Burke, Kelly. 'It's Not About Cancel Culture': Hedwig And The Angry Inch Postponed After Trans-Led Petition. *the Guardian*, 19 November, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/nov/18/its-not-about-cancel-culture-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-postponed-after-trans-led-petition.

[72] Cooper, Nathanael. "Anyone Should Be Able to Play Hedwig': Creators Defend Show Over Casting Controversy". *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November, 2020. https://www.smh.com.au/culture/musicals/anyone-should-be-able-to-play-hedwig-creators-defend-show-over-casting-controversy-20201118-p56fpy.html.

2. Audience Reception of *Boy*

Anna Ziegler's *Boy* has received widespread acclaim for its sensitive and nuanced portrayal of gender identity, particularly within the context of transgender experiences. Critics have praised the play for humanizing complex issues and encouraging thoughtful dialogue. Numerous journals and review blogs commend Ziegler's commitment to exploring questions of identity with depth and empathy. For example, *ChicagoOnStage* describes *Boy* as "a poignant and important love story for our era,"[73] emphasizing the remarkable journey of its protagonist, Adam, and the way the narrative challenges rigid gender norms. The site also applauds the casting of transgender actors, notably Theo Germaine—a non-binary trans performer making their debut at Timeline Theater. The *Windy City Times*, an LGBTQ+ newspaper in Chicago, highlights "how brilliantly *Boy* functions on both literal and symbolic levels,"[74] calling it a powerful piece that prompts emotional and intellectual engagement. Similarly, the American progressive news website HuffPost describes the play as offering "a heart-jolting spin"[75] on gender narratives, applauding Ziegler's ability to confront societal expectations while fostering introspection and conversation.

Yet, not all reviews of *Boy* across online platforms—ranging from journals and blogs to review sites—have been entirely positive. While many commend the play's intentions, others feel it falls short in execution. For instance, *The Guardian*, often considered a leading liberal voice in the press, praised the sensitive performances but remarked that the play "could

[73] Topham, Karen. Timeline's ""Boy": A Poignant and Important Love Story For Our Era", *Chicago On Stage,* 19 January 2018. https://www.chicagoonstage.com/timelines-boy-poignant-important-love-story-era/.
[74] Morgan C, Scott. "THEATER REVIEW Boy". *Windy City Times*. January 31, 2018. https://windycitytimes.com/2018/01/31/theater-review-boy/.
[75] Finkle, David. "First Nighter: Anna Ziegler's 'Boy' Is a Smart, Fresh Transgender-Play Twist". *HuffPost*, March 11, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/first-nighter-anna-ziegle_b_9434826.

go deeper into the issues."[76] Critic Alexis Soloski argued that the narrative oversimplifies the complexities it seeks to explore, describing Adam's storyline as "too tidy" and suggesting that the play avoids confronting the full messiness of its subject matter. *ARTSATL*, a publication covering Atlanta's arts scene, echoed similar concerns, stating that while *Boy* tells its story with emotion and respect, it often feels "painfully voyeuristic."[77] The review criticized the play's lack of a cohesive narrative thread and questioned whether there was a compelling enough reason for the story to be told in such a raw, naturalistic style. Despite the uniqueness of the plot, the reviewer noted that none of the thematic elements felt particularly new or engaging. Likewise, *DCTheaterScene* observed that although Ziegler raises important questions about the relationship between gender identity and biology, she does not explore them in sufficient depth. Instead, the play leans heavily on themes of self-determination and personal agency. The reviewer noted, "there are issues inherent to *Boy* that cannot be so neatly overcome."[78] More pointed criticism came from Seattle's Leading LGBTQ+ community website, *Seattle Gay Scene*, which described the play as "creepy and pedophilic," particularly in reference to the character of Dr. Wendell, who becomes deeply involved in Adam's emotional development. The review also criticized Ziegler's portrayal of rural Iowa and its residents, arguing that the playwright shows little understanding or respect for the cultural and religious context—specifically, the Mennonite background of the family—"something Ziegler doesn't get into; religion, which might have been an interesting component of the parents as characters, is avoided."[79] On platforms like Goodreads, readers have also expressed frustration, particularly

