



FREE STYLE

Two queer fashionistas explore the links between sexuality and appearance, and the pressure to 'dress down' for society.

 ROZ BELLAMY

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butch. femme. chapstick lesbian, lipstick lesbian. futch, soft butch, stone butch. twink, otter, bear and cub. drag king, drag queen. androgynous.

Historically, men and women have faced judgement or punishment for dressing subversively, and there remains a level of societal expectation regarding dress to this day. However, the queer community has never let this stop their exploration.

Ash Flanders meets me in a relaxed café courtyard in Prahran, a sexually diverse suburb of Melbourne. Flanders says he loves living in the area, and tries not to spend much time away from it. He recently starred in a cross-gender production of Hedda Gabler at Sydney's Belvoir Theatre; he has played female roles for years. Artist Wendy Sharpe painted a portrait of Flanders in a dress and heels that was named a finalist in the Archibald Prize. He is half of the queer theatre duo Sisters Grimm.

"[Playing women] has slowly become this thing that people like me doing," Flanders says. After playing a mother in the stage production of *Little Mercy*, people told him, 'I thought you were a woman, I really couldn't believe that.'

Flanders feels flattered by this feedback. "If my job is to make people believe I'm someone else, then that makes me think I'm doing it successfully," he says. "Apparently people can see me as a woman quite easily." Flanders attributes this to an innate femininity. "If I let it out, it's quite easy for me to access."

His roles involve differing degrees of becoming female – some require total realism, while in others it's very apparent that he is a man dressing as a woman. "I enjoy the whole spectrum of what it is to pretend to be someone else on stage. In some shows you really turn the volume up on someone else, and you

really transform, and other times it's really nice to be yourself and see what that distance between yourself and the character can offer the piece," he explains.

Either way, the roles involves a lot of preparation. Flanders says his friends occasionally want him to dress up for a party. "And by that they mean do an hour's worth of makeup and shave every inch of my body to try and look like a woman."

This level of effort is often the last thing he wants. "Halloween is exciting for everyone who's not in the arts," he says. "I dress up for a living."

Outside of work, he is most comfortable wearing T-shirts and jeans – the simple outfit he has on during our meeting. He points out that women have far more options and choice when it comes to clothing. "Men's fashion is very prescriptive, the palette is small. I was always jealous of how many clothing options women have."

Flanders' boyfriend is a stylist, and helped him develop his look and work out what suits him, which he says saved him from being that guy in the funny T-shirts. Despite some exploration with more typically feminine styles of clothing in the past, such as 1970s women's blouses, Flanders sticks to the basics, except for a few outlandish pieces he owns. One example is a bright pink *RuPaul's Drag Race* jumper with signature quotes on the front and back.

However, items like the *RuPaul's* jumper tend to stay in the closet, so to speak, mostly because Flanders fears harassment or judgement. "Some people feel a lot freer than I do in the way they dress," he says. He notes the contradiction there; he

gets attention for a living, but doesn't want to attract it on the street. "It's not the kind of attention I like," he says. "I want to do it on my terms."

"I have such a fear of inviting criticism from homophobic people that I don't dress as outrageously as sometimes, in the past, I would have liked to."

Flanders' career more than compensates for this, however. "If you get to be crazy on stage it means that the desire to do it in day-to-day life is minimal."

"When I'm on stage in a dress, I feel really authentic. I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be, doing what I'm supposed to be doing. And yet sitting in a writer's room in a grotty pair of jeans and sneakers and a stained T-shirt, that feels like me, too."

Flanders believes that his passion for work allows him to express himself much more than his clothing. "If I'm getting to do what I love, I feel like I'm totally authentic, and it has much less to do with what I'm wearing and more to do with expressing myself," he says.

Flanders describes himself as a strong believer in inclusivity. "The good thing about the queer community is that you can explore those things that mainstream society would deem unacceptable or strange. We get to make our own rules."

Despite this, he feels there are pressures to align with subcultures as well as physical expectations, especially for gay men. "I like to undermine these rules we have, so I would never want to subscribe to them," he says. "I'm a fierce individualist."

