

EGSM 012: Dressing fancy (Costumes & cosplay)

Content Warnings

- Explicit language
- Innuendo
- Discussions of: gender and identity, sexism and transmisogyny, fatphobia and toxic beauty standards, oppression and capitalism
- Mentions of: food, Nazis (briefly), COVID-19 pandemic, racism, cultural appropriation, emetophobia

NEMO

One of my characters recently, the description of them just said ‘wears socks and sandals.’ And I was like, yeah, that’s all you need to know about him!

(group laughter)

FRANCESCA

Conveys so much!

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers. Today we’re talking about costuming and cosplay. And I am beside myself to be joined by Francesca, Mabel, and Nemo. So let’s do this alphabetically as always; Francesca, can you please give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

FRANCESCA

Most certainly. So my name is Francesca and I am she/they. I play Julia Montauk on The Magnus Archives and I like that you gave yourself the title of one of the best Rusty Quillers. Best thing in the world! I'm into it. I'm a drag king, I'm a comedian, improviser. I do clowning in refugee camps. I facilitate, I direct, I do a whole bunch of stuff. So that's me in a nutshell!

HELEN

That is a whole bunch of stuff! Wow! I didn't even know you did all that.

FRANCESCA

Yeah.

HELEN

Very well done. Okay, and...I had to run through the alphabet just there, I was like 'does M or N come first?'

FRANCESCA

Just doing the song, just doing the song.

HELEN

Yeah! Just a quick bit of the song. Mabel, please give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

MABEL

Hello! Yes, I am Mabel Syrup. My pronouns are she and her, and I am a drag queen and also I do other things that are not associated with drag queening, and not hugely relevant right now!

(group laughter)

HELEN

That's fine! That's fine. It is relevant for this episode. And finally, Nemo. What are your pronouns and what do you do?

NEMO

Hello I'm Nemo. I use they/them pronouns and for Rusty Quill I'm the lead writer of a podcast called Trice Forgotten.

MABEL

Should I have talked about the Rusty Quill things that I did? That's fine, right?

HELEN

Oh yeah go for it. Yeah.

MABEL

I'll just add that now? I have also done some voice acting for Rusty Quill. Move on with your lives.

(Helen laughing)

HELEN

And Nemo, do you do anything else you'd like to mention other than the amazing podcast that you're going to be writing for us?

NEMO

I am mostly a writer to be honest. Yeah, so I write theatre and I write podcasts and I produce plays so yeah.

HELEN

Ah. God I'm so excited to have you on board. Like I just, I love the whole concept of the show. I'm just generally feeling very enthusiastic today.

NEMO

Yay!

HELEN

Okay. So, we're going to start with like a nice, easy establishing question which is: what got you into the idea of costuming and clothing as performance? Like, why is that interesting? Why is that something that you decided to look into or pursue? I personally do not do anything with my clothes professionally but it's something that I'm very interested in terms of...in terms of how the way you can choose to look can inform your identity and vice versa and the whole thing about gender and identity being a performance is something that I'm super interested in and enjoy playing with a lot.

MABEL

That's really cool. Sorry, just I, that's almost the entire opposite of the thing that I love about costumes.

HELEN

Oh yeah?

MABEL

Yeah, like on a personal day to day level I have literally never put any thought...it's like jeans, T-shirt, done. Whatever. Don't give a damn. And like the thing that I have always loved about costumes since like, really, really tiny, is being a character. Being a different person who is not me. Just like being able to put something on and immediately just inhabiting someone else. Like that is what I love about it. It's just sort of like 'what would this character, what would this person wear and why' and stuff like that. Whereas like on my own personal level, don't care. I couldn't care less.

HELEN

It is cool how...because I did do a bit of theatre, like when you wear the character's clothes, it completely changes your, like, entire mannerisms, especially if they're not clothes that you would usually wear.

MABEL

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like suddenly you just feel open to so many more, like, ways of being just because you're wearing someone else's clothes. It's really cool.

HELEN

Yes. Yeah I hear that. What about you Francesca?

FRANCESCA

I feel like in terms of theatrical sense like I've been performing since I was three, dancing and what not. And at drama school I kind of developed my process in terms of...I went to a method-acting, Stanislavskian drama school of East 15, and so therefore it was very internal in terms of process, but we did do a lot of Laban. And I discovered that actually for me, the externality was much more useful because I'm quite an esoteric person as it is. So, you know, if I start thinking about what bottle of perfume I am or what calibre of caviar I am in terms of personification, I can get a little bit stuck in that. Whereas if I allow my body, via the use of Laban or Lecoq or other sort of movement styles, if I allow my body to kind of morph into different shapes, I find that costume is an extension of that for me.

HELEN

Mmm.

