



# A Change for the Better

Transgender talent, themes rise amid  
a new era of acceptance in Hollywood.  
Now stars like Laverne Cox want to shatter the clichés

*Story By Ramin Setoodeh  
Photograph by Emily Hope*

As the first breakthrough transgender star in Hollywood, Laverne Cox has certainly mixed it up with members of the A-list. The “Orange Is the New Black” actress recently attended the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, where she rubbed shoulders with the president (“Oh God — he knows who I am!”). She fan-girled out for Viola Davis at the SAG Awards, mingled with Jon Hamm at an Emmys after-party, and received a Christmas card from Beyonce. But nothing compared with the time she ambushed her idol at an Essence magazine luncheon.

“This is the hand that Oprah touched,” Cox says, extending her wrist. “I didn’t want to wash it.”

Indeed, it’s been a whirlwind time for the 30-year-old actress. She just wrapped a CBS pilot called “Doubt,” in which she plays a transgender defense attorney dressed in Hillary Clinton-like power suits; landed a Daytime Emmy for producing the MTV doc “Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word”; and travels to college campuses to deliver lectures as an LGBT activist. And next month, she’ll slip back into the unglamorous outfit that opened these doors — the drab prison uniform from Netflix’s “Orange Is the New Black,” as the show enters its third season.

On a spring night over dinner in downtown Manhattan, Cox spoke about how far Hollywood has come — and still needs to go — in embracing transgender artists across all facets of the entertainment business. “I never wanted to be the only one,” she says, referencing an interview she heard with Sidney Poitier about how it felt to be the first African-American to win a best actor Oscar, in 1964. “The change will happen when there’s a slew of us.”

That day may be quickly approaching. A whopping 17 million viewers tuned in last month to a two-hour ABC interview with Bruce Jenner to hear his story about transitioning into a woman. And there is a smattering of transgender-themed film and TV projects about to premiere, which could signal a dramatic shift in the indus-

try. There are estimated to be about 700,000 transgender people in the U.S., according to Diane Sawyer’s interview with Jenner.

On July 10, Magnolia Pictures will release Sundance festival darling “Tangerine,” which follows two transgender prostitutes (played by newcomers Mya Taylor and Kitana Kiki Rodriguez) during a chaotic Christmas Eve in Los Angeles. In November, Focus Features drops Oscar-bait drama “The Danish Girl,” starring Academy Award-winning actor Eddie Redmayne as transgender 20th-century painter Lili Elbe. On television, Ryan Seacrest is producing the unscripted “Becoming Us” for ABC Family, about a teen who grapples with his father’s transition; Jenner will premiere his own E! docuseries on July 26; and the Wachowski siblings will unveil their new Netflix program “Sense8,” with up-and-coming star Jamie Clayton in a pivotal role, this summer. She beat out every transgender actress in town, including Cox, for the high-profile part.

Many of these stories are targeted to millennial audiences, which prize authenticity (an important arc in the transgender narrative), on shows that are banking on a groundswell of public support to sustain viewers. Says Jeffrey Tambor, who won a Golden Globe for his portrayal of Maura on the Amazon series “Transparent,” the first mainstream TV show headlined by a transgender character: “This is no less than a civil rights movement. And it’s about freedom — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The time has come.”

But not all audiences are accepting. In March, Karla Mosley — who isn’t transgender — began receiving a flood of tweets from fans when it was announced that her character on the CBS soap “The Bold and the Beautiful” had a surprise backstory. “People asked questions about genitalia,” Mosley says. “What was my experience transitioning? It definitely gave me a small crack of insight into what that must be like on a daily basis.”

Hollywood has long forced transgender performers into staying closeted — like ’80s model-turned-Bond girl Caroline Cossey, whose career stalled after a British tabloid wrote about her gender reassignment; or Jet cover-beauty Ajita Wilson, whose story was revealed only after her death in a 1987 car crash. In her



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Laverne Cox

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANS URSULA STEINER FOR JUSTICE; HAIR BY ANITA WATSON; MAKEUP BY JESSICA BROWN; STYLING BY CHRISTINA BAKELL; COATS: DONNA KARAN; COAT: CALVIN KLEIN; BIRCHER; EARRINGS: YVES SAINT LAURENT; RING AND CUFF: JENNIFER FISHER; ANKLE BRACELET: DINNY HALL

seminal 2007 book “Whipping Girl,” Julia Serano describes two transgender stereotypes that often appear in the movies: the deceptive transsexual (who tries to trick heterosexual men into having sex with her, a la “The Crying Game” or “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective”) or the pathetic transsexual (characters with overtly mannish features, such as in “The World According to Garp” or “The Adventures of Sebastian Cole”). When a rare sympathetic portrait has appeared — e.g., Felicity Huffman in “Transamerica” — these roles were frequently played by cisgender (or non-transgender) thespians. “Trans actors have a really hard time getting established in Hollywood,” Serano says.

