

The road from normal

By Dallas John Baker

Writing is like dancing, it's moving (or making marks) to a beat, a beat inside. The things that are written—novels, poems and plays—hold those rhythms in them, ready to be released when read or performed. That beat doesn't come out of nowhere, it's the echo of the writer's experiences, their loves and losses. It's easy enough to hear the music in any piece of writing, but to understand it fully we sometimes need to track that beat back to its source, to the moments and experiences that led to its creation. To understand my play *Ghosts of Leigh*, you need to go back to the 1980s and take a ride in a Datsun 120Y through the rolling grasslands of the Darling Downs.

Those who dance are considered mad by those who cannot hear the music – Friedrich Nietzsche

The road sparkled in the morning sun like a strip of black diamonds. Beautiful, even though the sparkle was just the glitter of millions of tiny shards of glass from broken headlights embedded in the bitumen. The highway curved between low hills blanketed in wild, golden grass, separating the paddocks on one side from those on the other with a dark, glittering slash. The paddocks stretched back in every direction under a luminous blue sky. Every now and then, far off in the distance, a lonely farmhouse sat on the horizon, watched over by a lightning-struck gum tree. The Darling Downs, my home.

My mother's little Datsun 120Y rode on the sparkling blacktop almost silently, the noise of the engine lost in that empty landscape. My mother steered the car with one hand and wound down the window with the other. She angled her face to let the cold air dry the tears that rolled freely down her cheeks. They just kept coming and she'd grown tired of wiping them away. She was heartbroken over something. I didn't know what. It was one of the saddest things I'd seen in my

whole life. Even though I was only fourteen years old, I was sure I could live to a hundred and not see anything that sad ever again.

At best, outsiders read my mother as not quite normal, at worst, they read her as hysterical. In reality, she was just sensitive and a little bit sad. She turned on the radio and cranked up the volume. *Do You Really Want to Hurt Me* by Culture Club was playing. One of our favourite songs. She started singing along, the tears still streaming down. This was the moment I understood that some people's minds are quite different to everyone else's; that one person's way of thinking and perceiving can be as unlike another person's as moonlight is to the harsh gleam of stadium floodlights. It was also the moment I realised that there is beauty in that difference. There is pain and loneliness, yes, but also something tender that is worth cherishing.

Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness – Allen Ginsberg

The kids in my neighbourhood called my grandmother 'the mad witch'. She was a paranoid schizophrenic in a time when hardly anyone had heard that term let alone knew what it meant. They called me 'the sissy freak'. Everyone knew exactly what that meant: queer. We were quite a trio, my mother, my grandmother and I. All outcasts in our small conservative town, and all so disconnected (perhaps alienated) from other people's expectations that we just did what we wanted; unconcerned by others' reactions, unfazed by the risk inherent in being different, in standing out. My mother went to bed for days in depressed, hypochondriac fits. My grandmother spoke in riddles and often went on lone adventures in the middle of the night; barefoot and wearing only a nightgown. I grew my hair long and put on my mother's make-up and an op-shop kimono and went for long walks in the countryside; a gender-bending bush-baby.

To outsiders, the things my grandmother did and the things that I did were in the same category: stuff only lunatics did. My mother's sins were not seen as quite so serious. But if on occasion sympathy was shown my mother or grandmother, none ever came my way. People seemed to think that I'd chosen to be different, to be a freak. Whereas they thought my grandmother was born crazy, they believed my own actions and choices had made me that way. And somehow my crimes were more taboo, because mine were crimes against gender. It was as if they thought I was being different (being myself) to spite them, as part of a willing refusal of their sense of what was normal, right and good. Whatever they believed, my behaviour and gender presentation weren't about rebellion, or trying to set myself apart. It was simply the outflow of an atypical mind, of thinking differently; of not having the same (restricted) sense of what was normal that everyone else had. I just didn't *believe* in gender the way other people did. For me it was something to be played with, something fluid and fun, a performance. Playing with gender was how I expressed myself. Because of that I was drawn to other people whose approach to gender was much the same. An expression of this was my record collection, which in the 1980s contained barely a single gender-normative performer. It was all David Bowie, Boy George, Marilyn, Dead or Alive and Divine. And it was through my gender-bending fandom that I encountered the unforgettable Leigh Bowery, a genius of shock and outrage whose drag-inspired costumery spoke to me (and woke me) in ways nothing else had before.

