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ENG 442

### Gender Performance in *Priscilla*

There are few films that show such a wide array of gender based performance as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. In *Priscilla*, two drag queens (Adam/ Felicia, Tick/ Mitzi) and a trans woman (Bernadette) travel across the Australian Outback in a tour bus they've named "Priscilla". During the road trip to a gig in Alice Springs, Bernadette and Adam learn that Tick was married to a woman with whom he had a son. They also learn that this wife owns the resort they'll be performing at. The journey that follows is both literal and metaphorical, showing the numerous roadblocks the queens face along the way.

The gender performances pictured in *Priscilla* can be broken down into two categories: Femininities and masculinities. These classifications cover both the gender expression and performance of the straight and queer cis women, trans women, gay men in and out of drag, straight cis men, and those whose genders are ambiguous. Part-time drag femininities, "full time" drag and trans femininities, racialized femininities, cisgender heterosexual femininities, butch femininities, and the feminized father are all observable feminine performances in *Priscilla*. Masculinity in the film, although offering less categories, can be seen in the various cis straight masculinities, the racialization of men in the film, cis gay masculinities, and the masculine child.

The opening scenes of the movie show a drag performance by Mitzi, who is shortly joined by Felicia. Although it's never explicitly stated that the two are drag queens, their over-the-top outfits and makeup paired with the on-stage lip syncing immediately register with the

viewer. Instead of trying to look like passable cisgender women, the queens exaggerate aspects of femininity for their drag performances. The drag femininities of Felicia and Mitzi get increasingly dramatic, with a scene just seconds later showing Mitzi in what appears to be a drag interpretation of a chandelier. Later in the film, one of the outfits worn by both Mitzi and Felicia incorporates plastic wigs and dresses made out of flip-flops. These nontraditional fashion statements take “feminine” every day accessories and transform them into extravagant expressions of hyper-femininity. Even the props used during select performances exemplify gay drag queens’ representation of femininity as grand and performative; Felicia uses a larger-than-life high heel in her shows/ musical numbers several times throughout the film. Although the symbolism is a little heavy-handed, *Priscilla* uses this prop and others like it to show how truly exaggerated drag femininities are. At one point, while stranded in the outback and rehearsing a performance, the drag queens encounter an Aboriginal person who reads as gender ambiguous. The person invites them to a gathering of other Aboriginal people, for whom they perform. The outfits chosen for this rehearsal performance are bright and colorful, completed by wigs made of fake flowers. This choice of outfit could be interpreted as a commentary on the “unreal” nature of drag performances, about their distance from what is considered traditional femininity. In the same scene, the three queens decide to incorporate the Aboriginal person who originally found them in the drag performance. After the person’s equally gender-ambiguous drag is shown, the scene fades out in to a more removed perspective of the gathering.

Not all drag femininities are the same in *Priscilla*, though. Bernadette, the last of the three main queens in the movie, is both a trans woman and a drag queen. Her drag femininity is influenced by but separate from her trans womanhood. In scenes where Bernadette does drag performances, her attire and lip-syncing are just as exaggerated as that of the cis gay queens. Out

of drag, though, she's shown behaving in ways that are more in line with traditional femininity. Her clothing choices are more neutral, and her make-up toned down to better reflect the way "real" or "traditional" femininity is supposed to be performed. This is in keeping with Harris' "The Aesthetic of Drag", in which he discusses the differences between drag queens and trans women. He proposes that drag serves as a satirical commentary, a parody of femininity, while trans women (he uses "transvestites") desire to effortlessly blend into society (Harris 62). This point of view, however, neglects to mention people like Bernadette. Because of her trans identity and drag identity, Bernadette's femininity as it's shown in *Priscilla* exists in a state of constant fluctuation. Her gender, like everyone's, is performative. The difference lies in the ways she must over perform her gender for drag and maintain levels of performance higher than cis women when she's out of drag. The film subtly notes the differences in her drag femininity and those of the two cis gay drag queens by showing her applying makeup in the bus, or taking her estrogen pills. *Priscilla*, in doing this, shows the extra maintenance required from Bernadette to maintain her feminine gender performance- A level of upkeep that doesn't exist in Mitzi or Felicia. In one scene, a butch cis woman challenges Bernadette's right to claim femininity via a drinking competition. This juxtaposes Bernadette, a feminine trans woman, with Shirley, a butch cis woman. Shirley's womanhood relies on her being cis, while she externally presents with no makeup, short hair, and masculine clothing. Bernadette's presentation is more in line with traditional femininity because she's wearing a full face of makeup, has long hair, and cisnormative feminine clothing. Ultimately, Bernadette bests Shirley in shots taken, solidifying the message that traditional gender performance often overrides birth gender designation.

