



18 MAY, 2024

BEYOND BINARY

The Saturday Age, Melbourne

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CAMERON WOODHEAD



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Emmanuelle Mattana found herself on a toxic schoolboy list. Her brilliant response might just make a difference.

Emmanuelle Mattana was a whip-smart champion of her high school debating team when she found herself on one of those awful schoolboy lists. Just like the Yarra Valley Grammar students at the centre of a media storm this month, the debaters at Sydney Boys High School (Scott Morrison's alma mater) had created an Excel spreadsheet to rank the girls according to their attractiveness.

"They were very thorough," the now 23-year-old actress and playwright says with a resigned smile. "One of the boys who had a crush on me told me that I rated particularly poorly on the 'playfulness' category but reassured me I ranked highly in the 'arse' category. So that was my redeeming feature, apparently – my dump truck! I was solidly middle-of-the-pack, once you evened it all out," she adds, once the laughter subsides.

In another bit of low-key misogyny, a boy from Sydney Grammar (Malcolm Turnbull's alma mater), told the Sydney Girls High School student that "the only reason they lost [the debate] was because they were distracted by my legs".

The experience helped to inform her play, *Trophy Boys*, which premiered in Melbourne last year and has now been revived for a

national tour. It is an exemplary instance of how art can advance and improve public debate in a thoroughly entertaining way. It's as impressive (and funny) a debut as I've seen in 20 years as a theatre critic, and the debate it covers – the causes of misogyny, sexual assault and gendered violence – couldn't be more relevant or urgent.

Trophy Boys tackles these issues through the time-honoured theatrical tradition of cross-dressing. The four-strong cast is female-identifying and nonbinary and, using the art of drag, the actors get under the skin

of private schoolboys – the privileges they enjoy, the pressures they face, the gendered socialisation they experience, even the knee-high socks and very short shorts they have to squeeze into on school days.

In the weeks since I interviewed Mattana and her fellow performers, two year 11 students were expelled from Yarra Valley Grammar for their role in creating a list that ranked female classmates according to demeaning categories, including "unrapable". Why we continue seeing boys engage in such disturbing behaviour is a vexed question explored in a controversial column in *The Age* from Waleed Aly, who argued the root of most male violence lies not in disrespect for women and girls, but in

the humiliation and shame felt by perpetrators. This set the letters page on fire, with several readers retorting that male entitlement was the cause – that men and boys expect to be treated better than women, as they have been for millennia, and feel humiliated and ashamed when they're not. Both sides will find a synthesis and refinement of their argument in *Trophy Boys*. The play focuses on a private school debating team – four boys, locked in a prep room for just over an hour, tying themselves in knots brainstorming the affirmative case for the topic: "That feminism has failed women."

It's a minefield, and they know it. The boys also know enough about (feminist) arguments critiquing feminism to be strategic about not getting cancelled, but before they're done, they will all fail women. When an unknown member of the team is accused of sexual assault, boyish camaraderie turns to ugly complicity.

In outline, the scenario resembles the 2021 sexual assault allegations against the then attorney-general, Christian Porter, by a woman known in the media as "Kate". Mattana acknowledges the story served as



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an inspiration for the play. Kate was a brilliant high school debater in 1988 who alleged Porter raped her at the World

Universities Championships in Sydney when they were both teenagers. Her early potential was never realised: she was dogged by mental illness all her life, and died by suicide in June 2020.

She never made a sworn statement to the police, and there were no witnesses to corroborate her allegations. But Kate found a posthumous champion in her childhood friend and fellow debater, Jo Dyer, who believed the allegations and, according to wishes Kate expressed, made sure they were aired publicly after her death. Porter has always vehemently denied the allegations.

It's a piteous story from every angle, but Mattana was especially struck by the photos of Kate and Porter from their high school debating years. This was a world she knew from personal experience – and she had a love-hate relationship with it.

