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Antoinette Thornes Is a Trans Actress Who Rocks

The Thornes singer chats about her role as a woman with a secret in the family drama *On a Stool at the End of the Bar*.

BY BRANDON VOSS NOVEMBER 30 2014 8:00 AM ET



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Antoinette Thornes in *On a Stool at the End of the Bar*

How honest should a trans person be with his or her partner? That's one question raised in Robert Callely's world-premiere drama *On a Stool at the End of the Bar*, which runs through December 14 at off-Broadway's 59E59 Theatres. Antoinette Thornes stars as Chris, a woman raising three teenagers in New Jersey with her blue-collar boyfriend of 10 years — a happy suburban family ripped apart by the discovery that Chris is transgender. Thornes, a New York rock singer, discusses the high price of passing.

***The Advocate:* After watching the play, I was surprised to learn that acting isn't your main focus. You front a band?**

Antoinette Thornes: Yeah, we're a hard-rockin' rock and roll band called **Thornes**, which is also my last name. I did not pick it; the band did. I wanted to name it something else, but they liked my last name.

What made you want to do *On a Stool at the End of the Bar*?

I used to act years ago. I met the director, Michael Parva, through some actor friends, and I told him I was transgender. He knew the writer, Bob, who'd written a play about a transgender woman. Five years ago, he encouraged me to audition for it. I met with everyone, it was looking good, but for some reason, the play didn't happen. It was a milestone for me, because it was the closest I'd come to something that I considered worthwhile. So I was like, *Screw this. I'm not acting anymore. I'm just gonna go back to doing what I love: writing and performing music.* And for the past five years, that's what I've been doing — until a few months ago, when Mike approached me again and said Bob was ready to do the play. I said, "Are you kidding? Don't mess with me!" So I auditioned again. Judy Henderson, the casting director, pulled me aside and told me I was very talented, which was very nice, because she doesn't have to say that. The rest is history. I dove in headfirst and

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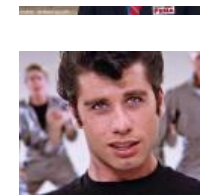
No hesitations?

I did have some reservations because the contacts that I've made in the rock and roll world don't really know I'm transgender. It's not that I keep it a secret, but I don't talk about it. They just assume I'm some tall, big-breasted bimbo who likes to play rock and roll music, and they treat me as such. When this all comes out, and it will, I don't know what's going to happen. I've had times in my life when people have turned their backs on me when they've found out. Being passable can be a positive, but it can also be a negative. As a positive, you don't get a hard time from anybody, because no one sees you as transgender; they just see some chick. But when they find out, they may say, "You've been lying to me all these years?" It's like, "No, you never asked me, I never brought it up."

The play's conflict stems from the fact that Chris didn't disclose her trans identity to her boyfriend, Tony, from the start. At one point, Chris says, "I'm not even sure I think I was right, but there's no changing it now." Do you defend her decision?

I really understand both sides of it. It's a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation. Once you get to a certain point, it's hard to open up and be honest. And if you are honest at the very beginning, there's a good chance of violence — you can get punished for telling the truth. Personally, I feel that you can't have a real relationship with anybody unless they know everything. But I also see the other side. Chris has gone through so much, she finally found the person she wants to be with, she's already had the surgery, she feels she's now a woman, so she doesn't feel like she needs to tell him anything.

Chris and Tony's violent confrontation is hard to watch. What's it like to play?



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Like any actress would, I try my hardest to become the character for the two hours, but it is heart-wrenching. Right after that carnage, when I break down, it's real. I feel stripped down and humiliated. But all the stuff I've gone through, it's been just as bad if not worse for a lot of other people, so I can't complain.

The play also poses the question of how Tony remained oblivious to the fact that Chris is trans. It's even suggested that he must be secretly gay.

Well, she had the surgery. If it looks like a vagina, why would he think any differently?

The play's set in the late '80s. Would the family's reaction be so different today?

I understand why Bob put it the '80s — fresh off the staunchly Republican Reagan era. I do think this could still happen today, but nowadays we all know more about transgender issues than we did 20, 30 years ago.

Speaking of the '80s, how do you feel in those period costumes?

Like the mom jeans? [*Laughs*] Oh, my God, I look the way my mother dressed back in the '80s. She would freak out.

I wouldn't have been shocked to see the role of Chris played by a non-trans actor. Does the casting of a trans actress feel like progress?

Definitely. Ever since Laverne Cox on *Orange Is the New Black*, more people are talking about transgender issues, so I think it's probably a matter of striking while the iron's hot. These things go in phases, just like with the gay community: First it's hated, then it's a joke, and then it becomes the norm, but it takes a while to go through those cycles. At this point, I still think transgender people are a punch line in a lot of jokes. But I'm not some kind of activist trying to make any statement here. I'm just a girl trying to get by.

For tickets and more information, visit 59E59.org.



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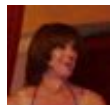


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Kim Teague-Schroeder · ★ Top Commenter · Software Developer at 2 Tech Girls

well, its a play that is intended to raise issues on a social level. There the emphasis is on what happens when you disclose not on why he did not just figure it out. I'm out of context where i live and am the only TS that is public. I'm far from perfect, but i pass very often. My social context dictates that i can't be TS in conservative AZ so they don't look for it. When i go to bars i'm asked to dance fairly often by men, but i decline for the

issues raised in the play. I would dance with them, but i'd fear doing so because i never 'disclose.' If someone were to discover it could get messy for me and the guy who is dancing with me. The scenario in the play is very relevant in my life albeit on a casual interaction level.

(I'm happy there are more qualified trans actors out there. We need to push ourselves to take the risk and try it. I'm hoping to, but time will tell.)

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Shelley Adrienne Mimi Belsky · ★ Top Commenter · Works at Self-Employed

"The play also poses the question of how Tony remained oblivious to the fact that Chris is trans. It's even suggested that he must be secretly gay. Well, she had the surgery. If it looks like a vagina, why would he think any differently?"

Considering the health maintenance involved in being a post op transwoman, how could someone not know?

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Gina Morvay · ★ Top Commenter · UC Berkeley

Shelley, I'm not sure to what you're referring? There is no real unusual 'maintenance' required if one is having regular penetrative vaginal sex (you don't have to dilate). And in terms of hormones, lots of women take pills every day. Believe me, there are plenty of husbands (especially in that era) who have zero idea of what their wives do in terms of vaginal care.

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