

Boy review



“Necessarily unsettling”

REVIEWS AUG 10, 2022 SUMMERHALL, EDINBURGH



Vanja Maria Godee in *Boy* at Summerhall, Edinburgh. Photo: Stef Stessel

Thought-provoking play about gender and identity based on a true story



Despite being born male, Bruce Reimer was raised as a girl. After a bungled operation damaged his penis, his parents were encouraged to turn Bruce into Brenda. But Brenda never felt comfortable as a girl. He never fit in. He never felt female.

Belgian writer Carly Wijs previously explored the Beslan school hostage crisis in her 2014 play [Us/Them](#), a fringe hit that went on to play at the National Theatre. She is skilled at unpicking complex topics and presenting them in accessible ways.

Boy takes on a similarly thorny and complex subject matter. The play explains how Bruce’s parents had both led relatively sheltered lives. They were both raised as Mennonites and so they were swayed when the Harvard educated sexologist John Money – who believed in the “gender neutrality” theory, that gender was essentially learned behaviour – told them that it would be better for Bruce in the long run to be raised female. He was considered an expert in his field – they believed in him.

We later learn that in order to “teach” Brenda how to be a girl, he encouraged her and her twin brother to engage in sexual rehearsal play, which was supposed to reinforce their gender roles. The play becomes increasingly disturbing as the extent of his abuse of Bruce/Brenda becomes apparent, that he was using the Reimer children as test subjects.

Standing in front of an iridescent blue curtain, Vanja Maria Godee and Jeroen van der Ven use a selection of soft toys to tell the story. They have an open, slightly wry, smiley performance style, akin to children’s TV presenters, that feels intentionally at odds with the events they’re recounting. Similarly, the use of soft toys – various stuffed bears, plush monkeys and a pair of plastic baby dolls – brings to mind the play therapy sessions used to help children process trauma; it’s a representational tactic that allows the performers to discuss the grimmest aspect of the story in a digestible way. There’s perhaps a danger of this approach feeling flippant, but – mostly – the production avoids this.

Wijs intersperses the narrative with illustrative Elvis songs – Love Me Tender, Caught in a Trap – and by the end, the stage is carpeted in stuffed animals.

On discovering the truth, Bruce would resume living as a man, changing his name to David, but would die by suicide before he was 40. Wijs’ production is unsettling, necessarily so; while there are times where more social context would be welcome – it’s not wholly clear when these events took place – it raises multiple questions about gender and identity, nature and nurture, and neither overstates its contemporary relevance nor provides easy answers – and is more compelling as a result.



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Natasha is The Stage’s reviews editor and joint lead critic.

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