

IDENTITIES IN FLUX: AN INTERVIEW WITH JESS CHANLIAU

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Abstract

This interview with non-binary actor Jess Chanliu, conducted by Alexa Alice Joubin, explores genderplay onstage. A bilingual actor, Chanliu has played Viola, “an intrinsically trans character” in *Twelfth Night* and a queer Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. They spoke candidly on their experience of either being tokenized or being cast frequently as cisgender women. Despite being asked disproportionately to perform the emotional labor of speaking on behalf of trans communities, Chanliu has created meaningful dialogues with industry professionals to address equity issues regarding gender, race, and disability. They reflect on the duality of being marginalized while enjoying certain privilege and offer suggestions on how to hold ourselves accountable and help to dismantle transphobic practices in the entertainment industry.



A talented, bilingual singer and movement artist, Jess Chanliu is a trans-identified non-binary actor who has trained and performed in Santa Maria, California, Glasgow, Scotland, and Paris, France. They played the lead role of Stone in *Inmate Zero* (dir. Russell Owen, Golden Crab Film Production, 2020) and performed more than twenty characters in Martin McCormick’s autobiographical play *South Bend* (dir. Ben Harrison) at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2019. Drawing on the techniques of Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, yoga, and acrobatics, Chanliu has performed in physical theatre (https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3324304/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm) as well as been featured in a video game called Chorus for Xbox (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnRy-waJBjA>). Through motion capture and green screen work, they depict a sentient “star fighter” on personal journey of redemption in the space combat shooter game. Chanliu has also taken on roles in several Shakespeare plays.

Jess Chanliu speaks candidly on their experience of either being tokenized or being cast frequently as cisgender women in the following interview with Alexa Alice Joubin on August 21, 2020. Chanliu also brings an international perspective to trans theory and contemporary performance. They critique the phenomenon that the few trans or non-binary stage roles are written by white, cisgender men, and that

cisgender actors dominate even the auditions for trans roles. Despite being asked disproportionately to perform the emotional labor of speaking on behalf of trans communities, Chanliau has created meaningful dialogues with industry professionals to address equity issues regarding gender, race, and disability. They reflect on the duality of being marginalized while enjoying certain privilege and offer suggestions on how to hold ourselves accountable and help to dismantle transphobic practices in the entertainment industry.

I thank Chanliau for their time and for engaging in uncomfortable conversations that some artists try to avoid in auditions and in rehearsal rooms. This interview is a follow-up on an event entitled *Queer @ King's*, hosted by Maryanne Saunders at King's College London, on July 23, 2020.

Alexa Alice Joubin (AAJ): You have spoken at length on how the personal has become political in a global context. How would you characterize your experiences living and working in France, the US, and the UK?

Jess Chanliau (JC): My mother is Irish and my father is French. I grew up speaking French and English. I was born in the U.S., but I attended collège and lycée (middle and high school) in France as well as Cours Florent, a theatre school. I returned to California for my final year of high school. I went on to attend the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts in Santa Maria and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. As an exchange artist from Scotland to France, I performed at the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris.

Despite progressive legislation in France, I faced the most transphobia in France. I code switched to be as binary as possible when there. I got harassed. French is such a binary language that it is difficult to express non-binary identities. The singular gender-neutral pronoun (they) is never used in real life. The most transphobia I faced was in the medical complex with health care professionals. I was in Paris during my Erasmus scholarship, and I went to a doctor to figure out how I could see a gender identity specialist. My gynecologist simply said "I don't know how to help you. It is something in your head." Even in the UK I get more help for my gender dysphoria.

AAJ: There is always a gap between diversity as a statistical notion and meaningful diversity in embodied, lived experiences. As an American from Massachusetts and educated in California, Scotland, and France, now living and working in London, have you observed cultural differences in attitudes towards individuals who identify as trans beyond the linguistic issues you just mentioned?

JC: There aren't too many visible cultural differences, though I think the main difference is that the US and UK have been progressively more open towards trans identities and representing them than France has. In all cases, gender seems to be more fluid than race.

Even then, a lot of the representations seem exploitative in the sense of latching on to a politically correct, fashionable notion of diversity to market commercial entertainments. One big reason that the acting in-

dustry in the UK and US are starting to represent more trans people is because it's fashionable and profitable. There is one caveat, however: trans actors and characters are only acceptable when they still fit within the Western beauty standards of being thin, white and physically mobile.