FRANCESCA

One can inform the other. I feel like it's a symbiotic relationship. Like one, can inform the other and one can spur the other on, but I think they are very indispensable in regards to each other. But for me as a drag performer - I am Brent Would, W-O-U-L-D because I would anything, literally anything, especially you -

(group laughter)

That's his tag line. That was a whole different world for me in so much as I, as a person, have always loved fashion and dressing differently. Y'know, when I was younger, I was, I'm still very much into metal and rock and punk and stuff so I felt like the way I dressed as a kid was a very transgressive act. It was me kind of saying, you know, up yours to the system. And I think that when I discovered drag, I've always felt like I didn't, inverted commas, "woman properly", whatever that means. And it doesn't mean anything, of course it's a binary construct. But being allowed the freedom to inhabit that space meant that I got given a lot more slack. So it's been a real like, head spinner being able to enter that space but my character has evolved recently and there's a lot more sort of gender...gender fuckery if you will, with my performance art versus just being a very masculinised thing but I think it inhabits a range of spaces and the clothing is extremely pivotal to that. Such a long answer! Kill me!

HELEN

No, it's a great answer! I also, I want to go back a little bit. Can you talk to me as a non-professionally trained person, can you talk about what...did you say Laban and Lecoq? What, what were those?

FRANCESCA

They're just movement languages or schools of movement. So like Laban, he has some questionable ties now we realise to the Nazi regime...

HELEN

Oh god!

FRANCESCA

But outside of that, his work was really interesting because he created a language for movement. He worked a lot with people who were...women particularly that were in munitions factories and were committing movements that were not their natural flow, and seeing how that had affected them. And it's, you know, when you work as a company, or if you work with actors it's a way of talking about movement and intention. Because, you know, if a director says to you like, 'be angry!' like what does that mean culturally, in terms of gender, in terms of you individually, the family you grew up in. Anger is such like a, a nondescript word to say realistically, because it has so many different permutations. Whereas like, if you're able to approach something from a more movement effort based perspective, I personally find that that can be a lot more helpful and I've done a lot of work teaching directors how to do that. And I think costume sort of gets on board with that. And Lecoq is more clowning and movement stuff as well, so again, going into the area of Bouffon and the various different sort of iterations of clown.

HELEN

That's absolutely fascinating. I'm going to have to do a, an episode about theatre.

(group laughter)

Because like, I don't know, I don't know any of this stuff! These are...wow! That's so...but that's totally true, like...if you ask me to act angry, what I am gonna do is going to be very different to what, say, Lowri might do or what Alex might do.

NEMO

Mm.

FRANCESCA

It's also a very hollow reaction because it's like, where did it come from? Unless you know where you've built from or the impetus, it's just the performance of an emotion like a kid would do when they're mucking about. Whereas like, for you to genuinely embody that and to be truthful because acting after all is about telling the truth versus lying, I think that's the common misconception. It has to come from a real place.

HELEN

Wow! Gosh! Yes, I knew this was going to be a good episode!

(laughter)

Nemo, talk to me about why you're interested in costumes and cosplay and stuff like that.

NEMO

I feel like mine is very similar to yours. What you said about like, gender play, and I was trying to think of like, the first time this would've come up for me and I was thinking about Runescape or other like MMORPGs and stuff like that and like buying costumes for your characters. And as a kid I always bought, like, male clothing for my characters and always made my character look male or masculine or would be wearing knight's armour and stuff like that. So I feel like it's part of that. I'm not a performer myself, I'm a writer. Solidly behind the screens, will never ever be on stage and also dress like...a child. Like anime T-shirts and like the stained shorts of a weeb. But um, yeah, but I really like dressing up my characters and I used to love playing those...you know like, those games for girls which were like, you got a little doll and then you like put them in all these like costumes and stuff...

HELEN

Yes! Doll divine dot com!

NEMO

Yeah! I loved all of those things.

MABEL

I loved them so much!

NEMO

And it's so weird because I hate dressing up myself and I hate like, I hate being looked at, perceived. But I do love the, like, the idea of costuming someone to

be a character. And like writing a character and like I know what they're wearing. One of my characters recently...the description of them just said 'wears socks and sandals.' And I was like, that's all you need to know about him.

FRANCESCA

Conveys so much!

NEMO

Exactly!

HELEN

I love this. So this means you're coming at it from the other side of the stage I guess. The other side of the wings? The other side of the backdrop? Yeah because I often...I often have a very strong idea of what all my characters look like as well. So when you've done plays and stuff have you had input into the costumes you've put people in and what they've been wearing?

NEMO

Not really.

(laughs)

Which, I mean, so far, so I am only a baby playwright so I've only had a couple of things ever been staged and so...and I'm trying, you know... there is that thing in theatre where it's kind of like the writer, kind of needs to give away

the child at some point right? And like you have to...you have to trust that your costume designers and your set designers and your designers are going to design the characters and that they're going to take it. And even the actors, you know. And I really really appreciate when actors put their own thought into it and often come up with costumes that are far more suited to the character than I would ever think. And so, you know, there is part of me that's kind of sad that I don't get to like dress up my little dolls and like, you know, move them around the stage but yeah, I, I have written a couple of plays where the actors have, yeah, put so much like thought and input into how their character dresses that I've been like okay, yeah, you get to...you get to play in my little headspace now too, I guess!

