

**Transfabulous, Border Fuckers and political queer
performance**

Jet Moon in conversation with Greg of No Borders London and
Emine of Kaos GL Turkey.

Greg: First of all, what is Transfabulous and how did you
get involved?

Jet Moon: Transfabulous is a Transgender Arts Festival that
happens in London every year. 2008 is the third festival. It
began as a solidarity movement within the transgender
community in London; first there were holding picnics, where
people could gather together and have a safe space to meet
other transgender people. Serge Nicholson and Jason Baker
are the two guys who run that. Then they launched a three-
day festival in London in 2006.

I was invited to curate Border Fuckers, the closing show for
Transfabulous, by Jason - and to bring performers from
Serbia. He came to the Queer Beograd festival in 2007 to
talk about Transfabulous and the situation in London. In
Beograd, what we do is have international guests speak about
transgender politics in their countries. People from the
Balkans region then join in the discussion. This builds up
networks.

Greg: Was the Transfabulous show performed at Queer Beograd
or was it something that was made for the occasion?

dig me out

Jet Moon: Both. The first big show we did at Queer Beograd was called Border Fuckers, which was also the theme of the festival. This show talked about the issues of border crossing: of militarism, of the divide between the queer world and the straight world. We try to put together fragments of stories, so that the audience has to think between the gaps of peoples' performances. Maybe in one story a person is talking about what it was like to be raised very traditionally as a woman. Then the character might talk from a different experience, where they are gay but do not fit within the gay community.

There is a show that Maja calls Cigarette Girl. It is a combination of my story of being raised as a girl and someone else's story, talking about how their mother sold cigarettes on the street during the war in Beograd. The idea of the body as a commodity also comes in, with the process of crossing borders and using sexuality: how we empower ourselves in our roles and identities; how we play with the system all the time; how people approach capitalism; how people approach sexism; how people approach gendered roles. It uses No Borders politics to put together ideas that do not seem to fit, but are very much connected.

Emine: How did the cabaret emerge?

Jet Moon: I have been working on shows since 1998 or 1999, mostly with queers and activists who are not performers. We make cross-over stories about being queer and bring in radical politics too. The process is conversation-based -

dig me out

scripts and performances are built up from people telling me their stories.

The first Queer Beograd festival was very small. Performers just did whatever shows they were currently doing. For the second festival, I had time to think about actually creating something. It is very hard to get messages across to people if you just tell them what you want to say. If you make it funny and sexy, with some entertainment, then you can present a really serious political message and the audience does not notice. Later, like a couple of days after the show, people are then like "Oh My God! Some very serious political messages slipped underneath!"

Greg: There is self-deprecating humour in the characters of Border Fuckers. Like, one of the performers came on - he was a big guy - doing this little dance, shimmying to 'Hawaii Five O' theme-tune music, and putting on rubber gloves. At this point everybody was thinking "is this a sex thing or what?" But he had the word 'forensic' printed on the back of his t-shirt and went on to talk about what he did for a day job - digging up mass graves and trying to identify the bone. It was political but at the same time he quipped "Do you think my chest is fat?" People laughed at that. I found some of the stuff he talked about very poignant. And he spoke about the jokes that Tuzla taxi drivers would tell him, because they see him as a man. How do you strike a balance between politics and humour in your work?

Jet Moon: With the show for Transfabulous I was thinking, okay it is not Beograd. It is the closing night of the

dig me out

London festival, with an audience interested in transgender issues as politics, but not necessarily interested in No Borders politics or anti-fascism or anti-militarism. That was the thing - how to write a show that can strike a balance between serious material and entertainment. With Dylan's piece, where he is talking about working at Srebrenica as a forensic scientist identifying human remains, he is also talking about body essentialism, his own gender issues, race and culture, and how people are seen within society...

Greg: I was touched when he said the only way to tell the difference between a male or a female body was to do with the skull or the hips - and that indicated only what hormones they had at the time they were forming, not how they lived, or how they identified, or what religion or nationality they were. I found that very poignant.

Jet Moon: The thing is he never said that! I wrote that. He spoke about gender at the Queer Beograd festival on a panel. From the transcript of his talk, I took out pieces I thought would fit with a performance. I had coffee with him and said, "I want to write a script where you talk about what you actually do in your job; how about we put this together with the stuff about your gender, and then introduce the stuff about nationalism and the body?" You see, this is the way to get a transgender audience to listen: here is the part of the story that you know and you relate to, and here is the other stuff that you are not really thinking about; it is not part of your experience or your world. It is probably quite disturbing to you, but here is the familiar

dig me out

stuff that is quite funny, here is stuff that is disturbing... We keep inter-cutting the material, to make the connections.