[76] Soloski, Alexis. "Boy Review – Transgender Drama Is Brisk And Fascinating But Too Tidy". *the Guardian*, 11 March 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/mar/10/boy-review-transgender-drama-clurman-theater-new-york.
[77] Alexander, Andrew. "'Boy' Tells Its Story Respectfully, but Feels Painfully Voyeuristic." *ARTS ATL*, 4 Oct. 2017, www.artsatl.org/review-boy-tells-story-respectfully-emotionally-feels-painfully-voyeuristic/.
[78] Bavoso, John. "DC Theatre Scene." *DC Theatre Scene*, 15 Feb. 2020, www.dctheatrescene.com/2020/02/15/review-anna-zieglers-boy-at-keegan-theatre/.
[79] Strangeways, Michael. "Reviews: LGBTQ Plays Take Center Stage with 'Take Me out' and 'Boy.'" *Seattle Gay Scene*, 15 June 2019, www.seattlegayscene.com/2019/06/reviews-lgbtq-plays-take-center-stage-with-take-me-out-and-boy/.

with the lack of character development. One user wrote, "I absolutely hated every last character in this book and could not get behind the things they did. Desperately uncomfortable and infuriating."[80]A recurring theme among these critiques is the sense that the play underdelivers in character depth and narrative richness.

However, it is notable that these criticisms rarely target the portrayal of the transgender character directly. This may be due to the fact that *Boy* is based on a real-life story from the 1970s, interpreted through Ziegler's dramatic lens to reflect the emotional and ethical complexities of the time. It is worth to mention that over six transgender individuals were involved in the production, contributing to its emotional authenticity and reinforcing the significance of inclusive representation in storytelling. According to Chicago's theater and entertainment industry news *PerformInk*:

> The audience has the opportunity to learn that not all stories about the spectrum of gender are the same, that intersex, transgender and genderqueer individuals forge many different paths on the journey to finding their truth, and that the full scope of these stories cannot be distilled down into one convenient narrative.[81]

Although some interpretations suggest that *Boy* does not center explicitly on a transgender character—given that Adam does not undergo a complete medical transition and remains positioned ambiguously between male and female identities during early development—the play nevertheless engages meaningfully with the complexities of gender identity. Adam's experience challenges binary conceptions of gender and highlights the fluidity inherent in personal identity formation. Crucially, the production reinforces the notion that authenticity in representation is not solely dependent on the characters portrayed, but also on the voices involved in constructing the narrative. When transgender individuals are given space to contribute to the telling of such stories, the resulting work tends to exhibit greater emotional

[80] "Boy." *Goodreads*, Goodreads, 27 May 2017, www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/31819996.
[81] Brady, Erin Shea. "Review: *Boy* at Timeline." *PerformInk*, 22 Jan. 2018, www.perform.ink/review-boy-timeline/.

depth, nuance, and cultural sensitivity, thereby enhancing the overall integrity and impact of the narrative.

3. Audience Reception of *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*

Among the three plays analyzed, *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* emerges as the most authentically grounded in transgender experiences, featuring narratives drawn entirely from interviews with transgender women. The play has been met with largely positive reception across a variety of online platforms. The independent arts publication *The Arts Fuse* commends Paul Lucas's script for its "exquisite sense of balance," describing the work as "thoughtful, informative, honest, and playful, all at once."[82] Similarly, *The Bay State Banner*, a Boston-based weekly newspaper, asserts that the play "should be mandatory viewing for anyone who identifies as human,"[83] highlighting its broad emotional and ethical appeal. *TheaterMania*, a prominent theater review platform, praises the structure of the play, noting that the individual stories unfold in a coherent and powerful progression—from early childhood recognition of difference to later experiences with issues such as sex, surgery, and suicidal ideation. The reviewer describes the production as "an airtight example of humanity woven into a compelling 90 minutes of storytelling,"[84] emphasizing that the diversity among the seven women featured underscores the critical message that there is no singular transgender narrative. Likewise, a

[82] Viator, Jess. "Theater Review: '*Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women'* -- an Evening of Powerful Journeys." *The Arts Fuse*, 2 Feb. 2017, www.artsfuse.org/154946/theater-review-trans-scripts-part-i-the-women-an-evening-of-powerful-journeys/.
[83] Colby, Celina. "'*Trans Scripts'* Stage Play Tells Empowering, Human Stories." *The Bay State Banner*, 2 Feb. 2017, www.baystatebanner.com/2017/02/02/trans-scripts-stage-play-tells-empowering-human-stories/.
[84] Ehlers, Cristopher. "*Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*." *TheaterMania.Com* -, 28 March 2023, www.theatermania.com/boston-theater/news/trans-scripts-part-i-the-women-american-repertory_79851.html/.