In other words, a trans story isn't profitable unless a cis person is in the lead and it is a romantically driven trajectory. For example, Eddie Redmayne took an opportunity away from the many trans actors in *Danish Girl* (dir. Tom Hooper, Working Title Films, 2005). That alone could be a sign of transphobia.

AAJ: Why is trans representation important despite commercial exploitations?

JC: Trans representation is important because the gender binary is violent and oppressive. We all benefit from experiencing and accepting the diversity of human existence.

If everyone, especially cisgender people, saw trans people in theatre, I think it would help them examine more frequently how they identify with their own gender, and maybe see how some of Western society's imposed gender roles have made them feel about themselves. Gender-based oppressions go beyond the trans communities.

However, I must point out that the most important aspect of trans representation is behind the scenes. Everyone would benefit from there being more trans writers, directors, producers, and executives. Having people in positions of power who truly understand the intersecting oppressions of different identities can lead to the creation of narratives that depict nuanced truth.

AAJ: You have played Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Could you tell us about your experience?

JC: I have a twin brother, and I identified deeply with Viola and the in-between space she creates. My brother does video game design, and I have now starred in a video game via motion capture. Viola understands and finds a lot of power while taking on cross-gender roles. As Cesario, Viola coaches Duke Orsino in courtship. It is about power.

I played Viola in *And When Love Speaks* (dir. Andrew Philpot, 2013) at the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts, which was a mash-up of six Shakespeare plays, including *Twelfth Night*. Although I think Viola is an intrinsically trans character, or gender queer character, the cast and audience perceived me as a woman changing from woman to man and vice versa. The production depicted Viola's journey as a binary one, changing from one gender to another. We never addressed the in between space.

That said, the role of Viola really helped me understand my own gender and expression. Although I was being directed as a woman in *Twelfth Night*, I found a lot of depth with Viola in their transient nature, focusing on their need to survive, and staying safe while still remaining curious and queer.



Figure 1. Jess Chanliau as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Emily Reutlinger at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow.

AAJ: What about your role as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*?

JC: With Mercutio, I found a queer playfulness that opened me up as a performer. He does not care what others think of him, and his attitude to life remains aloof. I loved that. I appreciated and related to his frustration with life and being unsatisfied as well as his eagerness to enjoy life and be gay. Mercutio also opened me up to the idea of class privilege and how I relate to that.

I played Mercutio in the rangy, punky production at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2015. At that time, I did not talk openly about my sexuality and gender identity. I played Mercutio as a queer, gender fluid character. I interpret him as being pissed off and fundamentally unhappy, though he is privileged for coming from an upper-class family.

In playing Mercutio we kept the he/him pronouns, but I was directed as a woman to be somewhat in love with Romeo or to have a sexually charged energy towards Romeo. Therefore, it was perceived as a binary relationship for the most part. To appear androgynous, I wore a binder and kept my underarm hair long. The makeup highlighted parts of my face to approximate the features of cis men.

I played up the struggle Mercutio has with his feelings towards Romeo, as I believed that the play was very suggestive about their romance with all of these “dick jokes.” Mercutio is notable for not using the same kind of masculinist language as Benvolio. In conclusion, Mercutio’s anger comes from not being able to fully express his gender identity and sexuality due to his oppressive family.

AAJ: Were there other trans-identified actors in the production of *Romeo and Juliet*?

JC: I was the only trans person to audition for Mercutio. In the show, everyone else played roles whose gender aligns with their gender identities. I was the only openly gender queer person.

To be honest, for both *Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet*, I did not feel safe enough in either environment to come out as trans or be openly queer in rehearsals. I was afraid people would deny my interpretation of how absolutely queer both of these characters are.

AAJ: How have personal identities enriched or complicated your work?

JC: When possible, I bring my trans identity to develop a character’s backstory, as in the case of Viola in *Twelfth Night*. However, I am self-conscious of my other identities as a white, thin, native English-speaking actor. My pronouns are they / them / theirs and I prefer to be androgynous, but to most people I remain identifiably female. That is a form of privilege. There is actually a huge demand for trans and non-binary actors in British and American film and television industries, because these categories are seen as profitable. I am cognizant that although I am queer and trans, my presence still contributes to the idea of “being white is beautiful” in the beauty standards for the Western market. My trans identity is acceptable to producers because I fit their beauty ideals.