Schoolboy lists aside, Mattana was drawn to the intellectual thrill of what she calls “nerd sports”, and the rare chance debating offered for a 15-year-old girl to have her ideas heard. “I was a very outspoken teenager,” Mattana says. “I had lots of opinions about the world. I was deeply political. And I was never going to be the beautiful girl in high school. I was never going to be popular. I was never going to be anything that women are supposed to be.

“But this was a place where, for eight minutes, I could speak and be respected. I got to speak uninterrupted. I got to have my intellect be the most important thing about me ... I learnt to have a voice. This play wouldn't exist, and not just in the most obvious of ways, if I hadn't done debating.”

Mattana has the kind of self-possessed intelligence that raises the IQ of an entire room and leaves it crackling with big-brain energy. The queer playwright came to theatre via film and television. In year 11, she was cast as the lead in *Mustangs FC* (2017-20), an ABC comedy-drama for kids where she played Marnie, a soccer player on an all-girls team. It was a socially progressive series with a diverse cast, and Mattana is proud she was the first person to say the word “lesbian” on children's TV.

Trophy Boys took her 18 months to write, but for an indie theatre debut, the show got a dream run. Every part of the theatre ecosystem aligned to realise the play's

brilliance and bring it to the main stage. With director Marni Mount, who she met at a high school debating tournament, already

on board, Mattana reached out to Dyer – a powerhouse theatre producer, respected for her work with Bangarra Dance Theatre, among other things. Dyer pledged \$50 and tweeted her support for indie theatre. A playwriting contest at the Midsumma Festival led to a staged reading. Producer Ben Andrews at The Maybe Pile came on board.

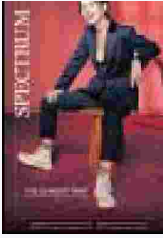
Crucially, *Trophy Boys* was part of an Explorations season at Melbourne's La Mama to test it in front of an audience. (On the recent failure of La Mama to receive organisational funding from the federal government, Mattana says: “Artists have got to have somewhere between their backyards and the main stage to develop their craft. Give La Mama back its funding.”)

When I saw the subsequent run at Melbourne's fortyfivedownstairs, I gave the play five stars in *The Age* and urged readers to rush to see it. On the strength of the review, Dyer flew interstate to see the show, and was so impressed she threw her weight behind a mainstage tour.

So, what is it about the play that makes it such effective theatre? Comedy is one element, as is the way drag draws attention to the performative nature of gender, but the cast also gives these boys the respect they deny women by fully imagining and humanising them. It helps to dispel one of the most persistent rape myths: that perpetrators are monsters, or “bad men”. Most of them aren't. They can't be. There are too many of them.

In Suzie Miller's hit play *Prima Facie*, the lone performer addresses the audience directly, inviting them to look around the auditorium, knowing one in three women report having experienced sexual assault. The corollary is uncomfortable: that you almost certainly know a perpetrator. *Trophy Boys* is incisive on how ordinary they look, and on how destructive but normalised gendered behaviour, reinforced through socialisation, always plays a role.

“The boys are victims of the patriarchy as much as they're perpetrators of it,” Mattana says. “The tragedy is that these boys are all performing a rigid kind of masculinity because they think it protects them or keeps them safe, or they think it allows them to repress their feelings, or their homosexuality, or that they'll step into a



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power that society tells them they will have if they act this way.”

It’s a warped headspace to enter, and only half of what’s needed to inhabit boyhood at a cellular level. The physical performance of insecure masculinity – all the body language, rugged poses, the manspreading, the emotions suppressed, all that covert self-surveillance to make sure you’re always acting “masc” enough to be accepted – it’s all ridiculously accurate and disturbing.

Leigh Lule, who plays black incel David, says she’s never been more hyper-aware of her body than in *Trophy Boys*.

“Every single second I’m thinking, ‘Am I sitting in a manly enough position? Maybe I need to sink a bit more’ ... ‘Is my expression too feminine? I need a deeper frown.’ Even for the audition, I went to my male mates and said, ‘Teach me how to walk, teach me how to stand and sit.’ And they full-on gave me a masterclass! They were just so f---ing precise, and I was like, ‘Did you take a course or something?’”

