



Gender Play

Kate O'Halloran

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Kimberly Dark's shows have always been about the 'messy' side of life. As a stand-up performer, writer and activist, she makes messy sexuality and gender her specialty. Kate O'Halloran spoke with the boundary pushing performer about her work and upcoming Australian tour.

Kimberly Dark has toured North America and Europe for over 10 years now, with award-winning shows like *The Butch/Femme Chronicles* and, as part of her life as a practicing sociologist in California, interactive lectures such as "Is that a Dude?" *Lesbian Gendering: There's More To It Than You Think!* This November, Dark will visit Australia for the first time, presenting new 'comic-erotic-drama' show *Dykeotomy* to audiences at *Feast* in Adelaide, as well as various side-shows in Melbourne.

She maintains her work is about the "social construction of gender," but *Dykeotomy* delves into some unfamiliar territory.

"Here's the thing: I've been working with revelations about the social construction of gender for years," Dark says. "My first touring show, *The Butch/Femme Chronicles*, was about how we recreate gender among women and it's a theme I've handled off and on ever since. I started realising, however, that I was really chickening out if I failed to follow this theme all the way into sexual encounters. I mean, sure, our gendered performances are 'on display' in public, but sex and intimacy are major stages where we perform and reinforce those roles."

Dark continues: "Dykeotomy is different - there is political content, humor, queer theory - and there's definitely sex!"

One of the most interesting themes *Dykeotomy* tackles is the question of how sexual orientation may change when someone transitions. For Dark, this is "one of the most fascinating aspects of gender fluidity".

"Suddenly, identity markers like gay and straight fly out the window," she says. "If I'm a lesbian and my female partner becomes a man, do I become heterosexual if we remain together, or do I maintain my status as a lesbian and the man I'm with is just an exception? Suddenly, the whole thing breaks down. One reason this is of interest is that we often claim certain rights based on membership to specific groups. I'd love to see gender fluidity as a way to bump out the boundaries on who gets to be considered part of the human family with all their civil rights included."

Dykeotomy doesn't shy away from tackling 'tricky' issues, such as stereotypical assumptions about sexual or gendered identifications like butch and femme. For Dark, this is also a personal interest:

"I happen to be a femme dyke with an attraction to butch dykes, but again, when gender shifts, this is also up for grabs. And let's face it, life is messy. If we're really living full lives we're going to overstep a few boundaries once in a while.

"This stuff is one funny, tragic, absurd hot mess! That makes for good theatre, methinks."

Dark's work is all 'personal' and draws from her life experiences in some way, but she shies away from considering it 'autobiographical'.

"I don't write fiction. I don't need to - real life is odd enough," she says. "[But] I don't think of my work as being autobiographical. Autobiography implies that I'm telling a story about my life. Actually, I'm telling stories about social issues, the contours of privilege and oppression, the foibles of self-definition and how we define others. Every story is about me, but I'm not the subject."

One way in which she achieves this delicate balance of the personal and political is through her characteristic performance style: poetic, intimate storytelling.

"For me, intimate storytelling and poetic language are the key for handling challenging themes. There's a certain entertainment that happens with an audience when there's one person on stage. My breathing, movement and heartbeat matter. There's a dialogue taking place - even when the audience is silent."

This performance style is one way Dark embraces the 'ambiguity' she sees as central to discussions of sex, gender and sexuality.

"I want to live in a world that is more capable of handling and embracing ambiguity," she says. "We tend to think and speak in dichotomies: Day/Night, Male/Female, Liberal/Conservative, Right/Wrong, etc. Yet these are all false dichotomies - there's so much more nuance in all of these binaries than what's expressed in words. So, our linguistic frames limit our thinking and ways of expressing ourselves. That is why I think of everyone that disrupts a fixed binary - like male and female - as a cultural hero," she says.

Embracing ambiguity is all part of what Dark terms 'artistic activism' - the idea that we can 'inspire' rather than 'force' change.

"We dare not forget that we are social creators - literally, we are creating the culture - whether or not we're conscious participants.

"It's not that I want audiences to think like me; I want you to think more like you. Be as much of a powerful social creator as possible! [And] do it with integrity, openness and verve!"

kimberlydark.com