

# CHERRY JONES

Award-winning out actor Cherry Jones on getting older, marrying younger, and playing a 'dude dyke' on *Transparent*.

BY MERRYN JOHNS

In a recent piece for the *New Yorker*, writer Ariel Levy nails Jill Soloway's *Transparent* as "post-patriarchal television." She describes Soloway as creating a radical, freeing work environment for her actors. She is a feminist director and a "doer." She doesn't let obstacles defeat her. She uses them to create a new aesthetic, a new commentary on sexuality, gender, and intimacy. Last year, Soloway won an Emmy for Best Directing in a Comedy Series for *Transparent*, and in season two she continues to spin out unique and unprecedented storylines, hiring who she wants to hire—which means actual talented female actors with non-television faces and bodies. What she has referred to as "dick candy" is not welcome on her show. It's such a relief to women everywhere, and to great actors like Cherry Jones, who never in her career fit that bill.

Jones, who is to the stage what Meryl Streep is to film, is best known in American households as U.S. President Allison Taylor in the TV series *24*—a head of state in perpetual crisis, yet in possession of a moral, ethical, and emotional backbone. Jones won an Emmy for her portrayal, and she's since dabbled in small film roles and more TV, but to see Jones at her transcendent best, you must go to Broadway. Thus far, her stage roles form a fascinating pantheon of fierce females: aviatrix, teacher, spinster, Southern belle, madam, saint, and nun—from Tennessee Williams to George Bernard Shaw to the best of contemporary feminist and lesbian playwrights. Throughout her illustrious career, Jones has picked up five Best Actress Tony Award nominations and two wins.

While she has not played an actual lesbian (until now), she has always been out and proud. When accepting her awards, she has thanked her partners: Mary O'Connor in 1995, when she won for *The Heiress* (which made Jones the first lesbian actor to thank her partner from the stage); and Sarah Paulson in 2005, when she won for *Doubt*. I've been longing for the moment when Jones would truly blaze her way into the lesbian zeitgeist. Perhaps that moment has arrived with her role as a womanizing lesbian poetry professor in season two of *Transparent*. It's all happened "at a very unexpected point in my life," Jones tells me about a week before her 59th birthday.

"Never did I think that I'd be playing a dude dyke lesbian poetry professor and having all my scenes with Gaby Hoffman, with Jill Soloway," she enthuses in a slightly Southern drawl. Jones, a Bible Belt gay hailing from Paris, Tenn., who miraculously transcended her small-town beginnings to become one of America's treasured thespians, says she has "so much respect" for Soloway's vision, work, and methodology, which is helping to revolutionize the role of women in TV, both behind and in front of the camera.

"There is an episode that takes place at a fictional Michigan women's music festival," says Jones, "and you have never seen so many different nude body types in your life. That's the thing about Jill. Usually, if it's a beautiful television-looking person, they don't make the cut. She wants real people and real bodies and real women of all ages. And she really allows a great deal of freedom on set," says Jones. "There's a fair amount of ad-libbing around a very structured plot, but it feels in a way more like being in rehearsal for a new play with a company that's creating the script

indeed, both in the press, and dating *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway. Jones adds, reflecting on how she tailored her appearance to reflect Myles' own unique style, "I even had a haircut, which is as close as my hair would get to Eileen's. I think the greatest thrill for me is that I get to wear the most comfortable clothes I've ever worn in my career."

A little less thrilling to Jones was the inevitability that she'd have to get naked and participate in frank on-screen sex. As an admirer of *Transparent*, Jones had watched the show with her wife, Sophie Huber, and wished she could nab a role on it. "And then lo and behold, several months later I got a call that Jill wanted me to do this. And so we Skyped, and she sort of gave me the arc of the character, and I said, 'Let me think about this and I'll get right back to you.' And I thought about it and I knew I had to do it. And then my second thought was, I have to ask Jill if I have to do any on-camera sex scenes. Because I knew that would be a real problem for me. I'm 59, from a small town in Tennessee, and I just—I'm from that quaint generation where if I have sex, that's with my partner," she laughs. "As an actress, there's only so much one can preserve that's sacred.