For the cis women in the film, their femininity and its performance exist in different amounts. For the most part, cisgender heterosexual women in the film exist as secondary

characters. They're used as part of a small joke in the beginning of the film, when an event for a woman runner about to start the Philips Classic is overshadowed by gays and queens sending off Bernadette, Adam and Tick. In other scenes, a cis woman is buying women's beauty products from Tick. The most significant cis women are Bob's wife, Cynthia, and Tick's wife, Marion. Cynthia's existence draws attention to a heavily stereotyped version of femininity. Her character caters to the white male gaze in its continued references to her "domination and domestication" (Kwan 99). Her refusal to be a submissive, obedient housewife and instead claim agency over her sexuality and behaviors is punished through Bob, who locks up the ping pong balls and outfits she uses to engage in performances for the bar. *Priscilla* shows in this way how even Cynthia's performance of femininity is unacceptable because it doesn't fit within traditional guidelines. The film almost demonizes her for this, though, in ways that it doesn't punish many other characters. She's portrayed as emotionally unstable despite the fact that Bob is effectively denying her the right to make decisions for herself. Because her gender performance is more racialized than any other women in the film, her punishment via *Priscilla* could be attributed to the fact that her gender performance lies outside the norms for both Western and stereotyped oriental models of femininity. The only other women of color shown in the film are the Aboriginal women, although they have no lines and are shown only in reference to their enjoyment of the drag queens. Marion's femininity exists in a liminal space of gender. That is, she's ascribed femininity due to her cis womanhood but does very little to perform femininity. The most feminine things she's required to do in the film are take the title of "wife" and have a child with Tick. Although she also fails to conform to traditional femininity, her gender variance is painted in a positive light in *Priscilla*. She "mothers" her child with Tick, but exudes masculine energy.

Despite Marion's nontraditional gender performance, a key plot point during *Priscilla* is Tick's fear of rejection by his son for being too feminine. Tick's drag femininity strikes him as a threat to his ability to be a father, even though at all other times this exaggerated brand of femininity is embraced. This fear seems to be rooted in the ideology that fathers are responsible for demonstrating masculinity and being devoid of femininity (Day et. al. 371). This conflict is strictly internal, in Tick's case. Although he's outwardly comfortable performing femininity, his worry about the effects this might have on his son are so severe that he attempts to hide them altogether. In order to be perceived as more socially acceptable by his son, Tick does "butch" drag to conform to traditionally masculine ideals of dress and behavior (Cohen 274). Part of the journey that takes place during *Priscilla* is Tick's coming to terms with his femininity via the reassurance of his family and friends. Ultimately, Tick understands that masculine and feminine performance can coexist and that these boundaries are not only complex, but in no way affect his abilities to parent (Lucas 138).

