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**Student's Name: Robert James Gilbert**

**Student's Signature:** 

**Date: 13 June 2014**

**WHAT ARE THE THEATRICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN WRITING A PLAY  
WHICH BROADENS THE DEBATE AROUND TRANSGENDER ISSUES?**

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**ROBERT JAMES GILBERT**

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## Abstract

Against a backdrop of derision and ridicule, transgender characters have been poorly represented in theatre throughout history. After lengthy interviews with two transgender subjects, consideration is given to theatrical form, narrative, and metaphor in the creation of a new stage play that explores transgender issues in contemporary society. *Trans Tasmin* counters the historical discrimination of transgender representation by placing the transgender characters as credible protagonists. By considering transgender representation in New Zealand plays, and examining models of socio-political plays, the debate around transgender issues is broadened beyond the realm of pantomime and grotesquery. *Trans Tasmin* removes transgender characters from ‘theatre-of-ridicule’ and relocates them to ‘theatre-of-acceptance’.

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*What are the theatrical considerations in writing a theatre play, which broadens the debate around transgender issues?*

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of my thesis surrounds the issues that relate to being a transgendered woman in contemporary New Zealand society. I will investigate the theatrical considerations involved in the creation of a theatre play that will allow me to broaden the debate around those issues and, ultimately, I will consider how that might be evidenced through the writing of a play.

Why theatre? Since before the first recorded theatrical events, the notion of blurring boundaries between male and female has been explored, celebrated, theatricalised. As far back as Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, through to William Shakespeare's cross-dressing comedies, men have dressed and acted as women for comedic purposes. The Victorian pantomimes, which still have currency in contemporary western theatre, exploited the transgender dynamic by using the 'dame' to deride and titillate, then as they do now. Edwin M. Eigner, former professor of English at the University of California and an expert on Victorian pantomime, pointed out that the character of the dame is the most important in the modern panto and, just as Victorian audiences appreciated the cross-dressing dame for the "madcap sexual element", the modern panto "is necessary for regeneration and rethinking of entrenched, patriarchal custom" (72-73). The history of laughing at a 'man-in-a-dress' in theatre through the ages has contributed to a society where transgendered people are widely discriminated against, misunderstood, ridiculed and even feared. Therefore, as a result of the traditional exploitation of the transgender dynamic in theatre, this thesis will use the medium of theatre to explore the topic.

### **Shape and form of thesis**

This thesis is about developing my own learning, tolerance and understanding, whilst exploring the possibilities of imbuing experiences of transgendered women creatively through the writing and development of a play for theatre. I will examine the issue of providing oppositional elements and explore what happens when tensions are created

between characters in disagreement, and when oppositional languages are made manifest. And through that process I aim to broaden the debate around transgender issues through the representation of transgendered characters in my play.

First, I will discuss the issues related to transgender and what brought me to this quest. This will include the negotiation of matters related to the collection of personal stories and experiences, far from my own, and poeticising those stories. Next, I will examine transgender representation in three New Zealand plays, and explore the use of the metaphor of *The Bacchae* in my play. Finally, I will visit models of political theatre in another three plays to see if they can provide devices and frameworks, which I can synthesise into my own writing to strengthen its socio-political responsibility.