"I called Jill and I basically said, 'Will I be required to do any pussy licking or finger fucking on-screen?' And there was a pause and she said, 'Yeah.' And I said, 'Really?' And she said, 'Yeah!' And I said, 'Well, I cannot do that.' And there was another pause and she said, 'Really?' And I said, 'Really.' And she said, 'Neither giving nor receiving?' And I said, 'Neither giving nor receiving!'"

While Jones knew that—in Soloway's hands—even explicit sex scenes would further the plot and our understanding of the characters, they were just not in her scope. Perhaps this dream role would elude her after all. "Will you make out?" asked Soloway. "Oh, I'll make out all day and all night," agreed Jones.

In the end, the compromise might even have strengthened the storyline, says Jones, but elsewhere the show is as bold as ever. "I tell you, this season...there was a sexual revolution in the '60s, and Jill is now including everyone who was left out of that sexual revolution, in terms of being present and accounted for."



themselves. It is so creative and so freeing."

It was also freeing for Jones to play Lesley Mackinaw, a sexy, swaggering older butch based loosely on Eileen Myles (also profiled in this issue). Myles, notes Jones, is finally receiving mainstream acclaim. "She seems to be everywhere right now. So this is a particularly thrilling time to be playing Eileen." At the time of writing, Myles was everywhere

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It delights Jones that Soloway is administering *Transgender 101*, "so that America can see what transgender people are up against. And that's what she explores, along with 50 other things, in this season. Even the places you'd think a transgender person should experience sympathy or empathy—it's not there. Everybody views them in a harsh or foreign light. And we're all in the same boat. Unless you have a parent or a sibling who is transgender or somebody who is in the community who has been transgender for a long time and is part of the community...unless that's the case, I just think transgender people have to be the *ballsiest* people—pardon the pun—in the world. I can't imagine what they're dealing with."

And as Jones discovered, Soloway uses sex as a lens through which to view difference as not really different at all. "Jill is pushing a lot of buttons about sex. What she is saying at the end of the day is: These are people having consensual sex, living their lives, trying to be good neighbors, citizens, and it's not these people who are the problem. It's those with intolerance who fuel violence and hatred. That's the danger, not transgender people. It's been very moving watching them craft this season so that one has to question what is dangerous. It's not sex between consenting adults. That is not what's dangerous."

The transgender rights movement and marriage equality are LGBT milestones that Jones is astonished and delighted to be ex-

periencing directly in her lifetime. "It blows my mind. Never did I think—no one my age ever thought—it would happen in our lifetime."

In August last year, Jones unexpectedly wed her film director girlfriend, Sophie Huber. They had met a few years earlier through a shared house in Los Angeles. "We joke that I found Sophie on Craigslist," laughs Jones. Prior to this relationship, Jones had never wanted to marry. "I didn't want to do what heterosexuals did. That was part of the freedom and joy [of being gay]: You didn't have to get married, you couldn't get married." But a few things had changed for Jones. She was older, and she'd lost both of her beloved parents in 2010, leaving her with only one real blood relation—her sister, Susan.

"I'm at that point in my life now where I guess, I hope, I'm more the person that I'll be 10 years from now. And I was ready to give my life fully to Sophie, and she was to me. And we both thought nothing would change, really, but of course it does—instantly. The moment you make that decision and you look at each other and you say, 'Let's do this,' and you do, it drops down into this deeper more comforting place where you're just there for one another. You were not, the day before you married. I've had three wonderful and very distinct acts in my life with loves, and they've each enriched my life, and I hope and pray I have theirs, as well."

For Jones, getting older has meant getting better and truer, and this might also be a theme of *Transparent*. After all, retired college professor Maura Pfefferman is in her late 60s when she comes to terms with her gender and her sexuality. And Jones is not the only seasoned actor to grace the new installment of the show; she is joined by the wonderful Anjelica Huston, who is 64. Soloway is determined to defy the industry standard that makes work hard to come by

after a woman reaches a certain age. "After *The Glass Menagerie*, I had one more stage role and then nothing," says Jones. "I had an offer here and there, but they weren't good fits. What I understand, however, is that in television, not film, older women are being offered any number of fabulous roles. In the past, if you were an actress over 50, you could play the psychiatrist, or the judge, or the granny. And now you have Christine Baranski on *The Good Wife*, any number of fabulous roles that are popping up."