There is no great genius without some touch of madness – Aristotle

The idea that genius, especially creative genius, is linked to madness is literally as old as Aristotle. That's a fair bit more than a two thousand year tradition of linking artists, writers and performers to "lunatics". It's no wonder then that the idea is hard to dislodge, despite the fact that there is no substantial evidence linking mental illness with creativity. Madness, in the form of hysteria, has long been associated more with women than men. The connection between creative genius (or talent),

madness and femininity is evident in everyday life. The few creative professions most people encounter on a regular basis—such as hairdressing, window-dressing, interior design, dressmaking and beautician—have long been seen as feminine. The men who participate in these professions are deemed *effeminate* by default. The same is true for men who participate in the more rarefied arts of ballet, opera and theatre. The figure of the “artsy effeminate” is a cultural stereotype that persists despite the fact that male dancers, singers and actors are often both masculine and heterosexual. It is because of this persistent association between creativity and femininity, between madness and the effeminate, that men who don’t look how men are supposed to look, whose gender presentation (or visual façade) defies gender norms, are often perceived as hysterics, as lunatics. More to the point, they are also often perceived as scary and dangerous. Leigh Bowery played up to the notion of the scary effeminate with sublime irreverence and turned his (powdered) nose up at all social norms around gender. In fact, he made these things the basis for all of his (unconventional) art.

In an interview with Ian Parker in London’s *The Independent*¹, Bowery described his artwork as “both serious and very funny. It’s decorative, but there’s something underlying [it] that’s maybe tragic and disturbing. There’s a tension between the two.” The tension between the two is the tension between normal and abnormal, sane and insane, male and female, between the banal and commonplace and the extraordinary. Bowery’s crafted visual façade reads on the outside as outlandish, as mad, but it rests on an inner philosophical architecture that is profoundly logical. Through outrageous costumery and a flirtation with the limits of acceptable behaviour and dress, Bowery is highlighting two things: 1. That gender norms are deeply conservative and conformist; and 2. That most individuals unconsciously adhere to a

¹‘A bizarre body of work’ (Sunday 26th February 1995)

rigid (and hierarchical) dress code as opposed to following their own inner impulses or desires, which is, in itself, a kind of (imposed) madness or forced inhibition. It's as though Bowery's costumes were a visual declaration similar to that made by author J.G. Ballard when he wrote: 'In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom.'²

A person needs a little madness, or else they never dare cut the rope and be free – Nikos Kazantzakis

Ironically, to be free does not come without a price. We all pay something for our freedom. Sometimes we pay a price just for being ourselves, especially when being ourselves confronts sacrosanct norms like gender. When we do that, when we break or transcend taboos, we are deemed mad, perhaps even dangerous. In my stage play, *Ghosts of Leigh*, the lead character, the ghost of a young (1980s) Leigh Bowery, says this: 'There is always a price to pay for being different, always, and sometimes it's a high price, but it's worth it. Besides, the price you pay for hiding who you really are is much higher. Sometimes it costs you your life.' In a lot of ways this play had its genesis in that Datsun 120Y, on that empty road slicing through the Darling Downs when I was 14. I knew then that I was not like everyone else and that as a result I would experience loneliness, and perhaps pain. But I also knew that I wouldn't conform and be like everyone else, even if I could. If I did, then I would lose the tenderness that comes from being an outsider, the tenderness that makes an ordinary country road seem like a thread of glittering black diamonds. Leigh Bowery was the role model I used for negotiating the pain and loneliness, and for how to be myself, how to preserve the tenderness within.

² *Running Wild* (1988)

'Look out there, Dallas,' my mother had said on that morning, motioning with her head out to broad skies and acres of golden grass. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

'Yes,' I answered, raising my voice a little over the wind flooding in the window. 'It's really beautiful.'

She smiled, wiping the last tear away. 'Not everyone sees it, but I knew you would.' She hit the accelerator. The little 120Y lurched forward, its tires whirring on the glittering road that stretched far away from normal to another place; a place where people like us could feel at home and dance to the beat of a different drum.