

 JC ALVAREZ

# *Billy Porter* - IF THE **KINKY** **BOOTS** FIT...

HE'S BLACK JESUS, HE'S BLACK MARY, BUT THIS MARY'S LEGS ARE HAIRY

*Billy Porter has a confession to make. This New York theater season's most-celebrated performer is preparing to reveal the inspiration behind "Lola," the heart-tugging drag queen he plays eight times a week to sold-out houses on Broadway. "Me," he says definitively. "Lola is me!" With a career as long and diverse as Billy Porter's, that the Tony Award-winning Best Actor in a Musical identifies with his feathered wig and sequined-studded alter ego is not all that difficult to accept.*

## **"NO NEED TO BE EMBARRASSED, I LIKE BEING LOOKED AT, AND YOU LIKE TO LOOK"**

A fixture in New York's entertainment scene for close to two decades, Billy Porter is the star of *Kinky Boots*, the Broadway musical behemoth that has swept just about every award this season, enchanting audiences from all walks of life. The show was realized and brought to the stage of New York's Al Hirschfeld Theatre by showman and director Jerry Mitchell (*Broadway Bares*), and with a book by Broadway legend Harvey Fierstein (*Torch Song Trilogy*) and music by pop icon Cyndi Lauper, Porter had a feeling that the show would be special.

"I knew the story," says Porter, referring to the 2005 film *Kinky Boots* on which the musical is based. "It was simple but extraordinary and actually unlike anything we've ever seen before, but it masquerades as something that is very familiar."

In *Kinky Boots*, Porter's character, the London drag queen Lola, finds himself the unwitting muse of a down-on-his-luck owner of a shoe factory who, in order to save his business, decides to market to a new and more fanciful consumer. Think out of the shoe box; enter the kinky boot – ideally designed and structured to suit the disparagingly larger sizes of the transtastic female impersonators and showgirls. The boots become a hit. In essence, Lola the drag queen saves the day!

"People are interested in hearing this story," Porter explains. "To have a show that asks you to accept people for who they are – we clearly need to hear that." In a society that basically still marginalizes people based on who they are, Porter believes: "*Kinky Boots* is in the zeitgeist, and striking at the perfect time."

"I've never seen a character like Lola before on a Broadway stage," says Porter. "The only thing you can do is start from yourself." The show explores the relationship of two unlikely friends, both of which (admittedly) have daddy issues, and one in particular who wears a dress. "I've not worn many dresses in my life," he admits, "but I've had daddy issues." Porter can testify.

In the first-act ballad "Not My Father's Son," Porter's Lola is able to pull back and reveal the depths of his character's loneliness, her tragedy realized.



Billy Porter and Stark Sands. Photo: Matthew Murphy

***"LOOK AT ME POWERLESS AND HOLDING MY BREATH TRYING HARD TO REPRESS WHAT SCARED HIM TO DEATH IT WAS NOT THAT EASY TO BE HIS TYPE OF MAN TO BREATHE FREELY WAS NOT IN HIS PLAN AND THE BEST PART OF ME IS WHAT HE WOULDN'T SEE"***

"She's not just a clown," he says. "That's [the song] where you get to see the inside of Lola – you realize she has many dimensions."

*Kinky Boots'* award-winning score is the freshman Broadway effort of pop-music legend Cyndi Lauper. "Cyndi has always understood about songwriting as imagery," Porter insists. "Just listen to 'Time After Time.' It's not surprising to me at all that people walk out of the show singing these songs." Songs that have allowed Porter to create a character that can inspire others to aspire. "It's qualitative. All you can do is tell the truth and hopefully the audience will respond to it. You can't second-guess that."

## "AND I FELT SO PROUD JUST TO LIVE OUT LOUD"

With a career that's had its share of full-tilt forward and false-floor drops, many felt that Porter's Tony win for *Kinky Boots* this year at Radio City Music Hall was a long time coming. In his long-standing entertainment career, he had pursued several avenues that were open for him. "Sometimes we base decisions in our lives on who we were as 16-year-olds." Porter was born in Pittsburgh and pursued musical theater, graduating from the Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts School before moving on to Carnegie Mellon. He was always dedicated to honing his skills.

Porter remembers getting attacked by bullies in the 11th grade while coming home late from a dance rehearsal. The experience was very traumatic, though even after revealing his bruises and fractured jaw to his mother, the next day he collected himself and returned to school. "I wasn't going to stop because someone didn't like me for who I am. They were going to have to kill me!" He wasn't willing to compromise from the fear, especially after landing a lead role he had then worked so hard to get. "As your view of the world expands, you can't be afraid — you have to be willing to grow."

It is that same willingness to grow that has made him one of the most diversely talented performers working today. "I got pigeonholed very early on in my career," Porter reveals. "It wasn't what I wanted to do. I needed to change the trajectory of where I was going, and where my career was heading." He chose to diversify his portfolio and opened himself up to being





The cast of *Kinky Boots*. Photo: Matthew Murphy



creative outside of the explored parameters. "You have to do whatever it is that your art leads you to." Porter recorded his self-titled album in 1997 on A&M Records and had numerous roles on the small and big screens, yet it has been his roles on stages that include *Grease*, *Miss Saigon*, his autobiographical *Ghetto Superstar (The Man That I Am)*, and now *Kinky Boots* that have allowed this performer to really shine.

In 2010, after an absence of more than a decade from New York's stages, Porter returned and received some of the best reviews of his career for his performance as Belize in the much-anticipated 20th-anniversary revival of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning magnum opus, *Angels in America*. During the run, Porter's role soared to the top of notoriety, even as the gossip trades began to speculate on whether his *Angels* co-star Zachary Quinto would come out of the closet. For Porter, who was known as an out gay man especially among his peers, the buzzing was nary a distraction. "I don't think how people come out is anybody's business," he says. "The decision that I made to come out very early on was a decision that I needed to make. I don't presume to judge what's right for anyone."



Stark Sands, Annaleigh Ashford, and Billy Porter. Photo: Matthew Murphy

### “STEP INTO A DREAM, WHERE GLAMOUR IS EXTREME”

Regardless of how much the scene has changed, with more and more entertainers coming out of the closet and the glass ceiling lifting, Porter still feels it’s a very personal choice. “That’s just the grown-up gay in me.”

But perhaps the biggest moment for the “grown-up gay” Billy Porter was accepting his Tony Award for Best Actor for his role as Lola in *Kinky Boots*. “That moment was very surreal,” he says. “The world stood still for like two minutes.” In those two minutes, Porter had to remind himself of all the people he needed to thank for getting him to that stage. “Your mind just goes 400 miles a minute, and you only have 90 seconds from the time that your name is called! Thank God my manager made me write out my speech – I was reading it and I just couldn’t think. I couldn’t imagine ever being up there again without a cheat sheet!”

The cheat sheet paid off. In front of an audience of 7.25 million viewers, a visibly excited and eloquent Porter said: “When I was 11 years old, my journey to truth began when I discovered the Tony Awards, washing dishes in my kitchen, and the performance of Jennifer Holliday and the cast of *Dreamgirls* on the Tony Awards took my breath away.”

With 31 years of not compromising his integrity as a man or a performer, Porter and his fellow *Kinky Boots* cast members play to standing ovations and much validation eight times a week. “I always say, It’s easy to be who you are when what you are is popular.” For Billy Porter, it’s all been worth the journey to arrive at this stage. 