(laughter)

HELEN

Okay well since we're on sort of this topic of theatre, do any of you remember any particular costumes, or things where you were like 'they've done a really good job with that'? It doesn't have to be theatre, but like, it's just the fashion and style and design of characters is something that I always pay a lot of attention to.

MABEL

I have one if other people need thinking time.

FRANCESCA

Go, yeah, go.

HELEN

Yeah, go ahead!

MABEL

The version of Twelfth Night that the National Theatre did that had Tamsin Greig in? Does anyone remember that?

NEMO

Mmm.

FRANCESCA

Yeah.

MABEL

Like that one I was just in so...I was so in awe of, because it refused to be pinned down to an era or a style or anything like that, but it was still so cohesive. And I was just like...I...because I could never have created something like that myself, like, I'm not a student of fashion or anything like that, and so like my approaches to designing things are very like 'this is the theme, down the line, we'll make, we'll work with whatever theme I've come up with' or whatever. But like the way that they did that was so, like, just beyond anything I could've created myself, and so impressive because it was like interesting to watch and yeah, like with all the staging of it and everything, it just refused to be one thing. It refused to be like 'and this is set in this era.' No! It's not. Like, we've got sunglasses but also like massive fancy dresses and then sometimes

someone's wearing leggings. Who knows! But it all worked together so brilliantly. Like I was so impressed by the design of that show.

NEMO

It's kind of funny, I was genuinely also actually thinking of that production but...yeah, so.

FRANCESCA

For me, I've got a very dear friend called Amy Jackson and she's an incredibly talented costume designer and she used to design all the Chichester Festival Youth Theatre productions but also like loads of other stuff as well. But I was so utterly blessed to like go to that youth theatre because it's one of the best in the country and our costumes were so high end, I really took myself seriously as a performer. And she designed, you know, The Wizard of Oz with really high-end conceptual stuff, very sort of visually appealing. It wasn't just like some amateur dramatic kids show. Like, the costumes were stunning. And when I got to play Nancy in Oliver!, the designs that she would draw by hand and then she would also draw on a digital tablet, in themselves are pieces of art. And so getting to wear the finalised version of it and to see them realised physically was just so gorgeous and like, getting to see that process from start to finish and to see her progress and make even more beautiful things for like a whole range of shows or one-off events now is really exciting. Like, it's not...I don't have that skillset, and so to watch someone be able to do that is really a beautiful thing to be able to witness. And I'm also really into like structural stuff that's almost like sculptural? That it kind of goes beyond clothing and it becomes almost sort of a piece of building or an architecture that is around the body. And also I don't know why now I'm thinking about the Skeksis from The

Dark Crystal. I just...that sort of stuff that kind of goes in between costuming and puppetry, I feel like it kind of like, is in a bit of a liminal space between the two.

HELEN

I was about to say that one of the costumes that has been in my head for like, since I was a kid, is that dress that...Jennifer...thingy wears in Labyrinth...

FRANCESCA

Oh yeah!

HELEN

...where it's like, it's the ball scene and she has all these like tassels and ribbons and glittery things in her hair, and this massive silver and white sparkling dress and it just looks like such a...it looks like a dream. Like the dress literally looks like a dream, and it is a dream, she's in a hallucination! And then David Bowie turns up, and he's got blue highlights in his hair and this like dark blue suit and his eyeliner and eyeshadow out to here. And I'm just looking at both of them like...yes! Yes, all of this.

NEMO

I agree!

FRANCESCA

He got the assignment and he knew exactly what he was doing.

HELEN

Like the styling in Labyrinth is really interesting because the costume changes are interesting. I remember reading somewhere that the shirt that Sarah starts off with at the beginning gradually gets more and more fantastical and more sort of tunic-like than actually shirt-like as she gets closer in. And I also really remember the sort of owl outfit that Jareth wears right at the end, where it's just like, it's all cream coloured and covered in feathers? And, urgh. It's great. It's great. And the whole set, they just went at the set with glitter. They got like a glitter...like a leaf blower but for glitter, and just put it on.

(laughing)

FRANCESCA

I worked an event some years ago, you talking about that fantastical element, where we were advertising tablets from a tech brand. But they'd had Marc Jacobs create a dress that has these tablets, and then they all showed an image on them that moved and that was the fabric of the dress.

HELEN

Wow!

FRANCESCA

That stands out to me again as like an exciting interpretation of an outfit.

HELEN AND NEMO

Mmm.

MABEL

On the like, kind of fashion theme, and like I don't know many fashion designers but it's about to sound like I do...

(group laughter)

...for in terms of like, loving structural things, do you know Iris van Herpen?

FRANCESCA

I know the name.

HELEN

No...

