

Q&A: How an Elvis impersonator-turned-drag queen was born: Playwright Matthew Lopez on 'Georgia McBride'

BY MARGARET GRAY

Writer Matthew Lopez has drama in his blood. After he saw his aunt, Priscilla Lopez, in her Tony-winning performance in Broadway's "A Day in Hollywood / A Night in the Ukraine" as a boy in 1980, he decided to become an actor.

It came as a surprise to those who knew him when, in his mid-20s, having moved from Florida to New York to pursue his dreams, Lopez abruptly quit acting and started writing in the early 2000s. But he soon emerged as one of the most-produced playwrights in the country.



"The Legend of Georgia McBride" writer Matthew Lopez, photographed in New York. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

At first glance, his plays form a remarkably diverse oeuvre: "The Whipping Man," his Civil War drama; "Somewhere," the story of a Puerto Rican family lost in Broadway dreams; "Reverberation," about a lonely gay man learning to connect in New York City; and "Georgia McBride," a drag-queen-coming-of-age extravaganza. But Lopez points out that the works share a theme: "They're all about home, creating home and family — either blood family or manufactured family. 'Georgia McBride' is about a group of people who don't really fit in anywhere else. I call them my misfit toys, and they build a home together at the bar."

The bar is a coastal Florida dive where a struggling Elvis impersonator named Casey does his act. Just as Casey learns that his wife is expecting their first child, he loses his stage to a pair of drag queens, Tracy Mills and Anorexia Nervosa, a.k.a. Remy. When Remy goes AWOL, Tracy takes Casey under her wing, and in a flurry of sensational costumes, country music and lip-sync malfunctions, the legend of Georgia McBride is born.

Lopez, who lives in New York, spoke by phone for this edited conversation about his "Georgia" journey.

"Georgia McBride" is set in your hometown of Panama City, Fla. Did you know a lot of drag queens growing up?

Not growing up. But when I was in my late teens, I had a friend who started doing drag, and I would go to the one and only gay bar in town and watch him perform. I would also hang out in the dressing room before the show and watch the queens get dressed. So my introduction to drag was largely from the inside out. I had a firsthand demonstration of how it came together, how it was built on these queens' bodies and on their faces, and how it became something wonderful and electric onstage.

I don't think that I would have an appreciation of drag — other than just being a gay man who has spent a lot of time in gay bars — if I hadn't first seen the work that goes into it and the artistry of it. There's a line in the play where Casey says, "I don't know anything about doing drag." And Tracy says, "Like that's ever stopped anyone from doing drag." I think that's true to a large extent, but for those who really do know how to do it, who are experts in it, it's a fascinating transformation to watch. I wanted to see that happen onstage — of course, an abbreviated, madcap version of it, because to fully get into drag can take hours.

What inspired you to make your fish-out-of-water, Casey, a straight man venturing into drag?

It actually all started with a playlist, which my then-boyfriend, now-husband, and I got our hands on from friends of a friend. The legend of this playlist has it that — and I've never met the people in question — the roommate of a friend had created this playlist for her boyfriend, who was beginning to explore drag as a performance outlet.

The playlist was called "Persona," and it was filled with country-western female vocalists: Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn and Brenda Lee and other fun stuff. Interspersed with those were covers of Elvis Presley songs and songs about Elvis by female vocalists.

My husband and I listened to it a lot, and I began to see the play. I was attracted to the notion of a straight man exploring drag. The guy the playlist was written for lived in Brooklyn, so he was not necessarily a surprising candidate for a straight man to do drag — as I've joked before, half the straight men in Brooklyn have done drag once in their lives. For my own story I needed to find someone more unlikely. And that's where I got the idea of setting it in my hometown and telling the story of this down-on-his-luck straight white guy who is an aspiring Elvis impersonator, who has definitely got performing in his blood, but who has not yet fully actualized as an artist or a person. And he stumbles on this and blossoms as a result, and really comes into his own as an adult through this process.

Rexy gives a speech about what it really means to be a drag queen. Were you conscious of how you were contributing to the discourse, which is such a theme in musical theater, about the sociopolitical significance of drag?

That was less an imperative at the beginning of the work. I was more interested in simply telling the story. But the story has required me to explore what drag means to me. Rexy's speech is my attempt to state for myself, if for no one else, how I view drag. For Casey it is one thing and for Rexy it is quite another. She has to remind him — or teach him for the first time — that drag once was and still is a dangerous thing, and by the same token, it is the only way for some people to survive in a dangerous world.

I remember when I was a teenager, growing up gay in a very conservative town, that being inside this gay bar did feel safe. Drag, as it's practiced in these small Southern gay bars, enables a sense of transgression, a sense of rebellion, a sense of resistance. And it's also a hell of a lot of fun.

I love the tender, mutually supportive relationship Casey shares with his wife, Jo.

That's my marriage up on stage, without a doubt. I am definitely Casey in that scenario, and Jo is definitely my husband.

Is your husband in the arts too?

No, thank God! He's a normal person. A real person. He works in education.

But he tolerates your artiness, the way Jo tolerates Casey's?

Oh, I think at the end of the day he's probably charmed by me more than he admits.

