

TE AHUREI
TOI O TĀMAKI

AUCKLAND
ARTS FESTIVAL

BOY

By Carly Wijs



Herald Theatre, Aotea Centre

14–17 March 2024

Carly Wijs / TEATERi

Writer & Director

Carly Wijs

Performers

Vanja Godée, Jeroen Van Der Ven

Producer

Jo Mackie

Set & Lighting Design

Stef Stessel

Sound Design & Technician

Wim Bernaers

Technician

Peter Brughmans

Carly Wijs and TEATERi would like to thank:
Sabam and VandenEnde Foundation

“Suspicious Minds”

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1hr no interval

Contains distressing themes, nudity and scenes of a sexual nature

Production images by Steff Stessel

Boy

About the Play



Boy

About the Play

About *Boy*

Boy is a powerful stage show based on the true story of the Reimer family. In 1966, the Reimer twins are taken into hospital by their parents to be circumcised. This simple medical procedure goes horribly wrong and baby Bruce loses his penis.

After consulting with Dr. Money at Johns Hopkins University, the young parents agree to raise Bruce as a girl. From the age of two Bruce goes through life as Brenda. She is never told the truth about what happened to her as a baby, but from a very young age, Brenda senses that something is just not right...

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Creative Notes



A note from the creator

This is not a trigger warning.

The story you're about to see is based on true events.

For the sake of narrating a compelling story, some things might have been added that sprouted from my imagination. To be honest, they are not the most disturbing moments in this story.

In the next hour, I can guarantee that you will not be set on fire, you will not be slapped in the face. Not in any instant will you as an audience member be in danger. This theatre is a safe space.

What happens on the stage however might be disturbing because sometimes that's what stories are. We tell each other stories to face our fears and while doing that, we look at what frightens us. That's what we do when we join other people and sit together in the dark.

I've been asked to warn you as an audience for disturbing content. As an artist, as a writer, as an actress myself, I don't like to warn people. I think audiences are intelligent, free people that can make their own choices.

It is not my intention to traumatise people. It is my intention to tell stories. Compelling stories that invite you to think about life and maybe offer you a slight, and I really mean ever so slight, changed perspective on life.

Boy is about “only the modern becomes old fashioned”; a quote by Oscar Wilde. It's about feeling different and being an outcast because of being different and not fitting a mould. It's about “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

– **Carly Wijs**

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Interview with the Creator



Carly Wijs' *Boy*

***Boy* is a unique tale that relates to many of the conversations being had about the queer community happening around the world. Why did you want to tell this story?**

People think this is a hot topic, but ultimately, this story does not have much to do with the entire conversation that is being had within the LGBTQ+ community. It simply runs along the rim of what people consider to be a delicate topic. Our play doesn't advocate any viewpoint; it just tells the tragic story of a family that struggled to survive in an extremely difficult circumstance.

Did you have any concerns or nervousness when writing the story about how audiences would react to it?

To be honest, yes – in the UK, but not in Sweden, Belgium, or the Netherlands. In Holland, the conversations around trans topics are largely conducted between the doctor and a patient. It's not really an issue politically. We have had a transgender clinic in the Netherlands since the early 1970s. I grew up with transgender people in my family. In the UK, however, the whole subject was quite politicised, and I was indeed afraid that

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Interview with the Creator

our story would be hijacked. Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Bruce's story is reminiscent of the stories of many intersex people – while not actually being an intersex story (i.e. Bruce was not born with ambiguous genitalia). Were you ever tempted while writing *Boy* to turn it into a true intersex tale?

No, that never occurred to me. What intrigued me about this story were two things that still resonate with me today: first, it is a story of inequality in intellectual ability, or class. Nowadays, we live in a high-tech world where it is becoming increasingly difficult for an increasingly large group to keep up intellectually, which has far-reaching consequences for their economic position.

David Reimer's parents were very young and not highly educated people who got caught up in an incredibly complex medical drama. That made them vulnerable when they faced doctors or PhD graduates from Harvard.

Another inspiration was based on a statement by Oscar Wilde: "Only the modern becomes old-fashioned." John Money, the doctor in this story, was a very progressive sexologist and researcher in the 1960s who formed the basis of our thinking about gender. But if you look at

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Interview with the Creator

how he interpreted gender with today's eyes, it is really, very old-fashioned. Very binary. And mainly based on nature versus nurture, because he lived in a time when nurture was everything. It was only 20 years after the second world war when a mindset that considered nature paramount had led to Auschwitz. Basically: in the sixties, you were considered a Nazi if you thought nature was an important factor in human behavior. He was a child of his time. And like any child of his time, it is impossible to view your own time objectively. That's why we tell each other stories. To stretch and test our thinking. In that respect, I admire Karl Popper and his theory of falsification. It suggests that for a theory to be considered scientific, it must be able to be tested and conceivably proven false. In theatre, we are always imagining the unimaginable.

John Money, the doctor who recommended Bruce was raised as a girl, was a Kiwi. What did you find out about this character when you were researching the play, and how common were stories like Bruce's?

I haven't found any other examples of a similar story. A phrase I often have in the back of my mind when writing or researching characters is: You are only as intelligent as your emotions allow

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you to be. I found that to be the case with John Money in extremis. He grew up in a family with an aggressive alcoholic father, whom he lost at a young age. That must have been a difficult circumstance for a sensitive child to grow up in. What saved him and allowed him to keep himself afloat was his above-average intelligence. He could transcend his circumstances, and his brilliant mind had been his most reliable tool. When you're always the most intelligent person in the room, it's very difficult to realise that you might not always be right. He wanted his theory to be correct so much that he maintained for a long time that his treatment of the twins was a success. While he knew that it had become a complete nightmare, the only reason you and I know about this is because the Reimer twins found out that medical books were still describing their case as a success, and with pictures and all, they decided to come forward and tell the truth.