As a rule, Flanders dresses with one thing in mind: the need to feel comfortable in his own skin.

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Eldiese Christie meets me at STREAT, a bustling café in Flemington that trains and employs homeless youth. I spot her immediately: she has pink-and-purple hair and expertly applied makeup.

Christie arrived by motorbike, she tells me, so she is wearing jeans and boots. "If I'm going out, I usually have my heels, Rockabilly dresses and petticoats," she explains.

As she tells me about her job as a nurse, where she is not out as a lesbian, she explains



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that she has developed separate professional and personal styles. There is no hint of her bold fashion sense at work – she covers her hair in a scrub cap, takes out her piercings and wears minimal makeup. She also wears a ring from her partner, and uses gender-neutral pronouns to describe her.

“Nobody has commented on my tattoos,” she says.

I ask Christie whether she thinks her colleagues know her sexuality. “They look, but they don’t want to see,” she says.

While Christie plays it conservative at work, she says she doesn’t care if her colleagues see her in her more elaborate garb. Conversely, at queer events, it becomes more important to her to look a certain way. “If I tone it down too much I feel uncomfortable,” she says. In this world, she wears makeup, diamantes, corsets and petticoats. “On Sundays, I turn it up. I spend hours putting my makeup on.”

“In the gay community I can dress however I want. Nobody judges you. It doesn’t matter, your style is your own. Being queer gives you an open mind.”

Christie’s comments make me think about the possibilities and limitations of sexual diversity, particularly for women. “So many lesbians are hardcore feminists,” she says. The usual physical expectations of women are also more optional, which can be liberating.

However, Christie also acknowledges that there is social stigma for lesbians: people demand to know who’s the ‘femme’ and who’s the ‘butch’ in a relationship. Similarly, while the queer community is open-minded, once you identify with a look, you are expected to stick to it. “If my partner wore a dress, people would be shocked,” she says.

For Christie, though, her friends are used to her changing style, so they don’t care if she is wearing a ball gown or a motorcycle helmet.

Christie says moving to Melbourne from Newcastle made her feel free. When she visits Newcastle she tones down her look, whereas in Melbourne, she is often complimented on her bold appearance.

“I used to try to look like everybody else,” she admits. When she became a burlesque dancer and discovered rockabilly, she learnt how to dress in a way that suited her. That said, she is still regularly hassled by drunk

people: “It happens all the time.”

Although she doesn’t blend in, Christie says she feels safer in a big costume. “I feel far more vulnerable with no makeup on.”

I ask Christie what she considers to be her most authentic style. “Still a little extravagant, but in jeans and comfortable,” she tells me.

The way Christie expresses herself is intricately connected with her sexuality, and the style changes depending on how out she is in each situation. In this way, makeup and clothing allow her to express her sexuality.

She remembers working at a children’s hospital where the kids were extremely accepting of her sexuality, and helped her with makeup and fake eyelashes when she got ready for dates. But nowadays she uses a pseudonym to keep her personal and professional worlds separate. “I have a No Real Name policy,” she says. “Most people are respectful of it.”

Flanders and Christie both say they dress for themselves, but a fear of attention or judgement remains part of both of their lives. If fashion is intertwined with sexuality, does that mean censoring one’s preferred style in public is like retreating back into the closet?

Since I came out more than a decade ago, I’ve learned how fashion can either hide or project my sexuality. On many occasions I have dressed in a way that doesn’t feel natural for me, just to avoid making others feel uncomfortable. When I dress in a way that is particularly femme, or feminine, I am more regularly complimented. People also assume that I am heterosexual.

Mainstream society still rewards its traditional concepts of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ for cisgender people. Even in our constantly evolving and diverse society, there are unquestioned beliefs and assumptions about gender roles and sexuality, and unless one has the confidence to transgress, it is easy to dress the way society expects. Eventually, it comes down to individual preference. Political statement or not, dress is a form of self-expression.

A week after our interview, Flanders contacted me. He was proud to tell me that he had finally worn that pink *RuPaul* jumper, and he was complimented by a stranger while wearing it. ■