Greg: You deliberately layer narratives; when you hear about someone growing up as a boy, then you find out he is a girl; and the whole gender thing layered with stuff about nationality and ethnic identity. You deliberately bring in mass graves and mix up all the stories..

Jet Moon: How else can you get people to listen? I mean, if he had stood there and just told the story about what Dylan does I am not sure I could listen because I know that happens. I know it is disturbing somehow at an emotional level. Even though I am a political activist, I want to switch off because it is too heavy, too serious and if I cannot listen to it, then how is an audience of people - not politicised in that way - going to listen and take it in? You have to be smart and construct it in such a way that he comes on, and he is doing like a crazy dance and it is really, like, wow, what is going on here?

He is a very funny guy in how he presents, so I was lucky. When I first met him, I did not know he could do performance. He was like "Actually, I have done a bit of Drag King stuff and I did some Shakespeare when I was a kid". When we went for coffee, I presented him with the panel transcript and he told me about his job. I just said, "I think it fits. Can you fill in some of the gaps, like the actual information about Srebrenica?"

dig me out

This is how I make a script with someone most of the time. They tell me a story; I write it and put in stuff - like the line about how 98% of the time you cannot identify sex; or how you cannot tell someone's nationality or their belief from their remains - because this is what we are trying to say in the whole show. It is someone's story that would never get told otherwise. Everyone has their amazing stories, everyone. It is about pulling these stories out and arranging them in a way that can be heard.

Emine: How did audience reactions compare from London to Serbia?

Jet Moon: I wrote that performance for Transfabulous; it has never been anywhere else. At the opening nights in Beograd, we have a supportive audience; people come to see the shows. I also think there is something very special about the Transfabulous crowd; I performed at last year's festival and it was amazing. The people are absolutely supportive; it is like doing a show in front of two hundred close friends. With Transfabulous, people understand that people are telling their stories. The people in the audience see themselves represented in some way and that is just not happening in the outside world. There are no positive representations of trans or genderqueer people in the mainstream. It is just not happening (laughs). If you see a representation of a queer or trans person in the mainstream, they usually end up getting killed (we laugh). There are film theories written about how queer and trans characters are always psychotic, sick or dead.

dig me out

On the other hand, every person in the audience at Transfabulous is to some extent thinking, "Here is something about me!" That is why people are supportive - they share the experience. They are not watching a show and thinking, "Do I think this is good? What is been said here?" It is like, "Ah, here are our people, talking about us!"

Greg: What is your experience of playing to other kinds of queer/LGBT audiences, or even to predominantly straight audiences? Have you performed to those sort of audiences?

Jet Moon: I like playing places where it is quite a straight audience. It is a different experience. Again I think it has to be presented in a certain way and you have to be smart about how you do it. I remember the show in Ljubljana, Slovenia at the Rde e zore festival. During the show Capitalist Whore Fantasy, I was presenting as a very 'high femme' character, very blonde in super pink clothes. I was getting wolf-whistled by a lot of the guys in the audience. At some point I perform with a strap-on and masturbate my cock. People in the audience that I know said afterwards that these guys suddenly became very quite, and started whispering to each other (laughs). Other people in the audience were 'HaHaHa...' (everyone laughs) because they had their empowerment. The whole mentality of sexism and heterosexism was completely disrupted - and you can do things on stage that might get your head kicked in elsewhere. You can get away with a lot because you have your powerful safe space. Sometimes I wonder about what might happen afterwards...

dig me out

Greg: The fact that it is a performance on a stage gives a kind of permission, or safe space to do things that are perhaps otherwise dangerous in everyday life...

Jet Moon: It gives a safe visibility. The same happened in Belarus, where I was doing a very queer feminist performance in a Social Forum. At times that environment was quite sexist and homophobic, and I did a very out performance. I said "Are there any butch women in the audience?" and had a couple of people identify. From my position as being the person in charge, because I am on stage, I can say "Hello" to those people. They get celebrated in a good way, where everyone is like "Huh?!". It is not happening the rest of the time. I think that it is really important to be able to do that, to somehow swing the balance of power to where [someone might think] "Oh! Maybe it is good to be gay. Oh, maybe being butch is quite cool!" (laughs). All these straight anarchist boys are then going "Oh?..." asking a few questions of themselves (laughs).

Greg: Like they are asking themselves "If I had some gay friends, would I be cool?" (everyone laughs).

Jet Moon: Or maybe they start to think that it is not okay to ignore that these trans and genderqueer people exist. All the time we press this message alongside the anti-capitalist and anti-fascist stuff. It is not just about gay things. The straight, anarchist crowd already understand the anti-capitalist and anti-fascist stuff. Instead, it becomes like "Ah, the queer stuff goes with this as well. Okay, better start paying attention to that."

dig me out