It’s even more torturous for Gaby Seow, who plays Scott, a closeted queer Asian-Australian boy whose public displays of masculinity are driven by internalised homophobia. Queer Asian people, Seow says, strongly identify with her character’s predicament.

What about Fran Sweeney-Nash, the nonbinary member of the cast who plays Jared, a jock who’s never been criticised and thinks of himself as the quintessential good bloke? “Gender is so f---ing made up,” Sweeney-Nash says wearily. “It is made up. I’ve always felt I’m failing at femininity. I can’t keep up with being a woman. I’d rather just not ... So to me, it feels like everyone’s playing a character a little bit, all the time.”

Mattana herself plays the brainiac scholarship boy Owen, and shows that if gender is a construct, it can also smack of conspiracy. That said, playing a boy does have an upside in lightening the luggage of the performer’s own gender.

“If I was doing my stage debut as a woman,” she says, “it would be like, ‘Do I have to be pretty?’, ‘How am I being perceived?’ and drag liberated me from all of that.”

For Mattana, too, the boys in her life helped to hone her sharp observations of gender in action. Her 15-year-old brother, she says, “is a constant resource”, and she can’t resist playing an audio message he

sent her just before the interview began – a few minutes of quiet scattling, the “doo-di-

doos” punctuated by a single audible word: “Moustache!”

“That’s his love language,” says Mattana, delighted afresh by the sweet absurdity of the message. “My brother doesn’t know how to tell me he loves me, so he sends me that stuff and punches me occasionally.”

And there it is: hiding your emotions, protecting your vulnerabilities. These are cardinal rules for traditional masculinity, and yet boys can and do find creative ways around gender norms they’ve often been socialised since birth to accept.

To change them, however, requires being conscious of them, and this intricate performance of elite private school masculinity will make every male who sees it more aware of the quality of their own gendered performance.

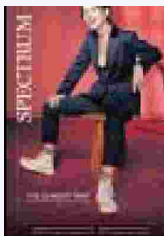
“The play contains an offer,” says Sweeney-Nash. “It says, if we can put gender on ... you can take it off as well. You don’t have to keep doing this. It is a performance. You can stop it if you’d like to.”

“Or you can just find some joy in the queerness of it,” Mattana chimes in. “It’s not just about boys interrogating their own relationship to masculinity. If a boy goes, ‘Hey, drag looks fun, and I don’t have to be this thing’; or if a girl goes, ‘Wait a second: I can put on a moustache?’ ... to me that is a great, great win. I mean, are any of us actually happy with what we’ve locked ourselves into with the gender binary?” Mattana asks pointedly.

As for Dyer, the tour of *Trophy Boys* strikes her as a fitting memorial to her lost friend Kate, and as important an educational initiative as Chanel Contos’ Teach Us Consent campaign in eliminating the kind of normalised sexual violence that’s alleged to have led Kate to take her own life.

Unfortunately, she describes some private schools as “chary” of sending their students to the show. You’d think Yarra Valley Grammar would be first in line, though it’s such a superb piece of theatre that every school kid should see *Trophy Boys*.

“It probably won’t make a profit,” Dyer says of the tour, “but it will make a difference.”



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Trophy Boys is at Geelong Arts Centre, June 14-15; Arts Centre Melbourne, July 16-21; and St Albans Bowery Theatre, July 16.

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EMMANUELLE MATTANA





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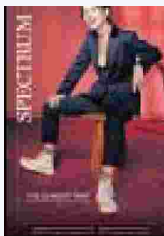
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Clockwise from main: The cast of *Trophy Boys*, from left, Gaby Seow, Fran Sweeney-Nash, Emmanuelle Mattana and Leigh Lule; Lule sought guidance on how to move as a boy; Mattana called on her experiences on debating teams; Seow plays a closeted queer Asian-Australian boy. PHOTOS: PENNY STEPHENS, BEN ANDREWS, SIMON SCHLUTER



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