

# history theatre



## PLAY GUIDE

Written by  
Susan Kimberly

Directed by  
Laura Leffler

February 8– March 1, 2020

## THE PLAY

**1982 & Beyond.** *Superman Becomes Lois Lane* tells the story of the gender transition of Bob Sylvester, a former President of the Saint Paul City Council and successful investment banker, to Susan Kimberly, the first transgender woman to become the deputy mayor of a major American city. This is Susan's story written in her own words with passion and humor that has been a hallmark of this remarkable St. Paul figure.

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Play Guide published by History Theatre c2020

Written by Cat Hammond

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT—SUSAN KIMBERLY



Susan Kimberly

Cat Hammond, Dramaturg for the play *Superman Becomes Lois Lane* sat down with Susan Kimberly to talk about her process of writing her own personal story into a play.

**Cat:** WHEN DID YOU BEGIN WORKING ON SUPERMAN BECOMES LOIS LANE?

**Susan:** In late autumn of 1989, while flying in an airplane to the west coast, shortly after visiting Fort Ross for the first time, I got the idea of writing SBLL as a play and actually started scribbling in a notebook while still in mid-air.

**Cat:** WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAY'S TITLE?

**Susan:** As Susan says in the play, “Bob never thought of himself as Superman and neither did anyone else – so far as I know. But I did. I was in awe of him. As far as I was concerned, he could fly. He belonged in the sky. And he always had my back.” Early in my transition from man to woman, I realized that I had my own internalized guardian angel. Whenever I got in trouble, I could turn to Bob for help. One day I imagined Clark Kent ducking into a phone booth, spinning around a couple of times and coming out as Lois Lane. I had my title.

**Cat:** WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN THE PROCESS OF ADAPTING YOUR LIFE STORY FOR THE STAGE?

**Susan:** The primary challenge was to get my life to a place that seemed like a happy ending. For many years I looked back on a halcyon period when Bob Sylvester was President of the City Council and all was right in the world. During those years I never really thought that I could recreate a time like that again. I was happier than I had been, but, at the same time, I felt like the Marlon Brando character who “coulda’ been a contender.” Then Norm Coleman asked me to be his deputy mayor and chief of staff and suddenly I found myself a VIP in City Hall again. I will be forever grateful to Norm for that. He gave me my career back!

**Cat:** THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOB AND SUSAN FEELS CENTRAL TO SBLL. TELL US ABOUT THE DECISION TO REPRESENT BOB AND SUSAN AS TWO CHARACTERS WHO SHARE THE STAGE AND INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER.

**Susan:** For several years I was involved in Werner Erhardt’s training – what was originally called *est*. Fundamental to that training was the notion that life is a conversation. As a woman who had once been a man, that made perfect sense to me and so did the notion of sorting things out with the person I used to be. Even during the years when Bob and I did not really like each other very much, we often talked – and frequently out loud. So, bringing these two folks to the stage seemed like a perfectly logical thing to do. The conversations between Bob and Susan are my favorite parts of the play.

**Cat:** DID ANYTHING SURPRISE YOU DURING THE WRITING OF THIS PLAY? DID THE PROCESS CHANGE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT ANY OF THE PEOPLE OR EVENTS YOU WROTE ABOUT?

**Susan:** The most surprising thing that happened was that bringing Bob to life on the stage brought him back to life within me as well. One night during the summer workshop of the play, I found myself talking as Bob. Being Bob, if you will. That hadn't happened in years. When I realized what I was doing, I was shocked. Then I was pleased. "Great to have you back," I said to myself.

The other remarkable thing that happened was that I rediscovered Mae (ex-wife) while writing this play. Late one night in Paris, she said to me: I have a theory that is different than most. I think Susan created Bob to protect her and guide her while she was growing up. That had never occurred to me, but I think it might be true. I think a higher power placed Mae in my life to guide me and protect me during this often difficult transformation.

**Cat:** HOW DID YOU GET INTO THEATRE?

**Susan:** I think it's premature to say that I am "into theatre." Although I am 77-years-old, this is my professional theatre debut. It's unlikely that I will become the Grandma Moses of the American theatre, so I would be most pleased if this play qualified me as a "one hit wonder" in the local theatre scene.