Cox, who grew up in Mobile, Ala., was harassed and bullied for being too feminine. She studied dance and acting in college, and had always wanted to be an actress, but took a detour into fashion school in New York. “There were no examples at the time of trans people who were professional actors,” she says. Then in 2007, Candis Cayne became the first transgender co-star of a primetime series, ABC’s “Dirty Sexy Money.” The show aired

**PRISON’S FREEDOM** Netflix’s “Orange Is the New Black,” now in its third season, opened doors for Cox, who was inspired by watching transgender star Candis Cayne on ABC’s 2007 series “Dirty Sexy Money.”

for just two seasons, but seeing Cayne on TV inspired Cox to send 500 postcards to talent reps, before she landed her current agent, Paul Hilepo.

Like many transgender actors, Cox had been typecast in the industry, where she had been offered mostly overtly sexualized roles. “I played sex workers seven different times in either student films or on TV,” Cox says. “I tried to make all my sex workers different.” Even though she disrobed on an episode of “Orange” directed by Jodie Foster, her first nude scene was in a 2003 indie film called “Daughter of Arabia,” where she plays a Moroccan stripper and hooker. The film has distribution overseas only.

**T**ransgender advocates are skeptical over whether the forthcoming projects will crack the glass ceiling in an industry where the majority of executives are straight white men. “There’s a perception that there’s been an explosion of transgender characters on TV,” says Nick Adams, director of transgender media programs at LGBT media-monitoring org GLAAD. “But when you look at the numbers, that’s not true.” According to a GLAAD survey, only one show on broadcast TV currently features a transgender regular (“The Bold and the Beautiful”), and not a single studio movie last year had a prominent transgender character, a statistic unlikely to improve with tentpoles largely dependent on foreign box office from regions of the world intolerant of LGBT rights.



## 7 Names to Know in Transgender Hollywood

### 1. Jamie Clayton

Beat out every other transgender actress for a mysterious part in the Wachowski siblings' Netflix series "Sense8."

### 2. Mya Taylor and 3. Kitana Kiki Rodriguez

These newcomers star in Sundance darling "Tangerine," which was shot on an iPhone.

### 4. Trace Lysette

The yoga teacher on "Transparent" plays the head waitress in the NBC pilot "The Curse of the Fuentes Woman."

### 5. Jazz Jennings

This 14-year-old headlines her own TLC series, "All That Jazz," airing this summer.

### 6. Rhys Ernst

The second-unit director on "Transparent" is developing a TV series with a transgender teen set in high school.

### 7. Janet Mock

The MSNBC.com host recently shared her transgender story with Oprah.

"In TV and film, we're moving away from trans characters being portrayed as a punchline or a victim or a novelty," says "Transparent's" Trace Lysette, who plays the head waitress in the NBC pilot "The Curse of the Fuentes Women," from "Ugly Betty" creator Silvio Horta, which could be ordered to series this week. "I think that's definitely a good thing," she adds. "But we've got a ways to go before trans roles and characters stop being so sensational, and start being real."

It helps when transgender actors and actresses can be part of telling their own story. "Tangerine" co-star Taylor developed the film's screenplay by talking about her experiences with director Sean Baker, who had met her at an LGBT center in Los Angeles. Taylor had no training as an actress, but wanted to break into the business — and she shot the indie just as she was transitioning. "I didn't necessarily love myself," she says of that time in her life. "I wasn't that comfortable with the way I looked. Now I am. Everything has filled out perfect: I have hips and breasts, and my muscles went down completely."