What do you hope audiences will take away from watching *Boy*?

A compelling story that reveals an uncomfortable truth.

Your play *Us/Them* has won much critical acclaim. Do you see many similar narratives between *Us/Them* and *Boy*?

The similarity is that *Us/Them* is a performance about a terrorist attack on a school that was a risky story to present on a stage for a young audience. But the success – we had made it clear that we found a tone in which it was possible to tackle such a difficult topic.

In the case of *Boy*, it seems to be about a story on gender, which, now, is a difficult topic to tackle, but it is about class and inequality and, as such, one of today's most important topics. By choosing a story that seems to be about gender, we took a risk, but like *Us/Them*, I think we found a gentle tone that makes it possible to tell it.

This interview for *YOUR EX* magazine was published on 7 March 2024.

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About the Company



TEATERi

TEATERi was founded in 1997 by several professional actors and directors with different national backgrounds in Jönköping, Sweden.

The group produces several shows a year for a young audience ranging between 6 and 19 years old that also appeal to a regular audience.

Among earlier productions are the critically-acclaimed *Speak! It's so dark*, *The Best Funerals in the World*, *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Arrival*. The repertoire is decided by a Repertory Council led by Artistic Directors Christian Arin and Vera Veljovic.

TEATERi's home is Jönköping's Old Theatre built in 1904 but they tour all over Sweden and also internationally.

TEATERi is a member of Assitej and Teatercentrum Väst.

TEATERi is financially supported by Swedish Arts Council with the support of Swedish Arts Council, Region Jönköping Council and Culture and leisure Jönköpings Kommun.

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Biographies – Creative Team



Carly Wijs

Writer, Director

After Carly graduated from the Maastricht Theater Academy in 1990, she performed with various theatre companies including the Needcompany, Ro Theater, NTGent, De Roovers, Victoria and the Zuidelijk Toneel. With De Onderneming, Carly made the performance *The Notebook* and *The Proof*, which were shown at the Edinburgh Festival, the Dublin Theater Festival and the Toronto Waterfront Festival.

In 2014, Wijs wrote and directed *Us/Them* at the BRONKS theatre in Brussels. In 2016, she won the prestigious Fringe award for this performance at The Edinburgh Fringe. In February 2017, *Us/Them* performed in the National Theatre's Dorfman theatre followed by a worldwide tour including Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada and Europe.

Us/Them has been translated into English, French, German, Hungarian, Swedish, Turkish and Japanese.

Her most recent play, *Boy*, was received with five star reviews at the Edinburgh Fringe 2022, toured Flanders and the Netherlands in the autumn of 2022, and the UK in 2023.

Stef Stessel

Set & Lighting Design

Stef Stessel is a Belgian scenographer, lighting designer and photographer.

Since their founding in 1995, he has been a permanent member of theater collective De Roovers in Antwerp.

As a freelancer, he regularly collaborates with large theatre and opera houses in Belgium.

His collaboration with Carly Wijs started while working on performances they made for KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS in Brussels in 2000, *The Notebook* and *The Proof*.

Stessel and Wijs worked together on *Us/Them* that was part of the 2018 Te Ahurei Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Arts Festival. Their next collaboration will be in the autumn of 2024 when they premiere *Autumnsolate* by Ingmar Bergman at the KVS in Brussels.

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Biographies – Performers





Vanja Maria Godée

Vanja Maria Godée (born 1980) is a Swedish artist educated at l'ESACT in Belgium where she is also based.

Godée works both as a freelance artist and as a member of the art and theater collective UBIK. She has performed for children and adults mainly in Europe but also in North America and North Africa.

Godée has collaborated with directors like Armel Roussel, Mohamed El Khatib and Françoise Bloch, and has performed at festivals such as Festival d'Avignon, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Belgrade International Theatre Festival and Festival Grec de Barcelona. She is currently working on an adaption of the Swedish ecocide, *Epos Aniara*, with her collective.

Godée and fellow performer Jeroen Van der Ven are partners and the parents of 10 year old Esme.



Jeroen Van der Ven

Jeroen Van der Ven (born 1983) is a Belgian actor.

Van der Ven studied at the RITCS drama school in Brussels. He has collaborated with theatre directors like

Kris Verdonck and Thomas Bellinck and theatre companies like KVS and Ontroerend Goed. He has played in several films and TV shows, most recently, in the Netflix-drama *Rough Diamonds*. Van der Ven is also a drama teacher at the KASK School of Arts in Ghent.

Van der Ven and fellow performer Vanja Godée are partners and the parents of 10 year old Esme.

About the Festival

Who We Are

Te Ahurei Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Arts Festival champions change-making, the environment, ambitious ideas, powerful voices and unique experiences that open our eyes, our hearts and our minds.

Taking place each March in New Zealand's largest city, and reflecting its contemporary, multicultural nature, the Festival challenges its community to be courageous, to be bold, and to explore new ways of reflecting the world around us.

Through the incredible work of artists here in Aotearoa and across the globe, we aim to unify, uplift and inspire our audiences – the people of Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa, and all who visit.

To learn more about us, tap here. 

The Auckland Festival Trust Ph **+64 09 309 0101** Email info@aaf.co.nz

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