**Cat:** WHAT PLAYS OR ARTISTS GOT YOU INTERESTED IN TELLING YOUR STORY THROUGH THIS ART FORM?

**Susan:** I thought about majoring in theatre at the University of Minnesota back in the 1960s. I spent a lot of time hanging around Theatre St. Paul (TSP) when Rex and Zoanne Henriot were the artistic leaders of TSP. I had bit parts in "Waiting for Godot," "Tiger at the Gates" and "The Very Opposite Sex" there. At the University, I took every Arthur Ballet course that I could and I appeared in studio productions of "La Ronde" and "No Exit." But I wasn't very good and I dropped out of theatre and majored in journalism instead.

**Cat:** WHEN IS THE FIRST TIME YOU REMEMBER LEARNING ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF GENDER TRANSITION?

**Susan:** On December 1, 1952 I learned from a story in the St. Paul Dispatch "that a man had become a woman." Christine Jorgenson disclosed many of the details of her journey from George to Christine in that story. It was the first time I knew that there were other people in the world who felt the way I did. About twenty years later, travel writer Jan Morris published "Conundrum" – the story of her transition from James to Jan. I truly related to Jan Morris' story. Her life was very much like mine although the nitty-gritty of her gender transition was really scary.

**Cat:** WHAT CURRENT EVENTS DO YOU SEE AS RELATED TO THE THEMES OF SBLL? WHAT DO YOU HOPE THIS PLAY MAKES PEOPLE THINK ABOUT, HERE AND NOW, 2020?

**Susan:** I am surprised that some people still do not believe that transgender and gender non-conforming identities are real. That some people still believe that we could give them up or grow out of them if we just applied ourselves to doing so. Well, I tried. Believe me, I tried. But I discovered that, as the anthem at the end of "La Cage aux Folles" declares: "I Am What I Am!"

## GENDER TRANSITION TIMELINE

People who do not conform to the gender role they are assigned, or who live in socially recognized gender roles other than male and female — in other words, people we would consider "transgender" by today's definition — are documented throughout history and around the world. In the 20th century, various social circumstances gave rise to the concept and phenomenon of "gender transition" in its current form: an individual's change from occupying one gender role to another, generally a role that better aligns with their inner sense of identity.

**1500s to 1700s** - European colonizers react with shock and sometimes with violence to many Native American cultures' non-binary systems of gender, forcefully introducing European culture's strict insistence on a binary definition of gender to the area that will become the United States.

**1800s** - Cultural authority gradually shifts from religion to science and medicine. Increasingly, doctors and scientists are the figures who are trusted to define the nature, causes, and effects of various types of human behavior and identity, including gender non-conformity.

**late 1800s** - Rather than seeing male and female as two completely distinct physical types, increasing numbers of doctors and scientists begin to understand physical sex as a spectrum, with every human body containing some amount of both male and female traits.

**late 1800s** - Due to industrialization, increasing numbers of people reside apart from their families of origin in urban environments, enabling the formation of communities and subcultures based around gender non-conformity.

**Early 20th century** - Several U.S. patients are able to convince doctors to provide gender-affirming surgeries, helping their bodies align more closely with their mannerisms and inner sense of gender identity. These basic early surgeries include the removal of testicles, uteri, or breasts.

**1912-1913** - Experimenting with ovary and testis implants in rodents, Austrian physiologist Eugen Steinach publishes his findings that "the implantation of the gonad of the opposite sex transforms the original sex of an animal." This research contributes to the emerging understanding of hormones.

**1910** - German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld publishes *Die Transvestiten*, in which he proposes that homosexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites are all distinct types of "sexual intermediaries," i.e. people who have some biological combination of male and female traits. (Note that the words we would use for these groups today, like "gay," "intersex," and "transgender," did not yet exist.)



Magnus Hirschfeld



**1919** - Hirschfeld opens the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. During the 20s and early 30s, the Institute advocates for the rights of gender and sexual minorities and provides gender-affirming medical treatments, including the first known genital reconstruction surgery for gender-affirming purposes.