On the smallscreen, there's yet to be a transgender contestant on competition juggernauts like "Survivor," "American Idol," "The Voice" or "Big Brother" (one exception was the 2009 season of "The Real World," which introduced Katelynn Cusanello to her Brooklyn housemates). This spring, fledgling network Discovery Life unveiled "New Girls on the Block," which centers on six transgender girlfriends in Kansas City, as they visit nail salons, grapple with dating, and come to terms with their new identities. "It was incredibly brave and bold," says Jane Latman, the network's general manager. "I

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Trace Lysette

thought it had the potential to get some attention, but it was really after we greenlit it that transgender programming became kind of hot." Discovery Life hasn't lost any advertisers as a result of the show. Says production and development chief Julie Meisner Eagle: "We weren't worried about backlash. We wanted the ladies to be onboard and be proud."

And TLC will shed light on the little-covered world of transgender adolescents this July with "All That Jazz," starring 14-year-old Jazz Jennings. The YouTube star publicly came out at 6, and has noticed how far acceptance has come since then. "When I first appeared in the media, it was rare to see trans people on TV, and young trans kids were unheard of," says Jennings. "I'm so happy trans visibility has increased immensely." The show will focus on both Jennings' home and school life, and it's being pitched as a series that the entire family can watch together. "I'm running for class president," Jennings says. "Who knows, maybe someday I'll be living in the White House."

Jenner's public coming-out as transgender could be as pivotal to LGBT rights as Ellen DeGeneres' announcement in 1997 that she is gay. But after she took the plunge, it was still years before Hollywood caught up — and gay characters stopped feeling like stereotypes. The lag time may not be as long for the transgender community, since Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube have allowed for storytelling in real time.

In Sawyer's interview with Jenner, as his kids publicly supported their dad, the material seemed familiar: A similar storyline already had unfolded on "Transparent," where Moira's three children stand behind her, and the sense of déjà vu in the Jenner interview wasn't lost on "Transparent" creator Jill Soloway. "It feels so strange," she says. "And also exciting. I'm somebody who grew up seeing Bruce Jenner on TV, with my parents (watching too)." She recalls having gone on Twitter during the interview to gauge the public's reaction, expecting it would be evenly divided between fans and haters. "Every single tweet was about love, support and bravery," says Soloway, who was touched by the messages from Jenner's children on social media. "Every person in Bruce's

family understood."

Just before the interview aired, Soloway had bumped into Jenner's stepdaughter, Kim Kardashian West, who told her that the entire Kardashian family watched "Transparent" together. Even though it's had only one season, the award-winning series already feels like a cultural touchstone. Soloway based the show on her dad, who came out to her as transgender three years ago. Amazon wasn't initially at the top of her list when Soloway shopped the pilot, with HBO and Showtime among her target destinations.

"But there was a big hunger for it at Amazon," Soloway recalls. "From the other networks, I got a resounding 'no,' or they were going to put it in the self-development machine, and it could take a couple years."

She sent the script to Tambor, because he reminded her of her father. He immediately wanted the part. "A role like this doesn't come along in a lifetime, let alone for an actor of 70 years," he says. Still, the actor wasn't sure he could pull the character off. "I was very nervous. I was throw-up nervous. Not because I wanted to get a good review. I wanted to do it right."

The show has become something of a career launching pad for transgender creatives in Hollywood. Because Soloway had cast Tambor in the title role, she insisted that all other transgender characters in the series be played by real trans people. She also employed trans crew in other departments, and the show added a trans writer (the singer Our Lady J) for the second season, after soliciting submissions from the community.

Soloway insists that Hollywood will begin to do right by the transgender community only when it starts allowing trans members into the club. "The more trans people produce their own shows, direct their own shows, star in their own shows, be in charge of their own images, the less it'll have this feeling of being special," Soloway explains.

The show's second-unit director, Rhys Ernst, who was responsible for scouting these hires, suggests that the progress being made today, no matter how slow, is not insignificant. "Making inroads for trans people in the industry is an important step in the long game," says Ernst, one of the only trans directors in the DGA. He hopes to make a movie of his own one day — a buddy indie about two middle-aged trans friends on a road trip.

