

Lift up your hands

Hedwig and the Angry Inch makes a space in student theater for transgender and nonbinary voices

STORY JUSTIN CURTO // DESIGN AUDREY VALBUENA // PHOTOS YING DAI

Stepping into Shanley Pavilion during the weekend of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, you'd notice the graffiti immediately. Green and blue spray-painted designs and phrases cover the walls – the word “fuck” is prominently displayed. In one corner of the room, the three-pronged transgender symbol rests between the words “Trans Justice.”

Standing 6-foot-8 in high-heeled boots and wearing glam rock-inspired blue eyeshadow, Connor MacMillen dances past that symbol throughout the show as they perform as Hedwig, its titular rock star. To them, it's not just graffiti: It represents the “weight of responsibility” of the show, the first Student Theatre Coalition performance in recent memory by and about transgender people.

“It's just so important that this show is happening and that we tell it right,” MacMillen says.

From the start, producer Lindsey Weiss and director Adam Orme knew that they wanted to put on a show dealing with gender. They chose *Hedwig*, a musical by Northwestern alumni John Cameron Mitchell (*Speech '85*) and Stephen Trask that centers on a genderqueer performer who was designated male at birth and experiences a botched sex reassignment surgery. As Hedwig performs a rock concert, she tells the audience her life's story, accompanied on backup vocals by her husband, Yitzhak. Their relationship is contentious from the start: Hedwig continually abuses and forces Yitzhak to repress his passion for drag performance.

To Weiss, the show doesn't present “a neat trans narrative” – and that made it all the more appealing for the team. Orme adds that Hedwig “defies definition.”

“That's what it does both about gender, and also in a broader sense about who we are supposed to be in society and in our relationships,” Orme says. “It is not so easy to slap a label on ourselves, especially for genderqueer people.”

Spectrum Theatre Company, a StuCo board focused on socially and politically important theater, put on the show Oct. 19–21. The board wanted its fall slot to amplify unheard stories – like it did last year with its winter mainstage, *Water by the Spoonful*, written by Latina playwright Quiara Alegria Hudes and starring Latinx actors.

But Hedwig's unrepresented, transgender-focused storyline almost didn't happen. Last spring, Weiss and the team intensely pursued the rights to *Hedwig*, but didn't hear back because the show was on its national tour. The team didn't give up that easily, though. It extended its deadline until the last possible minute, noon on the first day of callbacks. In the meantime, Orme had prepared a callback list for a backup play, *Where We're Born*, which did not focus on gender identity or feature explicitly transgender characters.

On the day of the deadline, after a morning of phone tag with Hedwig's licensing company and the tour's production company, when they found out the national tour would not be extended, Weiss received a call. It was the licensing company's head of nonprofessional licensing, Craig Pospisil: “Lindsey, guess what, it's 11:59, they called us back and you got the rights.” Weiss doesn't remember going to class after that. They just laid on the floor in shock.





The show's confirmation was great news for Rachel Stamler-Jonas, a senior in the School of Communication. It gave her the opportunity to put on a Croatian accent and five o'clock shadow makeup to play Yitzhak, her dream role ever since she saw the Broadway revival a few years ago. She even tried to get the rights for her own production. Since that fell through, Stamler-Jonas knew she had to be involved with Spectrum's performance.

"I saw Yitzhak find himself in a way that felt really important to me," Stamler-Jonas says. "It just feels like I'm watching something that I need to be [on stage]."

Throughout the rehearsal process, Stamler-Jonas and MacMillen worked to remake roles that already had their own histories. Stamler-Jonas felt that Yitzhak needed to be more than a character that "just kind of exists," as in popular productions; MacMillen wanted to reclaim a genderqueer character known for being played by cisgender men like Mitchell (the playwright) and Neil Patrick Harris. And both actors, who've been friends since the first day of freshman year, found their mutual trust invaluable in acting out and understanding the characters' abusive relationship.

"Rachel and I were talking about how this show is never going to exist again because this Hedwig and this Yitzhak are so uniquely creations of ourselves, more so than almost every other theatrical production I've been in," MacMillen says. "These were our stories we were telling."

All productions of *Hedwig* occur in the present day. For the Spectrum production, this meant Hedwig's concert took place at Northwestern's "historic" Shanley Pavilion in 2017. The script cleverly referenced Northwestern and current politics throughout the whole show. For the actors, this broke down a wall that exists in many other shows - instead of performing Hedwig, they were living in its world and bringing the audience in, too.

"Obviously there were facts about this character that don't apply to me, but the person that was up on stage was me the whole time, and

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that character was freeing in a way that I didn't expect," Stamler-Jonas says. "This show, I think, has greater meaning in a larger sense, and also very personal meaning in a very minute sense."

Beyond addressing issues of representation, Weiss says political art like *Hedwig* creates "healing and community wellness." They find that especially important given the absence of an explicitly transgender community at Northwestern.

"This is StuCo's first shot as getting trans representation right," Weiss said a few days before *Hedwig* opened. "Never, as far as I know in StuCo, have trans characters been played by openly trans actors and has that artistic leadership been forefronted by trans people."

Now, after *Hedwig's* five-show run, the team wants its impact to continue. As a junior, Weiss wants to continue promoting transgender and nonbinary representation in theater through their work as co-chair of activism for Lipstick Theatre, a StuCo board focusing on feminist theatre. And this winter, Stamler-Jonas will independently direct a self-written transgender retelling of *The Little Mermaid*, called *The Little Merperson*. Together, the team hopes that the show left some thinking about gender identity differently, and others feeling less lost in their own gender identity.

MacMillen performed as Hedwig during the show in front of two of the first people they ever came out to. They sang and cracked jokes, first in Hedwig's denim dress and fishnets and later in her shimmering evening gown and flowing blond wig.

As Hedwig came to terms with herself at the end of the show, MacMillen stood vulnerable at the edge of the stage. They had ripped off Hedwig's dress, smudged her makeup and given her wig to Yitzhak.

In a pair of black booty shorts and some leftover eyeshadow, MacMillen kneeled in front of the audience of friends, peers and strangers as they sang the show's final song, "Midnight Radio." When they stood back up, Stamler-Jonas returned to the stage wearing the wig and flowers as Yitzhak in full drag. Together, the two - channeling their own experiences - preached self-discovery to everyone, singing the show's final request: "Lift up your hands!"