contributor to the *South Shore Critic* blog emphasizes the transformative potential of the play, observing that the characters' shared yet distinct experiences serve as a powerful call for increased understanding. The reviewer writes that this work offers "a unique view into a little-known community" and describes it as "transfixing, transforming, and, yes, transcendent."[85] In an interview with *Toolkit*, playwright Paul Lucas further elaborated on his motivation and process behind *Trans Scripts:*

> When I began the show five years ago, I had characters stop the action to define terms like "cisgender" or "intersex." But I no longer have to do that. People are also more familiar now than they were five years ago with the challenges facing trans people. People are talking about trans identity at work, talking about the issues facing bathroom use, for instance.[86]

By indicating that it is no longer necessary to explicitly define these terms, the playwright recognizes the evolving role of theater as both a mirror of and catalyst for societal change. This shift also implies a transformation in audience engagement—from requiring foundational knowledge to being prepared for more intricate and nuanced representations of transgender experiences and challenges.

Despite the largely positive critical response, several reviews of *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* present more nuanced or ambivalent evaluations. Boston's public radio news platform *WBUR* characterizes the production as a "touchy-feely show," as "Trans Scripts skewers privilege, calls out the gay rights movement far too often showing a willingness to leave trans people behind, and resorts to crude (if, in context, satisfying) language."[87] The review highlights how the play provokes critical reflection and leaves audiences with unanswered questions, particularly regarding the intersection of non-binary identities with the

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[85] Craib, Jack. "'*Trans Scripts: Part i*, the Women': Transcendent?" *South Shore Critic,* 26 Jan. 2017, www.southshorecritic.blogspot.com/2017/01/trans-scripts-part-i-women-transcendent.html.

[86] *Amazonaws*, www.american-rep-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/27143713/Trans-Scripts-Toolkit-Final.pdf.

[87] Melloy, Kilian. "Frank and Funny: American Rep's 'trans Scripts' Delivers Unguarded Access to Trans Women's Experiences." *WBUR News*, 27 Jan. 2017, www.wbur.org/news/2017/01/27/trans-scripts-review.

themes explored on stage. The author expresses a desire for deeper engagement with the complexities of non-binary gender and their connections to intimacy, identity, and sexuality. Similarly, *Vancouver Presents*, a performing arts review outlet, offers a more critical take on the production's staging, particularly the choreography and ensemble performance. The reviewer notes that "some awkward moments come from the rather forced choreography that the cast can't quite pull off with comfort,"[88] suggesting that these instances disrupt the emotional resonance of the narrative. While the minimalistic set design is praised for keeping the focus on the performers, the review implies that it also falls short of capturing the dramatic intensity of the subject matter. Playwright Paul Lucas, in his interview with *Toolkit*, addressed some of these concerns, particularly regarding casting decisions:

> You're talking about a community that has not been represented on stage or film very often, or very well. And then, even when they have been represented, they have not been allowed to portray themselves. When you look at *The Danish Girl*, or *Trans America*, or *Transparent*, the central character is not played by a trans actor. So there's a disenfranchisement issue.[89]

Further controversy emerged around *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* due to the fact that the play was written by Paul Lucas, a cisgender man. Although Lucas based the script on extensive interviews with transgender women, some critics have contended that narratives centered on transgender experiences are most authentically and ethically represented when created by transgender individuals themselves. This critique reflects broader concerns about authorship, authenticity, and the potential for cisnormative bias in storytelling. Acknowledging this tension, Lucas has emphasized that his intention was not to appropriate trans voices, but rather to provide a theatrical platform through which transgender women could articulate their own stories. As he explained in interviews, he viewed his role not as that of a spokesperson, but

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[88] Stuyt, Chelsey. "Theatre Review: Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women Empowers Unheard Stories." *Vancouver Presents*, 17 Mar. 2020, www.vancouverpresents.com/theatre/theatre-review-trans-scripts-part-i-the-women-empowers-unheard-stories/.