**1932** - An autobiographical account of Dutch painter Lili Elbe's gender transition is published. It is the first known book-length account of a gender transition, and its English translation sets off a spate of media coverage in the U.S. As was typical at the time, articles about Elbe emphasize a physiological basis for her transition (the alleged presence of atrophied ovaries as well as testicles, although it is now considered unlikely that Elbe had any physically intersex traits).



Lili Elbe

**1933** - Nazi vigilantes destroy the Institute for Sexual Science and burn its library of books and documents on sexual diversity.

**1949** - In an article for *Sexology* magazine, physician and popular health writer David O. Cauldwell is the first to use the term "transsexual" to describe individuals who desire to change their sex. The new term gains popularity throughout the 1950s, coinciding with a new understanding of transsexuality as having to do with an individual's inner gender identity, rather than some assumed physical mixture of male and female traits.

**1952** - Virginia Price and several other Los Angeles area cross-dressers publish the first issue of *Transvestia*, a short-lived newsletter that is relaunched as a magazine in 1960. It is the first U.S. publication specifically for gender non-conforming people, specifically male-to-female transvestites. Although many of its contributors live full-time as women, *Transvestia* draws a sharp distinction between "transvestites" and transsexuals who pursue gender-affirming surgeries.

**1952** - The *New York Daily News* learns that an American citizen, Christine Jorgensen, has received gender-affirming surgeries in Copenhagen, Denmark, and breaks the story with the sensational front-page headline "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY." Jorgensen becomes a global celebrity overnight and public awareness of gender transition skyrockets.



Christine Jorgensen

**1950s** - Even following the enormous publicity around Christine Jorgensen's gender transition, the mainstream U.S. medical establishment remains hesitant to provide hormonal and surgical treatment to individuals who wish to transition to a new gender role.

**1960** - Persuaded by Dr. Harry Benjamin's expert testimony on the complexity of sex, a judge in a small Midwestern town permits a transgender man to change the sex on his birth certificate from female to male. ("Isn't it encouraging," Benjamin writes of the incident, "that occasionally we encounter an intelligent judge.") Nonetheless, courts and public agencies

remain divided on the issue of whether it is permissible to change an individual's legally documented sex. To this day, many trans people struggle to obtain birth certificates, passports, driver's licenses, and other documents that accurately reflect the gender role they live in.

**1964** - Following his own transition to living full time as male, wealthy philanthropist Reed Erickson founds the Erickson Educational Foundation, which will play a critical role in providing funding to advance research, awareness, and support related to transsexuality.

**1966** - With funding from the Erickson Educational Foundation, Johns Hopkins University opens a Gender Identity Clinic. Very few patients are accepted for gender affirming surgeries at Johns Hopkins, but it is the first major American institution to endorse surgeries and other medical treatments that help trans people transition to a gender role that aligns with their inner gender identity.

**1966** - The University of Minnesota opens a Gender Identity Clinic of its own, immediately after Johns Hopkins. Northwestern University, Stanford University, and the University of Washington follow suit soon after.



Dr. Stanley Biber

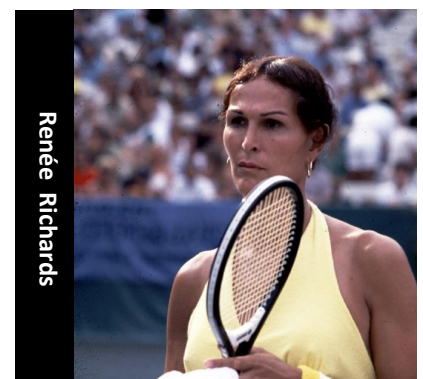
**1970s** - With gender-affirming surgeries newly legitimized by the university based clinics, increasing numbers of private practitioners begin to offer psychological, hormonal, and surgical treatments to trans patients. The private practitioners generally have less restrictive policies on which patients qualify for treatment, and gender-affirming medical treatment becomes much more easily available in the U.S. to those who can afford it. This new wave of private practitioners includes Dr. Stanley Biber, who turns Trinidad, Colorado into the "sex-change surgery capital of the world" and performs over 3800 surgeries by the time of his retirement in the 1990s.

**1975** - Minneapolis adopts a city ordinance barring discrimination on the basis of "having or projecting a self-image not associated with one's biological maleness or biological femaleness." It is the United States' earliest known legal provision protecting transgender people.