Although the film seems to focus almost exclusively on feminine performance, there are a plethora of different kinds of masculine gender performance in *Priscilla*. The most prominent are cis gay masculinities and cis straight masculinities, although the masculinity of Tick's wife and son are also important. The masculinities shown most in *Priscilla* are those of cisgender heterosexual men. From the first scene, in which Mitzi and Felicia are performing, the audience (composed of cis straight men) become agitated and violent with Mitzi, one throwing a beer can at the back of her head. This begins a trend seen throughout *Priscilla* in which most cis het men are stand-offish and confrontational with the queens from the get go. This is in part because Adam and Tick are seen as performing gender incorrectly, resulting in punishment from "appropriately" masculine men (Cohen 274). Australian men that self-report as having higher

levels of masculine traits show higher levels of homophobia towards gay men (Polimeni 2). *Priscilla's* depiction of the way Australian men view gender variant people could be a reflection of real ideologies and behaviors. Other examples of this brand of masculinity are seen when the queens stop in a roughneck, working class town for the night. Felicia, failing to integrate with the local men because of her drag femininity, experiences physical violence because she was recognized as a drag queen and not a cis woman. Not all of the cis straight men in *Priscilla* are aggressive, though. The bar scene, which is initially brimming with hostility towards Bernadette, Mitzi and Felicia, almost immediately becomes friendly when Bernadette deescalates with humor. In Bob's town, the queens are met with confusion, but little to no hostility. Perhaps this is due to the ways some brands of Australian masculinity separate drag from womanhood entirely, and view it as an acceptable way to embody femininity so long as masculinity also exists in the individual's gender performance as a whole (Lucas 138).

Bob, although shown as the friendliest and most open minded straight man, still maintains aspects of harmful traditional masculinity. He's immediately accepting of Felicia and Mitzi, and even develops an emotional and romantic connection to Bernadette. Bob punishes his wife for her lack of submission and passivity, and *Priscilla* appears to justify his behavior. Cynthia's behavior is shown as erratic; Yelling and pacing in front of the cabinet where Bob has locked away her possessions, hitting him when he removes her from her performance in their local bar. Bob is depicted as a gentle and altruistic version of masculinity regardless. He's immediately supportive of the queens and their endeavors, eventually deciding to stay in Alice Springs with Bernadette at the end of the movie. One of the last (and almost insignificant) portrayals of cis het masculinity is towards the end of the movie, when the queens and Bob arrive at the casino. The men responsible for greeting them treat their arrival as perfectly normal, in

contrast to the way they were received in almost every other instance in *Priscilla*. All of the harmful brands of masculinity they'd experienced from cis straight men appear to culminate into one harmless, completely uneventful reception.

Each of the cis gay men have their own relationships with masculinity, as well. The gay men shown are often celebratory, catty, masculine in ways that mirror femininity. Of all the queens, Tick's the closest to traditionally masculine. He attempts to fix the bus engine, he wears men's clothing when spending time with his son, and his mannerisms often fit the mold of traditional masculinity. He even has a wife and child. Adam, on the other hand, "fixes the bus up" by painting it hot pink, and demonstrates more femininity than Tick even when he's out of drag. Perhaps the most "masculine" thing he does is get in a fight with the roughneck cis straight men trying to fight him when he's presenting as Felicia. The only other gay men shown are towards the beginning, when "Priscilla" is being sent off. They're shown surrounding the bus, waving colorful banners and having a gay time. Through this representation, *Priscilla* shows gay masculinity as celebratory and fun rather than stern and rigid.

Marion's performance of masculinity is the most "traditional" of any non-cis-man in the movie. She's the groom in her and Tick's wedding, shown wearing a full suit and tie. Her speech and the way she holds herself when reacquainted with Tick is blunt and distinctly masculine, in contrast to the passivity shown by Tick himself. She's a business owner, and appears to be the dominant one in the marriage- Two more "masculine" traits. Perhaps because of this gender variance, her and Tick's son exemplifies his own version of masculinity. It's been shown that socialization influences gender expression (Udry, 443). While comfortable in his own boyhood, the son is non-judgmental of his father or the other queens, and expresses this lack of bigotry and judgement verbally.

Overall, *Priscilla* effectively demonstrates a wide array of masculine and feminine gender performance. The genders shown are primarily binary, but delve into the details of gender variance and deviance. The film shows how gender is experienced differently by cis, gay, straight, and trans people alike. Through plot devices and costume use, it conveys an overarching theme of the construction of gender and questions the idea that gender is a rigid absolute.



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