[89] *Amazonaws*, www.american-rep-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/27143713/Trans-Scripts-Toolkit-Final.pdf. Accessed 22 Apr. 2025.

as a facilitator—stating that he felt a responsibility "not to write a play about trans women, but to let trans women tell their own stories in their own words."[90]

4. Cultural and Social Effects of Trans Narratives

The plays *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* have each played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary discourse on gender identity, medical ethics, and LGBTQ+ representation. The fact that these works are widely reviewed, critically analyzed, and readily accessible through various media platforms reflects a broader cultural shift toward greater openness and engagement with topics that were once marginalized or stigmatized. In contrast to earlier decades—particularly prior to the year 2000—such productions would have likely been met with silence, resistance, or outright condemnation. The current visibility and critical reception of these plays suggest not only a transformation in public attitudes, but also an evolving theatrical landscape that is increasingly inclusive of diverse gender narratives.

Many reviews commend the plays for their bold, unapologetic portrayals of genderqueer protagonists, recognizing their significant contribution to ongoing conversations about gender identity and artistic representation. The overarching themes of empowerment present in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* have resonated deeply within the LGBTQ+ community, with audiences frequently describing these productions as spaces of affirmation—places where individuals feel seen, safe, and understood. However, the plays'

[90] Gardner, Lyn. "Trans Scripts at Edinburgh Festival Review – Six Timely Stories from Transgender Women." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 16 Aug. 2015, www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/16/trans-scripts-edinburgh-festival-review-transgender-women?.

impact extends well beyond LGBTQ+ circles. For example, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* co-creator and composer Stephen Trask has spoken about the diverse nature of the show's fanbase, noting, "Whenever I meet a fan, I think, 'oh, that person could be my friend in real life.'"[91] In an interview with *BBC Culture*, Trask recounts how the production has also inspired cisgender individuals, underscoring the universal themes of identity, resilience, and belonging that transcend specific communities:

> Recently, a young woman came backstage and told me about her mother, a refugee from El Salvador who in the early 80s trudged through all of Central America on her own to come to the United States illegally. She lived secretly and got herself a teacher certificate, becoming a high school teacher. [The Hedwig] song that gave her strength was Wig in a Box and she would say: 'I am Hedwig'.[92]

Lucas' play not only provides a platform for transgender individuals to share their stories, but it also offers an engaging experience for cisgender audiences. As expressed by an art director from *The Arts Fuse* magazine: "I am a cis-gendered woman, so take my opinion with the requisite grain of salt: Lucas dramatizes the unique stories of trans women in a thoroughly enjoyable way."[93] Furthermore, each performance is followed by an "Act II" discussion, moderated by activists, medical professionals, scholars, and others, creating an opportunity for dialogue on gender binaries and fostering a safe space for individuals to share their perspectives or collaborate with trans activists.

Similarly, *Boy*—despite lacking direct audience testimonials—has sparked significant debate within both the medical and psychological communities, particularly regarding the ethics of gender reassignment procedures and the importance of informed consent. Had this

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[91] Latif, Leila. "Hedwig And The Angry Inch : A Love Story That Broke Taboos." *BBC Home* - Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & ; Audio, November 12, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20211111-hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-a-love-story-that-broke-taboos.

[92] *Ibid*.

[93] Viator, Jess. "Theater Review: 'Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women' -- an Evening of Powerful Journeys." *The Arts Fuse*, 2 Feb. 2017, www.artsfuse.org/154946/theater-review-trans-scripts-part-i-the-women-an-evening-of-powerful-journeys/.

play been staged in the 1960s, during the time of the David Reimer case, it is unlikely that it would have received the same reception or visibility. Instead, it might have been suppressed, as society at the time largely concealed the botched circumcision that became central to Reimer's story.

5. Discussion

The interrelated questions raised in these plays—such as 'What makes someone a woman?'—invite deeper reflection on how society defines gender. Is it rooted in biology, clothing, behavior, or social performance? While all three plays—*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*—explore transgender experiences, they collectively challenge the conventional, binary view of gender as biologically fixed. Instead, they highlight how gender is socially constructed and reinforced through daily acts, as Butler theorized—how one dresses, speaks, sits, or moves. These performances interrogate the pressure to conform to culturally coded gender markers: Hedwig links femininity to heels and dresses; *Trans Scripts*, for example, reflects on the subtle mannerisms that are required to embody femininity: "It's a matter of ticking of all the little things you can change. Mannerisms. How do you sit when you're on the tube? How do you hail a taxi?" (*Trans Scripts* 39). Or, as in *Boy*, Adam's interest in stereotypically masculine activities, like working on cars, is framed in tension with the imposed expectations of a female gender identity, underscoring the social weight of such interests. These plays do not simply question gender; they actively parody and subvert it. Through camp aesthetics, drag, and irony, the characters destabilize conventional narratives of what it means to be a man or a woman. However, even as they resist societal norms, the

characters are shown attempting to align themselves with the very constructs that oppress them, suggesting the inescapability of cultural judgment. The performances thus reveal a paradox: while gender norms can be rejected or exaggerated for effect, they remain deeply embedded in the social fabric and continue to influence both the self-perception and societal reception of transgender individuals. In doing so, the plays reflect not only personal journeys of identity but also the persistent societal pressures to conform.

These are, ultimately, only additional questions that have emerged over the course of this thesis, leading us back to the central questions posed in the introduction: *How is the transgender experience represented on the contemporary US stage? And to what extent do such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular?* It is important to recall that the primary objective of this thesis is to analyze the representation of transgender characters in contemporary theater and not to conduct an in-depth exploration of the inclusion, challenges, or systemic barriers faced by transgender actors, directors, or playwrights, although these issues remain inherently interconnected. Focusing first on the representational aspect, the analysis of the selected works—*Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* by Paul Lucas, *Boy* by Anna Ziegler, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* by John Cameron Mitchell—reveals a shift toward more nuanced, multidimensional portrayals of transgender experiences. As outlined in the introduction, past representations of transgender characters frequently relied on stereotypes, offering minimal character depth and resulting in superficial casting choices. In contrast, the works examined here reflect a broader commitment to authenticity, complexity, and emotional depth. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, for example, narrates the protagonist's life journey through an electrifying rock music performance, tracing a path from childhood trauma and a coerced gender reassignment surgery to a hard-won sense of personal liberation and gender identity. *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*, draws directly from interviews with transgender women, presenting their lived experiences through monologues that intentionally reject stereotypes and

instead embrace emotional depth and complexity. In contrast, *Boy* delves into the psychological and ethical terrain of gender identity, exploring how societal and parental expectations shape the life of a child who, after a medical accident, is forced into a gender role that never truly fits—a role imposed on someone who is unable to conform to normative ideas of masculinity. Together, these productions reject the notion of a singular transgender narrative. Instead, they offer a plurality of voices, each with its own trajectory and relationship to gender identity. The playwrights and speakers represented in these works challenge reductive understandings of trans lives and emphasize their inherent diversity and complexity. After all, it is important to acknowledge that the three plays examined center on transgender female characters, meaning the protagonists were assigned male at birth and later transition, or attempt to transition, to a female identity, as is the case in *Boy*. While these narratives offer authentic and diverse portrayals, a notable absence is the representation of transgender men characters in the plays—individuals assigned female at birth who transition to male. This represents a valuable direction for future research, as such plays would likely also engage with themes of challenging gender norms and exploring identity through a sociocultural lens, much like the three works analyzed here. Furthermore, as the analysis of these plays demonstrates, not all transgender narratives culminate in a sense of fulfillment following transition. In *Boy*, Adam's experience complicates the common narrative of transition-as-resolution, illustrating the psychological toll of having gender identity imposed rather than self-determined. His journey calls attention to the ethical dilemmas involved when gender decisions are externally driven, particularly in childhood. Similarly, in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the protagonist undergoes gender reassignment not as a reflection of internal identity, but out of necessity—to escape East Germany with an American soldier. From the outset, Hansel (Hedwig's former self) displays a queer, effeminate identity, yet the surgery is portrayed as an act of survival, not of personal affirmation. This framing disrupts the simplistic alignment of genital transformation with gender identity and

underscores the complexities within gender narratives. Although Hedwig is consistently presented as female throughout the script, she ultimately finds inner peace in a powerful act of shedding her clothes and wig, allowing her partner to express himself freely and authentically. This moment aligns with playwright John Cameron Mitchell's assertion that the play is less about the act of transitioning and more about confronting and subverting rigid societal norms. Hedwig embodies a space between binary identities, challenging traditional gender categories while fully embracing her complex selfhood. In doing so, the play underscores the rich diversity within transgender experiences.