**1977** - The New York County Supreme Court rules in favor of transgender professional tennis player Renée Richards' right to compete as a woman. Richards is supported by several doctors as well as tennis player Billie Jean King. The court rules that using a chromosome test as the only basis for determining sex is "grossly unfair, discriminatory, and inequitable."

**1979** - The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association is formed and releases its Standards of Care, outlining criteria for diagnosing and treating transgender conditions. The Standards of Care help more practitioners provide gender-affirming treatments without fear of losing their professional standing, but the highly involved requirements for receiving care still bar many patients from treatment.

**1979** - Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic ceases operations in response to a controversial study claiming that recipients of gender-affirming surgeries experience no "objective advantage in terms of social rehabilitation." (The study completely dismisses patient satisfaction and instead counts heterosexual relationships, upward economic mobility, and not having sought further mental health care as the markers of positive post-surgery "adjustment.")



Renée Richards

**1980** - "Transsexualism" and other "Gender Identity Disorders" are added to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) for the first time.

**Early 1990s** - As activists increasingly emphasize the many diverse forms of gender transition, including those that do not involve medical or surgical intervention, the term "transgender" becomes popular as a broader and less medicalized alternative to "transsexual."

**1993** - Minnesota becomes the first U.S. state to enact a law prohibiting discrimination against transgender individuals, defined as people "having a self-image or identity not traditionally associated with one's biological maleness or femaleness."

**2013** - The DSM-5 removes "Gender Identity Disorder" and substitutes "Gender Dysphoria." This signifies that a trans individual's gender identity is no longer considered pathological, whereas the distress caused by obstacles to expressing one's gender identity is still recognized as a medically treatable condition.

**2015** - Famed Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner publicly comes out as transgender, generating the most extensive media and popular culture coverage of an individual gender transition since Christine Jorgensen. Her transition is part of a period of growing visibility (and increasingly sympathetic coverage) of transgender people in mainstream media.

**2018** - Trump administration officials in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services call for a legal definition of sex based solely on an individual's genitals present at birth, with ambiguous or contested cases determined through testing of chromosomes. If adopted, such a definition will mean that it is no longer possible to transition from one legal gender to another in the eyes of the U.S. federal government.



**2019** - As of April 12, Directive-type Memorandum-19-004 took effect and transgender personnel in the United States military are not allowed to serve or enlist in the United States military, except if they serve in their original sex assignment, had been grandfathered in prior to April 12, 2019, or were given a waiver. Directive-type Memorandum-19-004 is set to expire on March 12, 2020.

## SOURCES

How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States by Joanne Meyerowitz

Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution (Revised Edition) by Susan Stryker

Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: "U.S. History" by Genny Beemyn

"How Minneapolis Became First U.S. City to Pass Trans Protections" by Emma Margolin, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/how-minneapolis-became-first-u-s-city-pass-trans-protections-n585291>

"'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration" by Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, and Robert Pear, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html>



## WAYS TO SUPPORT THE TRANS PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

Each of us has a gender identity, which is an inner sense of how it's right for us to move through the world: as male, as female, or as something in between. The word "transgender" can refer to anyone whose gender identity is not the same as the sex that got stamped on their original birth certificate. Transgender people are often questioned, scrutinized, pathologized, and denied the right to openly express their gender identity. They face widespread discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Here are some small, but important, ways to show the trans people in your life that you support and respect them for who they are.

### Check Your Assumptions At The Door

You can't know a person's gender identity just by looking at them! Don't use words like "ladies" and "sir" or "ma'am" to address someone unless you know they'd use those words to describe themselves. If you absolutely must guess someone's gender, do so on the basis of their self-expression (like clothing) rather than their body (like vocal pitch or body shape).

### Preferred Name & Pronouns = Correct Name & Pronouns

Call a person by the name and pronouns they currently use (even if you knew them during a time when they went by a different name and pronouns). If you're not sure what name or pronouns to call someone, you can always politely ask! If you accidentally refer to someone incorrectly, be considerate by correcting yourself and moving on without making a fuss: "She told me yesterday that - whoops, I'm so sorry. *He* was telling me yesterday that..."