MABEL

Oh my goodness, look up Iris van Herpen's stuff because you would love it. Like, all of her stuff is basically...it's about structure and like parts of it move and stuff like that. But it's gorgeous and it's like really, really intricate. I think a lot of it is like, either like laser printed and things like that, like 3D printed and stuff, and it's like, so incredibly delicate. Like there are things that look like they're really delicate bones of like a bird and stuff like that, but it's all very structured and three dimensional and things and she's done photoshoots where someone's wearing the dress doing sky diving and stuff like that. It's just...like her stuff is just beautiful and completely wild. Like, oh, I love it, for exactly that reason, like it's walking art.

HELEN

Yeah like some of these, they look like people are wearing like pieces of coral or the sea.

MABEL

Yeah, I know, just like that! And she also specialises in things looking like...almost like they're growing out of the skin of the people wearing them.

HELEN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MABEL

Yeah it's gorgeous.

HELEN

Lovely.

NEMO

Did you ever watch an anime called Jellyfish Princess?

HELEN

No, but that sounds great!

NEMO

It's a really cute anime. I really recommend it. But, so it's about this like, really nerdy person who wants to design dresses, and she bases them off of these jellyfish. She like goes to the aquarium a lot and she sees these jellyfish, and these designs, Iris van Herpen's dresses, look a lot like the ones that were inspired by jellyfish because of that like really fluid kind of line and the like, very like ethereal, natural thing. Where you're like, it's so ethereal, it doesn't look natural but it is so natural.

MABEL

Yeah, yeah.

HELEN

Mm.

FRANCESCA

I love that. Another Iris who I think's an absolute style icon is Iris Apfel. Do you know her?

NEMO

Nope.

HELEN

No.

MABEL

Her name rings a bell but I can't...

HELEN

I'm learning so much.

FRANCESCA

So there was this documentary called Advanced Style, and it was about women over the age of 60, I think? But like being extremely stylish, and it's so heartening and glorious and wonderful, and she's one of the main ones in that and she's just absolutely...

MABEL

Is she famous for having those big, round black glasses?

FRANCESCA

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MABEL

Yeah, yeah that is the person I was thinking of, yeah.

FRANCESCA

She's such a legend. When I think of like, people that I love and I think about the way that they dress and I love it, I think like, Angela Bassett is absolutely stunning and is just really like, has this classic very tailored look. Iris Apfel's got this mad, kind of artistic, vibrant look. And then I always think of Frida Kahlo

and her beautiful, traditional dress and just, the colours and the weave and the weft and the shape and the import and the importance of her clothing. Those kind of float around in my head.

HELEN

Sorry, you said Iris Apfel? Oh she was in that...she was in an advert in the cinema.

(laughing)

FRANCESCA

Turn off your phone lads. I've got my glasses on!

HELEN

(laughing)

Yes I remember her! I thought she looked amazing then as well. Good for her.

FRANCESCA

Good for her!

HELEN

Do you know what? I think on that I'm going to take a break, and when we come back I really want to talk more about drag since we have organically gotten to this conclusion. But listener, we'll see you in a minute.

[BREAK]

And welcome back. So we've gotten on to the topic of drag, which I love. I haven't seen a lot of drag, though I would like to. Talk to me about it. Tell me how you got involved, or if you've seen it, or if you like it, or if you haven't. Someone start off because I can tell this is a little bit of a hot button topic.

MABEL

Well I mean I started drag by starting to do burlesque classes and being like I like this, this is fun, oh this is basically drag, drag and burlesque are the same thing. And I get to go to drag shows and I basically really, really enjoy watching drag, and so when I perform it's just like 'cool I get to see a show for free, that's awesome.'

(group laughter)

And also it's a way of doing theatre without having to rely on other people which, ooh, it's hard!

(group laughter)

That is an appealing aspect of it.

HELEN

What about you Francesca?

FRANCESCA

I got into drag because I was having a very difficult time with a fizzy brain, 2014 particularly. And I started watching Ru Paul's Drag Race which I understand is obviously pretty problematic in many ways but obviously that is evolving, but you know, there's definitely a lot of ground to cover. And I'm part of a drag scene whereby we are pushing forward for better representation and inclusivity, and for the same opportunities for, you know, our trans siblings and performers from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds who are not being given as much platforming. So all of that being said, that was where I sort of entered into it visually. My mum used to go on about drag queens all the time. She used to talk about her friends, Bob and Barry, her two gay mates. I mean she wasn't particularly the most politically correct person but she was trying. And so obviously when I was a little queer button, she sort of took me to drag shows and it would happen a little bit and I got into Ru Paul's Drag Race, and it gave me something to think of and to get my mind off of stuff really. It was just this fantastical escape of people who equally had probably had had a bit of a tough road to home, and I'd been a performer all my life and again I would totally agree with you that it is theatre without having to rely on everybody else, but when you do get to rely on people it's symbiotic and beautiful and it's an absolute stunner because you get community and really beautiful things and it was an exploration of different facets of myself as a performer. And it just felt punk and anarchic and in the East London drag scene is so different to the North London drag scene, to the South London drag scene, and then the rest of the country. It's like this incredible patchwork within this country and other countries internationally, of so many extremely creative and brave, beautiful people, and I thought, 'yeah, I reckon that looks good. I'll try that on.'

HELEN

Excellent. Nemo, do you have any experience watching drag or being involved in it?

NEMO

I don't. Drag is one thing that I haven't really been involved in but I did want to say like, recently, I guess in British theatre there has been...so I saw a performance of Twelfth Night at the Globe Theatre which had a drag queen in it. She's called Le Gateau Chocolat and she's so incredible. I love her so much. She's also an opera singer, and it was just such a like...it was such a beautiful...so the Globe Theatre, she just kind of emerges, singing opera. She's like quite a big, black lady with a full, thick beard in like a...

HELEN

Oh I love it!

NEMO

...in a beautiful ball gown, and like, in a show like Twelfth Night where it's so much about gender play and, like costume and...yeah it was such a...I was watching it and I was like, oh yeah, like, you know things like this can happen and it be used as not just a...huh, what am I trying to say? Like, I feel like I have seen quite a few drag shows and I really enjoy them, and I love what they are in performance and that they can be so many versatile things, and watching this drag performer in a play was like, oh yeah, drag can be this as well. It can be...we can see drag in so many different places, and, yeah. I just think it's a

really cool art form and obviously in things like Shakespeare where you're already playing with actor gender and character gender, things like drag and...yeah I just found it...like, it's so memorable and I still think about it to this day.

FRANCESCA

I love Le Gateau Chocolat as well. Their show Icons that I saw at Soho Theatre was absolutely sublime and their voice is divine, so hard agree with you there. I also think it's really interesting though that within the world of drag that there is like a lot of misogyny, transmisogyny, and other issues in terms of like, not having the same spaces for, like, non cis white male performers, and sometimes this adherence to the gender binary...you're out there saying like, 'oh yeah, whatever, down the patriarchy and down with the binary', but then, you know, AFAB performers or people who have been socialised as female are not given the same platform. And you're told that it's kings or queens or it's just queens that you want, but actually there are drag monarchs, drag monsters, drag things, drag princes with x's and without x's. Like there is a whole universe of possibility and all drag is valid, and for anybody to like, step out there and be like, 'no this is not how it's done', they're just reinforcing the societal norms. And like I totally agree with you, to see it in a theatre show...you know, you've got Death Drop The Play at the moment, which is an all drag performer cast. I think there's so many possibilities, and I think it should be normalised and people should see themselves represented, a hundred and ten per cent.

MABEL

Oh I totally agree, like, the drag that really got me into it and that really opened my eyes is the indie stuff. The stuff that you will go to a theatre that is near you and, or like a pub, or whatever, that is near you. And it's like when you're at school and you learn all of the rules of writing, right, and it's just like 'and these are the rules of sentence structure, and these are the rules of how you form everything.' And then you go 'and then there's poetry, and you throw all of those rules away.'

(group laughter)

And like it's...it was that thing of going like, you know how you've learnt that there are kinds of art that are valid? Like 'this is art' and 'this is not art.' When you go to like a drag show or like an indie cabaret show, what it does, is literally just go, like, 'no, no, this is a stage and if someone decides to do something on the stage, that is their art, and this is a place where we celebrate that.' Like it's so phenomenally freeing to just be like, oh no, you don't...you don't have to do anything...you can...you don't have to fit in a box, you don't have to tick anything. You don't...you can do whatever speaks to you, and there are places where people will go, yes! Just yes, and that lends itself so brilliantly to supporting people who are not...who can't find places in mainstream art. And it's so ridiculous to me like...this is something that I've been like writing about recently is like, things like burlesque are really, like, I don't know, like side-eyed by mainstream society as superficial, right. Strip art in general is really side-eyed as it's like 'well it's just about the body and it's just like it's really sexist' and all this kind of stuff, whereas like other dance forms like ballet are considered to be, like, this is high art. This transcends

those kind of superficial interests of just sort of like, ‘oh you know, it’s just about what your body looks like.’ I have never been in a room more concerned with the size of my body than a ballet class, and I have never been in a room less concerned with what my body looks like than a burlesque dance class. Like it is the entire opposite. And, but it is like in mainstream art and because a lot of it is about monetary success, it celebrates and reifies a really certain specific kind of art, and then it excludes other people who can’t access or can’t produce that art often because of monetary constraints or all sorts of other things like lack of representation, all that kind of stuff, they don’t see themselves in it. Whereas because drag is kind of underground and punk and it’s still often, with some exceptions, in that like indie space, it is that place to just be like, ‘no you can do anything. Anything is art. Your body? Your body is art. Like, I don’t care that you’re not seen it in other places, your body is art and it can do art’. And I just love that about it and like, I, yeah I will fight to keep drag that and not let it become that thing of like ‘no, you’ve got to tick these boxes. It’s not drag unless you do x, y, z.’ Like that’s rubbish.

FRANCESCA

One hundred and ten per cent! And I’d say like you know Rubyyy Jones with Three Y’s, Prince Chiyo, Romeo De La Cruz, I think, you know, those individuals typify that as well and The Christeene Machine is...have you ever seen The Christeene Machine?

HELEN AND MABEL

No.

FRANCESCA

They're an American performer but they're like, absolutely gorgeously vile and stunning and horrific and all at the same time. And they make my heart so happy, because they're just so otherworldly and I think they kind of almost fall into the world of Bouffon in terms of clowning, but I would really highly recommend checking them out.

HELEN

Nemo, earlier you were going to say something about drag and I can't remember what it was.

NEMO

Yeah, I was actually thinking, so with what Mabel was just saying about like, kind of pushing the needle with performers and stuff, this is actually not about drag but it is still about costumes, so bear with me!

HELEN

Yeah absolutely, let's go for it.

NEMO

But actually, Francesca also mentioned there at the beginning like about punk and about transgressive clothing and in...and I was thinking about this episode and I was thinking about cosplay and I was thinking about the Japanese trend of ganguro which...it's, so because of Japanese beauty standards of like pale skin, straight dark hair, being very thin, being very petite that...I'm half Japanese as well. I feel like I should say that because I'm talking about a

culture, that this is something that I'm aware of. So teenage girls would start like dying their hair like bleach blonde and darkening their skin, and there is like some political stuff about it, like there could, there can be a whole conversation about blackfacing and there can be a whole conversation about, yeah, the politics of darkening your skin. And for these people it was a way of showing that they would not tolerate being in this system any more that was like focused on like skin...that whiteness of your skin to the point of bleaching it, and my aunt is someone who doesn't go outside without wearing like, full length black clothing in order to make sure that her skin stays like milky white because of the like, yeah. And so what these girls would do was yeah, like, make themselves look as quote unquote 'unappealing' as possible and I really liked that. And that became like a fashion style. It became something that people went to go and see, because it was like, wow, you're like doing activism by like body modding and that kind of stuff, and yeah, it made me think when you were talking about drag and about these performers who are...because it's about like heightening things, right? I mean from my like, outsider's perspective it seems to me as if it's about heightening things but also like making things...I guess romanticising things that are monstrous or have been termed monstrous, or like reclaiming things and pushing things and I just really like, like it made me think of these girls who did that and there have been other trends in Japan since then. But yeah it's, it's like, thinking about what is ugly, thinking about, like, beauty standards, thinking about very culturally specific beauty standards and how they get created into costumes and that's a whole other conversation about like cultural appropriation and stuff which I know that we don't have time for but yeah, I really like enjoyed listening to this conversation because it was, it is so interesting to see how, even if you're not part of an industry, everyone is sort of like thinking about the same things, and

talking about them in different ways, and using costume to talk about them in different ways, and even if you wouldn't call ganguro drag, it still has the same, like, base underneath it.

HELEN

Yeah.

FRANCESCA

That's super interesting. Thank you for sharing.

MABEL

Yeah.

HELEN

For me it comes down to the fact that I think clothing is political.

MABEL

Yes. Yes!

HELEN

Just fundamentally.

MABEL

I love that, yeah.

HELEN

And the freedom to think that your clothing is not political is also in itself part of politics.

NEMO AND FRANCESCA

Yep, yeah.

MABEL

One of my favourite quotes and I can't even assign it to anyone and also it's been bastardised a billion times but, like, for a fat woman to love herself is a political act. And fundamentally for anyone to love their appearance is a political act, because capitalism is built around telling us we're inadequate, so it can sell us more things to make us more palatable. And so just loving the way that you look is political in and of itself. It is a rejection of everything trying to tell you that you are inadequate. But then there's like, all sorts of other things on top of it like as a fat person, I...it's so difficult to find...and especially I am very unusually proportioned and it is pretty much impossible to find tops that fit me. They don't really exist. And I have only recently started like making some of my own clothes and the, like, awe I felt the first time I wore something that was made to fit me was wild. Like, it, I cannot convey to people who are straight-sized the sheer joy of putting something on your body and realising that your body is not wrong when the clothes are made to fit it. Like, oh, I can look, I can have joy in clothing because it fits me now. Like that is such a joyous thing to feel and, like, it is, it is denied to so many people because of like the way that fast fashion works and the way that clothes are made on a very specific kind of, of mannequin and form. But like yeah, so much of clothing is political. And oh my god, going back to the...the Met Gala thing, the Notes On Camp theme was like, such a great demonstration of that and how...I

don't know, how some people really, really understood that and how some people didn't quite understand that. But like, I think the best explanation of camp that I had because lots of people were trying to define it in the after...well in the run up and the aftermath of that particular one was someone who basically said camp is a rejection of the male gaze. Of the, like, heterosexual male gaze. It's going like 'I will dress in a way that does not cater to you at all' and I really, really like that as a description of it. And it...

HELEN

It's really interesting.

MABEL

...yeah it opened it up to mean so much more than just like, over the top and I'm wearing pink and like it's really big and all that kind of stuff that you generally associate with drag queens and stuff like that. It's just like no, it doesn't have to be that. It's just a rejection of 'this has to be palatable for heterosexual men', like...

FRANCESCA

It's so tough though because I feel like, even though my logical brain says all of these things to me, I definitely do have those moments where I'm like 'oh, do I look good?' And then I'm like 'urgh, stop it!' Like, you don't owe anyone pretty, but it's this constant fight particularly I think if you're a millennial or an elder millennial, if you look at the coverage of clothing and bodies during that time it was some of the most toxic...

HELEN

It was bonkers!

FRANCESCA

...it has ever been. And so I think that there's a lot to unpack there and also in regards to when you're talking about clothing being political, the real strength of the politics of it as well is these hidden figures who are not being paid enough who are making these things for us to look pretty but they're not even able to survive. Like these women, children, men who are like, working away in factories, like yeah there's a political ramification to literally everything in the world and for people to be like 'I'm not political', it makes me want to vom in my own mouth!

(laughing)

HELEN

I want to try and talk about...it can be any kind of clothing, for my examples I'm gonna pick a costume, but like, something that's made you feel, like, powerful or good about yourself. I want us to round off on talking about that because I think...looking back on it now, like...regular listeners of the show will know that I, um, recently this year I realised that I am gender fluid right? And then I did that thing where you look back through your life and you're like, oh, right, yeah! I see. And one of those moments was when I went to a convention and I was dressed as the Winter Soldier and I swear, I have never felt more powerful than when most of my face was covered up.

NEMO

Yeah!

HELEN

And there was, like...you could barely tell anything about any of my gender markers or anything. But the idea that I could, like...that I could see and recognise people and they could not see me. It was really bizarre and still, and so...the power that I felt wearing that costume and I had that again when I started experimenting with like different types of clothing, like seriously. And I was like 'oh I can look like this! Oh I see! This is very interesting.' But yeah that cosplay as the Winter Soldier has really stuck with me, and I also think a lot about how a lot of the...I mean I don't, I don't make it a habit, but a lot of the cosplays I've done have involved masks in some way. Like I dressed up as the Witch King one time and I got like a special pointy helmet with a, sort of a balaclava thing underneath. I dressed up as Gaster who is from Undertale and I had like a white mask on with like a spooky face drawn on it. So I think a lot of costuming as well can be to do with what it is to see and be seen as well. And so for me it was like...the power dynamic got completely shifted for me. I guess that's what I'm trying to, to say.

MABEL

That's very cool.

HELEN

Yeah, it was like...you might look but you can't see.

(laughs)

MABEL

It's, it's a weird thing, I sort of know a weird fact that connects what you've just said with the thing about Japan and fashion.

HELEN

Oh go for it.

MABEL

Which is like there was a trend for like facekinis, precisely for what you were talking about, about people not wanting to expose their skin to the sun, and so like basically swimwear that like entirely covered your face as well. It almost looked like Club Kid kind of masks. And then people realising they felt so confident and so, like, just entirely different sides of them coming out because it was the anonymity of having that. Of just being like 'I cannot be identified. You can't, like, you don't know me' kind of thing. So I just thought that was a really weird link.

HELEN

No it makes sense, but, and also I think because we can't just like leave it there, I think it's a very different experience to choosing to wear a mask than having to wear a mask because there is a virus outside that can kill you but!
We will move swiftly on!

(group laughter)

Nemo, is there any kind of clothing or costume that has made you feel particularly happy or powerful or good?

NEMO

Yeah, like again, we're very similar in that...so the one I immediately thought of was that I cosplayed Baze Malbus from Star Wars. And it was...watching Rogue One was the first time really that I had seen like a western film with a, like, chunky Asian dude with like long hair who wasn't like a martial arts pro and he was just like really tired and...

(Helen laughing)

...he was really cool and funny and like, just really human. And so I cosplayed him and it was like...he has this like really long hair and at the time I had very short hair, but right now I have very long hair because after cosplaying him and I cosplayed him like before...just as I was starting testosterone, and it was such a, like, oh wow, I can feel so masculine and cool and, like, funny and like this character and confident while having really long hair and while not looking like 'manly man'. And I think there is that thing of like, yeah, gender and race, the like intersections of it where if you are only watching western media you don't get to see played with. Especially with East Asian men who are often like made effeminate and East Asian women who are like highly sexualised and highly fetishized and so this like, yeah, Baze Malbus saved my life kind of thing, where like, every time I look at photos of that cosplay and I'm like...ah, I just, it's so cool! And now I've grown...because lockdown happened, I was like 'oh I'll just grow my hair out and see what happens' and now I really love having really

long hair and I didn't think that I would ever come to the place where I would, like, have that, so yeah that's...

HELEN

Oh I'm so happy for you. Also like, Rogue One is very underrated!

NEMO

So underrated!

HELEN

I really liked it!

MABEL

Such a good film! Such a good film.

HELEN

Mabel how about you? You mentioned the top that you were able to make for yourself. Is there anything else that you would like to highlight?