Regarding the second part of the question—*to what extent do such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular?*—it is evident that these portrayals carry significant cultural weight as the depiction of transgender experiences on the contemporary American stage continues to evolve amidst persistent political and societal tensions. As discussed in the section on reviews and critiques, public reception of these plays tends to be largely positive, indicating a growing willingness to engage with narratives centered on gender identity. This shift marks a notable departure from earlier eras marked by erasure or harmful stereotyping, and instead affirms that transgender lives and experiences are not only valid but also deserving of thoughtful and visible representation. On the other hand, increased visibility does not always equate to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of transgender individuals. While trans people are frequently featured in the media, often due to the ongoing and highly publicized attacks on their rights—particularly from the far right—transgender people continue to face significant challenges. According to 2022 statistics, transgender individuals make up approximately 1.6% of the population, yet they remain the target of legislative and societal hostility. These attacks disproportionately affect trans women, who are specifically targeted by laws that restrict their participation in sports, deny them access to gender-appropriate bathrooms, and subject them to discrimination within political

institutions. Another limitation of this research lies in the limited inclusion of diverse audience perspectives, particularly mixed reviews or firsthand feedback from a broader range of spectators. While such material—such as audience interviews conducted after performances—could have enriched the analysis, it is not readily accessible and would have required considerable additional time and resources to gather. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the nature of the audience represented in this study. The analysis draws primarily on professional critiques and responses published on review platforms and theater-focused blogs. As a result, the perspectives captured tend to reflect those of individuals with a certain level of cultural capital or professional affiliation within the arts—individuals who are likely more accustomed to and open toward unconventional or identity-focused theatrical content. This leaves out the views of more general or first-time theatergoers, whose responses may differ significantly and could offer valuable insight into broader public reception.

Although many of the previously mentioned discussions suggest transgender actors should portray transgender roles, rather than cisgender or non-binary performers, the reality is that transgender individuals still face significant barriers within the theater industry. Despite a growing number of transgender characters appearing on stage, trans actors, directors, and producers remain underrepresented and continue to struggle against transphobia when it comes to casting and production opportunities. Theater may serve as a reflection of society and a platform for addressing important gender-related issues, but the real world is often moving at a much slower pace, and in some cases, regressing. As recent political events, such as the 2024 U.S. presidential election, have demonstrated, the legal and policy landscape for transgender people, particularly in healthcare access, remains precarious. These developments raise serious concerns not only about the future representation of transgender individuals on stage but also about the potential for greater marginalization and transphobia across various aspects of life.

While progress for the transgender community was notable from 2000 to 2020, the uncertain trajectory of the future is cause for significant worry.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to see oneself on stage—not as a caricature or a symbol, but as a fully realized, complex human being? This central question resonates throughout the plays examined in this thesis and underscores the fundamental importance of representation. Drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks on gender identity, alongside in-depth textual analysis and critical discussion, this study has explored how transgender experiences are portrayed in contemporary US theater. The selected plays—*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*—contribute to this exploration by offering distinct yet thematically connected portrayals of transgender lives. While *Boy* may not at first glance be considered a play featuring a transgender character in the traditional sense, all three works engage deeply with the struggle for self-definition and the articulation of gender identity. Collectively, they interrogate and challenge normative gender roles, those societal expectations that dictate how one should behave, speak, or present themselves—aligning with Foucault's assertion that "power is essentially what dictates its law to sex."[94] In defying these established power structures, often perpetuated by cisgender, heteronormative norms, the plays' transgender characters confront gender not as a fixed binary, but as a fluid and multifaceted experience. It is done through the way these works resist the notion of a singular, archetypal transgender narrative. Instead, they offer a spectrum of stories: *Hedwig* unfolds through a self-aware rock concert that fuses humor with ideas of trauma and liberation; *Boy* raises ethical questions about imposed identity and bodily autonomy, illustrated by Adam's rejection of the imposed persona Samantha; *Trans Scripts* directly draws from interviews with trans women, presenting a tapestry of lived experiences across age, race, culture, and background. Through these

[94] Foucault, Michel (1976). *History of Sexuality*, *Volume I.* p. 83.

