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Comic Timing Tackles Transphobia

By Jacob Anderson-Minshall

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Ian Harvie is on a mission. Sure, the transgender stand-up comic wants to make audiences laugh, but only if he can humanize trans people at the same time. Harvie—who plays to mainstream comedy establishments around the country, including the Boston Comedy Connection, and the Funny Bone clubs—contends that he’s the only trans comic on the circuit.



Photo by Cliff Kucine

“I know there are trans performers,” he says, “but [they’re] not doing traditional stand-up. I think I’m the only one doing this.”

Much of Harvie’s (www.ianharvie.com) comedy may revolve around his queer identity, but he employs mainstream material to reach his audience. The comic also directs MCs to introduce him as ‘she;’ and not just because he fears his breasts might disturb the audience. Harvie believes the initial deception is essential to his message.

“In order to transition them with me on stage,” Harvie explains, “I have people introduce me as she. I’ll endear myself to the crowd and then I’ll get them to a point where they like me well enough that I can pretty much say anything to them . I believe at that point people cannot look away. They cannot not listen. People are leaning in at that point. [Redneck guys] come up to me afterwards and give me the guy hug, with the handshake in between us and they’re like, ‘That was fuckin’ funny, dude!’ That’s the kind of stuff I love. I say mission accomplished.”

It’s not just straight men that Harvie touches with his material; women fans frequently proposition him—and that’s okay with him.

“Everybody there’s questioning everything that they thought about trans people—whether they thought they would never be attracted to one or whether they’d thought they’d never know one. I’m making a lot of people question shit.”

Harvie says that while his gender identification hasn’t changed, his expression of it has.

“I’ve always [identified] as butch, even before I had the language for it. Obviously I look down and I see a

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female-bodied person. I know what I see, but still I don't feel female. There was definitely a point at which I felt that butch wasn't enough for me and that I wanted to make physical alterations."

Harvie says he enjoys testosterone-induced attributes like his lowered voice, additional body hair and muscles, but Harvie also voices an unusual complaint: he didn't like passing as a man.

"When I started taking hormones I started passing as a guy [and] I was upset," Harvie admits. "It was that I was passing as just a guy. And I'm not just a guy. I'm a guy, but not the kind of guy you think. I'm a butch trans queer."

Rather than being just another guy, the comic went off hormones—but that hasn't changed his gender identification.

"I definitely still feel trans," Harvie clarifies. "I don't just feel butch, because I feel—[there's] no word is out there yet that describes exactly who I am."

Harvie hopes to perform for more queer audiences and he dreams of becoming a "wildly famous butch tranny stand up." He'd settle for a role on The L-word, but only to improve the cable show's presentation of trans men.

"God love Daniela Sea," Harvie says of the actress who plays Max—the show's first trans guy. "But I think that The L-Word representation of Max was really poor. You know what my long-term goal is? I would like to be Max's therapist on The L-Word. I'm not joking. I would love to be Max's therapist on that show and show range of representation for trans people, and the fluidity of it and that not everybody feels the way Max does. Not all trans guys ID as just straight men. I realize that it's The L-Word, it's not The T-Word, [but] I wish that their representation was a little more queer."

Read the entire conversation with Ian Harive at trans-nation.org. Trans writer Jacob Anderson-Minshall can be reached at jake@trans-nation.org. A mystery novel written by him and his wife will be released by Bold Strokes Books mid-2007.

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