Outside of TV, Jones also thinks life gets better. "Talk to any woman over 50, no matter what the stresses in their lives, they're able to deal with them in a way that they never could before. So many of the insecurities fall away, and you even get to that point with your body. In your 40s, you start to freak out because you see your youth ending, but by the time you're in your 50s you've sort of made peace with that, and that's a wonderful thing most women don't anticipate. I think for most women there just comes a point in your 50s and 60s where you feel so much more comfortable in your loose skin."

But when I speak with Jones, she sounds like a giddy teenager in love. We compare notes on how we—two mature lesbians firmly opposed to marriage—finally gave way to our younger partners. "Lucky, lucky us," she says. Coincidentally, both our wives are 15 years our junior. "Sophie is 15 years younger, and she's one of those people who have always loved older people and fallen in love with older people." The same is true for my wife, and it took me some time to accept it. "I think people are just wired differently," offers Jones, "and everyone has a different attraction."

Jones is rapturous about Huber's physical beauty (Google her to see), her complexity, and her creative ability. She and Huber had "flirted around with the idea" of marriage, and then once they decided, on a Friday, they were married on a Sunday. "We thought, Let's just do it, let's just get the paperwork. It wasn't so much about a ceremony and vows. We just sort of wanted to make it legal between us, in a way. And my sister in Tennessee was very upset that this was happening so suddenly, so at the last minute, Sunday morning, we got her a plane ticket and she

was at LAX by 11 AM.

"We had agreed to meet the officiant somewhere down in the [San Fernando] Valley, and we were almost there and realized we had forgotten the marriage license! And so she followed us back up the hill to the house where I had moved into and where Sophie and I met. So we married literally on the spot where we first shook hands, under a lemon tree, with those we love around us, and before we knew it we were saying vows. And then we just had a wonderful all-night party with about 12 of my dearest friends who were in town, and it was gorgeous, it really was."

I tell Jones that I still have moments when I refer to my wife as my partner or my girlfriend. Old habits are hard to break. "Sophie and I both have the same sort of knee-jerk reaction to the word 'wife,'" says Jones. "She's Swiss-German, and, she'll be the first to tell you, slightly homophobic. And being an old lesbian, the word 'wife' is bizarre to me, but I've used it myself because it's a shortcut to say exactly who Sophie is to me. But we were joking, as all of us do who have trouble with the word 'wife,' about coming up with another term. And I randomly just made up

the word 'hamet'—a made-up word—and Sophie said, 'What did you say?' And I said, 'You're my 'hamet.' And she said, 'In my dialect, that means 'home.' It means the place where you are from.' Isn't that extraordinary?"

It is. And it's also extraordinary that women of a certain age are finding new homes in themselves and in others, even after less successful habitations—whether it be Jill Soloway with her culture-changing TV show, Maura Pefferman making a late-in-life transition, Eileen Myles finding fame as a rock-star poet, or Cherry Jones enjoying a moment as a "blushing bride." At any age, women can make discoveries about love, work, and life.

Jones adds that a benefit of getting older is clarity about all that has gone before, including the role of past loves. "They were absolutely necessary," she says of her two previous relationships. "I would not have been the person I am today, and I surely never would have met Soph, if things had been different in any way."

While in culture, older women are experiencing a second coming of age, it's time for politics to catch up. Jones may have played a female president, but the U.S. has yet to actually see one take her place in the Oval Office. "It's always amazed me that in the countries

that you'd think of as the most chauvinistic in the world, they've all had women leaders, from Indira Gandhi to Golda Meir, Benazir Bhutto to Margaret Thatcher. But we are still a country of puritans in a way," she says.

Nevertheless, Jones feels a "groundswell" in America now. "Seeing the word 'feminist' come back is such a thrill. This unapologetic use of the word 'feminist'—in this country, it was the kiss of death if you were a feminist. I do think that it came from the fact that it was identified as a cause of lesbians and somehow promoting lesbianism. So no heterosexual woman wanted to be labeled a feminist. I do think part of the reason feminism is coming back into the culture is because of gay rights, and because people now are loving and appreciating their gay family members and neighbors, and we've just taken a light-year kind of jaunt. We've taken these huge strides so quickly, and I think this has affected why feminism has taken off. You've got 'transgender' and 'feminism' right now on everyone's lips."

And after this season of *Transparent*, with its unwavering female gaze, its post-patriarchal aesthetic, and its liberal community, I hope Cherry Jones will finally be the name on every lesbian's lips. ■