narratives, a multitude of trans voices emerge—each asserting the right to exist beyond stereotype or simplification of transgender individuals. Through an examination of key elements in the selected plays—such as narrative structure, representations of identity, and themes of empowerment—this study has sought to illuminate the intricate and multifaceted ways in which transgender experiences are conveyed on stage. Theater emerges as a vital space for confronting and reshaping normative conceptions of gender, amplifying marginalized voices, and cultivating empathy, critical reflection, and transformative understanding. The intentional selection of these works demonstrates how seemingly disparate or fragmented bodies—marked by trauma, displacement, or societal exclusion—nonetheless reflect shared struggles and desires to make the audience reach them. Their visibility is achieved through a range of theatrical performance styles, including musical performance, dramatic monologue, and nuanced character dialogue. These varied forms of expression collectively serve to dismantle reductive portrayals and foreground the authenticity of transgender lives. In doing so, this analysis provides a response to the first part of the central research question: *How is the transgender experience represented on the contemporary North American stage?*

The second part of the question explores *to what extent such representations impact the public and the transgender community in particular*. As demonstrated in the *Impact and Reception* section through a detailed analysis of critical reviews and public discourse, these representations not only offer much-needed visibility to marginalized voices but also foster empathy, critical engagement, and social transformation. The majority of responses to the selected plays—*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women*—have been notably positive, with critics frequently commending the performances, the sensitivity of the subject matter, and the overall artistic execution. For general audiences, these plays function as powerful tools for humanizing transgender experiences, challenging entrenched stereotypes, and inviting viewers to engage with complex, emotionally resonant narratives. For the

transgender community, these plays provide crucial visibility, affirmation, and a sense of empowerment. The portrayal of multidimensional trans characters with nuance and sensitivity serves as a powerful source of validation—particularly in a cultural landscape where trans lives are frequently politicized, marginalized, or narrowly framed through narratives of trauma. Additionally, these theatrical works function as important platforms for transgender voices, opening space for conversations not only about individual identity but also about broader issues of representation and inclusion.

However, challenges still persist—including the limited representation of transmasculine stories and the ongoing exclusion of transgender artists from theatrical production processes. The current political climate in the United States, particularly in the wake of recent elections, also raises concerns about the future safety and visibility of trans individuals. Nonetheless, the increasing prominence of trans-centered stories on stage represents a meaningful stride toward greater inclusivity and cultural transformation. Future research could explore transmasculine narratives and examine casting practices, such as the controversy over casting a cisgender actor as Hedwig in the Australian festival in 2020 which reflects ongoing debates about representation in the arts.

As previously explored, theater often mirrors societal values and serves as a vital space for engaging with critical gender-related questions. However, real-world progress tends to unfold more slowly—and at times, even regresses. While theater alone may not initiate sweeping legal or cultural transformations, it plays a critical role in the gradual process of normalization of such portrayals. By presenting transgender characters as fully realized individuals rather than as mere narrative devices or symbols of tragedy, these representations have the potential to shape public perception and influence how transgender individuals are treated in everyday contexts such as workplaces, schools, and communities. This aligns with and affirms the central argument of this thesis: *Through the exploration of transgender*

experiences on stage, contemporary US theater serves as a platform for challenging traditional gender norms and fostering greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity within society. Productions such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Boy*, and *Trans Scripts, Part I: The Women* make substantive contributions to public discourse, offering platforms where empathy can be nurtured, stereotypes questioned, and marginalized identities brought into clearer view. In closing, and in keeping with the themes explored throughout this thesis, I would like to end with a reflection from Kate Bornstein on the necessity of unlearning gender:

> Our culture also tells us that we are what we belong to. To give up membership is to give up identity, and while that's not ultimately harmful, it is frightening. In the same way we unlearn other outmoded and/or harmful cultural imperatives, we need to unlearn gender. In the same way we need to break free of systems that enslave us, we need to break free of gender.[95]

This quote aligns closely with Butler's theory of gender as performative, where gender is understood as a socially constructed identity manifested through repeated actions. To "break free of gender," therefore, does not require the total rejection of gender itself but rather the deconstruction of the rigid norms that dictate its expression, thus allowing individuals the freedom to define their gender on their own terms. It is through these repeated gendered acts that the concept of gender is constructed, and without these performances, gender itself would cease to exist.

[95] Bornstein, Kate (2013). *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. p. 125.

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