MABEL

So in that theme just generally, there was a...I don't...I can't pinpoint it, but there was a point at which I went, I really like crop tops! Like I really, really like crop tops!

HELEN

Oh! Love a crop top.

MABEL

And like, now ninety per cent of what I wear when I'm not at work or whatever is crop tops, because I love them and I love the way I look in them and I can so vividly remember the point in my life not that long ago where it would be like 'oh nobody wants to see that.' And it just like, for some reason that is not me anymore, and that's glorious. That's a glorious feeling. I love crop tops.

HELEN

I'm very happy.

MABEL

I will wear them to the day I die. But in terms of costuming and stuff, there's so many things that I absolutely love. Like, there's a couple of bits from some of my acts that...I have an act where I'm Thanos.

(group laughter)

FRANCESCA

Love it.

MABEL

And I strip as sexy Thanos! And I had made some middle finger nipple pasties and I made them in like, sparkly gold.

(Helen laughing)

NEMO

Oh my god.

MABEL

My housemate who is a genius...so I had made them in like sparkly gold and he was just like 'just put the Infinity Stones on them!' so now I have middle finger nipple pasties with the Infinity Stones on. Like Infinity Gauntlet nipple pasties and they are glorious things. Along with like, these like gold cage panties that I made. And like, there are some photos of me in that and like the remnants of that act, where it...it just means so much to me because it was like the point at which I was happy to do strip stuff and like it's me...like I'm almost universally putting up middle fingers in all of the photos, and also there's confetti everywhere because that's part of the act as well. And it's just like...it's so powerful and important to me, like that feeling that I now have access to of just sort of like, like a, I made these things and I'm proud of that. Like, with, you know, some artistic help from my housemate. But also like what it means about who I am and where I am in my relationship to myself is a big deal for me. And also the fact that I don't consider that act to be particularly femme. Despite the fact that like, I do consider myself to be a drag queen, like, I...because I'm Thanos in it, I don't consider it to be particularly gendered, it's just my body making a point about, like, judgment of fat bodies...I'm sounding really one note at the moment. Fatness!

HELEN

No, no, I am on board.

MABEL

But like it's just...but I don't consider it to be a particularly gendered act at all, and so like aesthetically I just really, really enjoy it. Yeah, so that's sort of a big one for me.

HELEN

Oh I'm glad. Francesca, how about you?

FRANCESCA

I think like when I first started really inhabiting my drag character that definitely has changed my relationship to my own gender, because again I've also sort of realised that I'm probably gender queer, and that feels like a more comfortable space for me to be in. And I think that for me there were like two kind of extremes whereby I felt extremely powerful when I wore a really nice suit for the first time. I think that the context is extremely important for me. Even more so than the clothes sometimes because I can wear anything in any context and not feel particularly powerful or disempowered. Context is quite key but yeah, I think me being a teenager wearing Criminal Damage jeans and like just massive hoodies and stuff, I just felt pretty rocking to be honest and I don't think I've really moved past that space in many ways.

HELEN

Ah I'd forgotten the name of that brand! Criminal Damage!

FRANCESCA

We used to get rising damp, I couldn't afford the bus fare back to the village because I moved out of London for a bit and so that was it. Just sat soggy and wet in a coffee shop with one coffee between 20 people!

(Helen laughing)

NEMO

Oh my god...

HELEN

God I remember you used to get the catalogues!

(Francesca squeals in delight)

Those massive jeans. Yes! Anyway, yeah I'm, sorry, thrown back into my own days as a little punk teenager in the north of England. Soggy up to the knees because it's always raining!

FRANCESCA

Oh, soggy soggy.

(Helen laughing)

HELEN

Okay, we've definitely come to time now. This has been such an enlightening talk. We've managed to talk about so much stuff, I'm so pleased. Thank you so, so much for coming on.

NEMO AND MABEL

Thank you for having us!

FRANCESCA

I'm glad you're pleased and I wasn't being naughty. I have got ADHD so like, my brain does the thing!

(laughs)

HELEN

Oh! Don't worry about that!

MABEL

Oh hey, so do I!

FRANCESCA

Yay!

NEMO

Full house!

HELEN

Everybody is welcome. Particularly the neurodivergent. There's a lot of that. And you are all very worthy and valid and we love you.

MABEL

Thank you!

HELEN

And on that: listeners I hope you've had a good time as well and learned some things. I certainly have. I will see you on the next episode, but for now, it's goodbye from me – goodbye – and it's goodbye from them. Do you want to say goodbye everyone?

NEMO

Goodbye everyone!

FRANCESCA AND MABEL

Bye!

MABEL

Wear more crop tops!

[Show Theme - Outro]

HELEN

Enthusigasm is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. It is directed by Helen Gould, produced by Lowri Ann Davies with Executive Producers Alexander J. Newall and April Sumner, and edited by Marisa Ewing, Tessa Vroom, Jeffrey Nils Gardner and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

(Show Theme – Outro Ends)

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