



The Stage Belongs to Fat, Frigid Freaks

Review by Jo Krishnakumar

Mabel Syrup. *Accepted*. 2021.



Mabel on stage performing *Fucking Accepted*. The photograph features a white performer with blonde hair and wearing beige coloured lingerie against a black background with spotlights.

Ms Mabel Syrup is a neo-burlesque dancer/drag queen with three years of experience in the Oxford/London drag/burlesque scene. Her larger body of performance seeks to claim aesthetic joy for fat people, subverts dominant ideas of female sexuality, and provides political commentary using creative and comedic metaphors (for example, a drag-burlesque performance involving a love story of a moth and a lamp or a feminist rendition of “Stacy’s Mom”). She uses performance and social media to navigate her relationship with her body, her journey with PCOS, and her divergence from what is considered “normal female biology.”

This review focuses on her performance of a lip-synced spoken word piece, *Fucking Accepted*, that the reviewer watched at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London during the final stages of Not Another Drag Competition (NADC) in 2021. For full disclosure, the reviewer is a regular admirer of Mabel’s work and a close friend who has been engaging in conversations around body and sexuality with the performer, which gives them special insight into Mabel’s work.

Fucking Accepted is about exploring acceptance and what that means in a society that constantly changes its metres of acceptance to benefit societal structures of patriarchy and capitalism, which eventually breed insecurity in every person living within these structures. Mabel explores her relationship with her body, the queer community she is in conversation with, and the larger world that seeks to shrink “unaesthetically” fat, asexual, queer women into tiny boxes. While asexual women are not “allowed” or expected to explore their sexuality and are told that they don’t have one, fat women are sexualised and desexualised according to the whims of societal “standards.” The act begins with Mabel walking through a door to the middle of the stage in a grey shimmery bodycon dress with a long slit up to her thighs, her hair and makeup inspired by 50s glam. The track begins, timed perfectly, “this lip-sync is a pivotal moment for you, how do you feel?” in RuPaul’s voice. For me, Mabel sourcing RuPaul to begin the performance became part of the critique levelled against RuPaul’s Drag Race for not being inclusive of drag performers who are assigned female at birth (AFAB), trans



people (especially trans women), and fat people. There have been trends of fatphobia and fatphobic standards of beauty being pushed through Rupaul's show underneath "supportive" feminist/popular statements reduced to fit the performance of the show for a Global audience (Pomerantz 2017, 103-120). This inherent fatphobia affects asexual women within and outside queer communities whether as performers or not. Fat, asexual women's asexuality is often confused with them not "wanting" to be sexual in whatever way they want, and any show of sexuality, bodily acceptance, love and respect (not afforded by larger society) often lead to questions about whether they are "really" asexual or not. Either that, or they are desexualised for being "fat in the wrong ways" and thus viewed or portrayed as "asexual" women even though they might not identify with as being on the asexuality spectrum. There is often no place to explore these different styles and ways to be a performer because fat women, other than being desexualised, are also only expected to do *some* things on stage (comedy, for example) but not other things (a "simple" dance routine, for example).

The dialogue cuts to the first verse of Aretha Franklin's "Natural Woman," as Mabel lip-syncs and dances to the song. The crowd cheers to the chorus as Mabel sings the last line, "you make me feel like," and then seamlessly cuts into a piece of original poetry, saying, "fucking accepted." She looks directly into the eyes of her audience members as the music stops and the performance becomes a spoken word lip-sync in Mabel's voice. "Natural Woman" was an apt song choice to speak about women's constant fight to be the most "real, natural" women they can be—how intersex women, trans women, and even cisgender women can never achieve the impossible standard of being a "real" woman for the capitalist society that gains money from the creation of insecurity.

Mabel acts through her spoken word. When she calls herself a "fat frigid freak for who even the 'A' in LGBT isn't enough because it glosses over the body," she shows which parts of her body it glosses over. Within the asexual spectrum as well, fat people who want to explore their sexuality are not often seen; there is a clear "look," perhaps, of an asexual person, and that has never been a person like Mabel. She reveals her body, bit by bit and beat by beat to the rhythm of the poem, until she is wearing nothing but her underpants and bra—the crowd cheers and stops exactly in time for her to say "cause everyone knows fat folks don't fuck;" the crowd laughs at the remark, but also cheers for Mabel's radiating confidence. Mabel's style of performance requires her audience to clap for her body—not her intelligence, "inner beauty," or anything else that is used on fat people as weapons of an "at least"—but her body, a good thing that should be clapped. As Mabel says, "some happy fat lady rejects conventional femininity" as is expected from fat women, she talks about expectations of beauty from women and men—what makes a woman womanly and a man manly and how much of the world does not fall into those sectioned categories.

The poem has some quieter bits, as Mabel talks about theories pointing out that breasts don't go with beards and how she "still believes that one;" how some body hair is more acceptable than other body hair or how some parts of a fat person are more acceptable than other parts. Almost like there is a way to be fat, to be proud of body hair, and ways not to be. Mabel's poem makes a point about people on the margins constantly being reduced to performing their pain as well as their strength and resilience in order to be visible. This point comes through most poignantly when she reveals drawn-on body hair on her inner thighs, saying "so I pluck it out, and paint it back on when I want to make a point". Mabel then removes her long blonde wig to expose her short, pink-tipped, blonde-brown hair along with the last few



pieces of clothing on her, proclaiming that she is “not gay, or bi, not even quite the ‘T’ in the alphabet army, just fucking queer.”

The way she ended her piece in rawness jolted the audience while also calming them about their own identities. The performance was followed by two entire minutes of continuous applause. Mabel’s use of neo-burlesque is extremely effective in the way that she takes back control of how she wants to be seen and applauded on stage. Her use of songs, spoken word, dance, and rhythm keeps her audience riveted and responding in tune to her. Mabel gains that power out of performing her sexuality in the way she wants, a control that is otherwise taken from people on the margins.

Mabel’s *Fucking Accepted* is different from what I have watched in drag performances before. It is unapologetic, but extremely difficult because of the raw emotion that Mabel lets people see when she opens herself up to them. Mabel is strong and soft on stage. She is sultry, seductive, and radiant but she is also asking for space to just be. Knowing Mabel personally, I knew this was the first time she performed this explicitly about her not/fitting into the communities she finds herself in (the ace, queer communities). Through this review, I want to bring out the importance and need for queer performers that question, explore and create their space in their own communities through performance. Mabel doesn’t perform as though there is a full stop to knowing where she belongs and where she can go. With Mabel, there is always something more, something to look forward to; and that is my personal understanding of the ethos of individuality wrapped inside the queer community. Mabel’s performance was the first time I was left in tears after a performance ended. Mabel’s words, body, and presence sent shivers down my spine, but it also gave me the strength to cry for her in public, and as her audience, my applause for her were my tears.

Works Cited

Pomerantz, Ami. 2017. “Big-Girls Don’t Cry: Portrayals of the Fat Body in RuPaul’s Drag Race”. In *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 103–120. London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-50618-0_8.

Find Mabel's work here: https://www.instagram.com/ms_mabel_syrup/

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