AAJ: Could you share your thoughts on explicitly trans characters in drama?

JC: Most trans characters are badly written, I am afraid. For example, British-Dutch playwright Jon Brittain’s *Rotterdam* depicts the gender transition of Fiona to Adrian, but the play fetishizes its trans protagonist’s gender identity as the only thing worth knowing about them. *Rotterdam* is the trans version of the television series *Friends* (Warner Bros, 1994–2004). Although it is a story about a lesbian couple, one of whom is trans, it’s a very binary story. The lesbian relationship remains very binary, because the characters and we have internalized transphobia and sexism. We need to decolonize our education. To me, it focuses more on the roles of man and woman and less on the fluidity of gender. I was disappointed. As a trans person, I did not see a lot of depth in the story. It was a typical trans story which is mostly about the trans person’s transition.

AAJ: It is problematic to single out one aspect, among many, of a person’s identity and make it the only meaningful thing about their life.

JC: Indeed, that is what I think a badly written trans role is: written with the main focus on the trans person transitioning to another gender. I honestly think there would be more depth in a trans story if a trans person wrote it. We can't write trans characters whose only desire is to transition, and their only struggle is transphobia.

AAJ: How do you deal with badly written roles that you are assigned?

JC: If I come across a badly written script, I will try my best to understand the story the writer wants to tell, what their intentions are, and maybe suggest other words or lines depending on how we're working together creatively.

I generally feel uncomfortable auditioning for trans and non-binary roles written and directed by cisgender people, even if the writer was very close to a trans person and wanted to tell their story. In my experience, additional emotional labor is always required of me. When a trans actor is being directed by a cis man to tell a trans story, it reinforces an unequal power dynamic that already is frequently experienced by trans and gender non-conforming people outside of theater. On top of that, an actor's job requires being vulnerable and that opens us up to potential harm. I wish cis writers and directors would acknowledge that power dynamic more.

Ideally, if I was to play an explicitly trans role, I would like it to be written and directed by a trans person. I hope that we would have a shared understanding of how each trans person has their own unique experience of gender. There would be an underlying understanding that we maybe have very similar experiences but no trans person or person for that matter is identical. That's not to say that all trans artists work well together, but this level of understanding and appreciation wouldn't be possible with a cisgender writer/director.

I would love to see a play or film where a queer friend is helping their transmasculine friend getting their testosterone shot. The film would not focus on the action. It will be depicted as simply one aspect of their normal routine. They would carry on with their day. A large part of trans culture has not been represented in television and film, which is always very binary.

AAJ: How can educators raise awareness of trans representation?

JC: One of the best ways we can raise awareness of trans representation is if we honestly examine our relationship to gender and the gender binary. How does the gender binary influence all our lives? What privilege does it give us? I also think the more we can de-gender our language, the easier it will be for us to expand our understanding of the human experience. If educators were more honest about how they felt about gender for themselves it would open up a space for students and those who are learning to be more open.

AAJ: What are the influences that helped shape your performance work?

JC: I am a Gemini: someone who collects information by reading ferociously. Through works by black feminists such as Angela Davis and bell hooks, I was able to understand myself and open myself up to new ideas. I am forever indebted to the Black women who have continued to educate me on intersectionality. All my drive for equality is because of Black women and Black non-binary people. Before the pandemic of COVID-19, I was writing a musical, *Darling*, about a queer relationship to explore the emotional intimacy between two people that is based on camaraderie.

AAJ: Do you prefer classical or modern plays?

JC: I enjoy non-conventional adaptations of classical plays but love newly written works too.

AAJ: What are your next projects?

JC: I recently did a residency with the Scottish Trans Alliance where I learned about how to be an advocate for trans people and myself. It made it much easier for me to talk to people who think trans people should not exist. As an actor and a free agent, I was not confined by any institution and had less to lose.

I am planning to work as an equity and diversity officer. I do feel somewhat conflicted, because there should not be a white person as the head of diversity. At the same time, it is an imposition on a person of color to work in an all-white environment and be asked to do additional emotional labor. I will do my best!