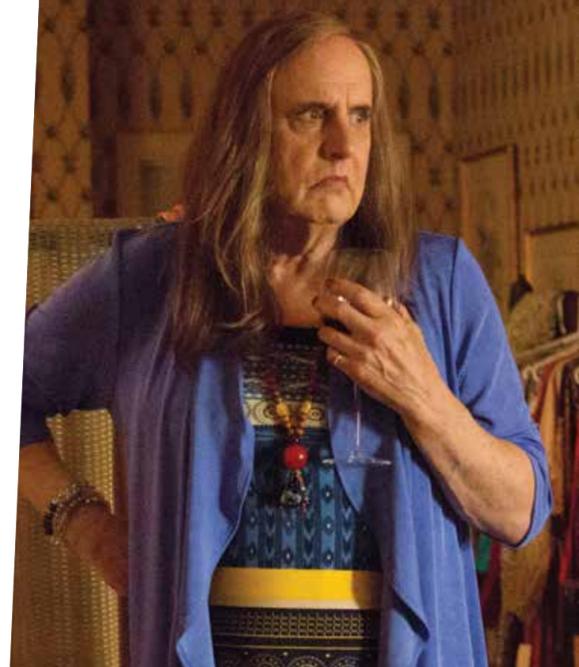
He's also writing a trans teen TV series that he describes as a cross between "My So-Called Life" and "Juno."

Laverne Cox is so famous now, she can no longer ride the subway. She recalls taking the L-train from Brooklyn back to her Manhattan apartment in 2013. After a few riders spotted her — she says that her height (5'11") makes it hard to blend in — the car turned into a raucous photo op. "It was a Saturday night, so people had no boundaries," she says of her zealous fans. "In the beginning, it was mostly girls. Now it's straight men, gay men, every race you can imagine. It's everybody."

Although there's no shortage of love for Cox, she's yet to share a romantic kiss onscreen with a man. The closest she got was in the 2011 indie "Musical Chairs," where there was a scripted smooch between her and Nelson Landrieu. "It didn't make it into the final film," Cox says. As for her personal life, she had to quit online dating after she became a household name. "People were like, 'Why is Laverne Cox on OkCupid!'" she says. But she's now in a relationship — the details of which she wants to remain private. Though she believes the men who date trans women need to be more visible, in order to eradicate societal shame, she says she won't bring her boyfriend onto red-carpet events. "I don't want my relationship to be up for public scrutiny," Cox says. "I'm a private person, too, in some ways. Just because I leave my apartment doesn't mean I'm available for public consumption."

Cox still lives in the same rent-controlled studio space (without an oven) in downtown Manhattan, with a giant print of her 2014 Time magazine cover framed over her bed. She plans on buying her own place in five years, but she's hesitant about splurging now on a bigger pad, because she knows how fickle the public — and show business — can be.

Still, Cox remains cautiously optimistic that Hollywood will continue to bring transgender stories to the screen, and that there will be a point of acceptance from which there will be no turning back. "I think it's hard to say at this moment," Cox says. "There needs to be a systemic shift. I don't think we're there yet, but there's a lot of potential."



## Moira Speaks

Jeffrey Tambor has won a Golden Globe for his role as Moira Pfefferman in Amazon Studios' "Transparent," which begins production on season 2 in the summer. He tells us he's gotten to know the character quite well.

### Did you expect the show to become such a cultural phenomenon?

Our show asks a very basic question that I think is at the heart of every family. And that is: "If I change, will you still love me?" The best barometer I have (to measure the response) is the airport-shopping barometer. I'm shopping, and all of a sudden someone comes over to me. It's not uncommon for them to lead a conversation with "Thank you."

### What else do you hear?

People tell me they use the show to help their families. I had a young couple come up to me at Sundance and say their young child said, "Mommy, I'm not a boy." Thank God they were sensitive enough and intelligent enough to hear. I always thought that acting is more than just entertainment. I do believe there's a higher prize.

### Did you seek advice from transgender people before playing Moira?

I had three consultants from the trans community — Jenny Boylan, Rhys Ernst and Zackary Drucker. The great thing about playing Moira — she's a great character. I really see her clearly. Jill (Soloway) came to my hotel room one day, and we took Moira out on our first field trip.

### What happened?

We made up and wiggled Moira. I'll never forget that walk through the hotel lobby. I was so nervous, and then I realized no one was even looking at me. Then we went out to a nightclub. I got to meet Moira for the first time, and she got to meet me. I danced. Moira had a good time.

### Does she stay with you?

You don't put Moira down. She's made me more present, a better parent, a better citizen. When I first started the process, I got a mani and pedi. That was fun. I kept the fingernails on to remind me always of Moira. I don't have to do that anymore. Moira is there. I feel like she's a good friend. I can't wait to be reunited with her.

—Ramin Setoodeh