### Don't Ask About "The Surgery"

Some transgender people choose to pursue various kinds of surgery to make their appearance or anatomy more traditionally masculine or feminine, but many do not. Either way, it's an extremely personal matter! Asking if a person has had gender-related surgery is rude and invasive.

### Be a Bathroom Buddy

Many public spaces, such as restrooms and locker rooms, are segregated by gender. Some people can be eager to judge who belongs in a men's or women's room based on appearances, which can make these spaces stressful or even unsafe for some trans people. Remember, it is not your job (or your right) to scrutinize other people and decide which restroom they should use!

### Respect Confidentiality

If you learn that a person is transgender, remember that other people in their life may or may not know that. Sometimes, a trans person may even be unsafe if other people find out. Never "out" a person as trans without their permission.

### Stay Informed

Trans people are currently experiencing both increased visibility and dangerous backlash in politics and the media. Seek out books, articles, and videos about trans people's experiences and current events that affect us - especially material that is actually written by trans people!

## FOR FURTHER READING

Feinberg, Leslie. **Transgender Warriors: Making History From Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman.** Beacon Press, 1997.

A very personal exploration of gender expression and nonconformity throughout history.

Gill-Peterson, Jillian. **Histories of The Transgender Child.** University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

The twentieth-century history of Transgender and Intersex children is revealed through archival research and medical literature. Emphasis is placed on the racial history and how trans children who are Black or People of Color are excluded from medicine.

Gossett, Reina (editor). **Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and The Politics of Visibility.** MIT Press, 2017.

Trans visibility has coincided with an increase in violence against Trans folk and increased legal suppression of Trans rights. A book of essays.

Riley Snorton, C. **Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity.** University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

This book traces the intersections of Blackness and Transness from mid-nineteenth century to present day.

Stryker, Susan. **Transgender History.** Seal Press, 2017.

Exploring American Transgender history chronologically from the mid-twentieth century to today.

Teich, Nicholas. **Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue.** Columbia University Press, 2012.

Written by a social worker, popular educator, and member of the transgender community, this well-rounded resource combines an accessible portrait of transgenderism with a rich history of transgender life and its unique experiences of discrimination. Chapters introduce transgenderism and its psychological, physical, and social processes. They describe the coming out process and its effect on family and friends, the relationship between sexual orientation, and gender and the differences between transsexualism and lesser-known types of transgenderism.

## RESOURCES

**Family Tree Clinics** [familytreeclinic.org/](https://familytreeclinic.org/)

Family Tree Clinic's mission is to cultivate a healthy community through comprehensive sexual health care and education.

**Minnesota Transgender Health Organization** [mntransgenderhealth.org/support-groups](https://mntransgenderhealth.org/support-groups)

Our groups welcome everyone wanting to find support within the transgender and gender non-conforming community.

**HRC Trans Toolkit for Employers** [hrc.org/campaigns/trans-toolkit](https://hrc.org/campaigns/trans-toolkit)

The HRC Foundation's "Transgender Inclusion in the Workplace: A Toolkit for Employers" provides practical guidance in creating a more inclusive workplace for transgender and gender non-conforming employees.

**National Center for Transgender Equality** [transequality.org/](https://transequality.org/)

The *National Center for Transgender Equality* is the nation's leading social justice advocacy organization winning life-saving change for transgender people.

**OutFront Minnesota** [outfront.org/support-counseling-organizations](https://outfront.org/support-counseling-organizations)

OutFront Minnesota's mission is to create a state where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are free to be who they are, love who they love, and live without fear of violence, harassment or discrimination.

**Trans Awareness Organizations** [transawareness.org/twin-cities.html](https://transawareness.org/twin-cities.html)

Listing of Twin Cities resources organizations and services for trans identified folks throughout the Twin Cities.

## **Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences**

**As an audience member at the theater, you are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:**

- **Arrive at least 15 minutes early**
  - **Visit the restroom before the show starts**
- **Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it**
- **Before the show begins, turn off your phone and any other electronic devices . If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately**
  - **Do not use your phone for texts, calls or games**
  - **You cannot make recordings in the theater**
- **Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so**
- **Avoid getting up during the show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly**