

BE SOMEONE ELSE

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Warning, this episode opens with some dirty stuff and who doesn't want that? But, you know, shield the children if you don't want to explain what a dil- uh...if you don't want to have to explain stuff to them today. Ok. Enjoy.

Paul: So, we're in the kitchen and actually there isn't much to look at quite yet but I can talk you through it. So I'm performing down at a drag show called circus hosted by woo woo monroe and it's a really really gracious audience and they tip well. And they tend to like body stuff down there. So I am kind of tailoring my numbers a little more towards that. And interestingly the show -

Lily: What do you mean by body -

Paul: Bawdy, like B A W D Y. [Lily: oh BAWDY] Yeah, some queens serve body, I serve BAWDY [laughing]

Lily Narration: That's my friend Paul Ziller, telling me about a special project he's working on.

Paul: And they have one of the queens from the online drag competition, Dragula, which is a filth competition so all the queens are like blood coming out of their mouths or they're lactating and drinking it god knows, whatever you can think of. That's not quite what I do in my performance. But I thought Ok I'm gonna take a step towards that.

Lily Narration: This is the first time I'm really hearing about this part of Paul's life.

Paul: ...and with this giant refrigerator box, it's made out of a cardboard refrigerator box, I'm going to create a bathroom stall with a glory hole and I'm going to have three men walk up onto the stage like they're going to the bathroom and they're gonna stick a variety of things through the glory hole and I'm gonna lip sync and interact with these quote on quote things that are getting stuck through the glory hole including a cob of corn [L obviously] including a cob of corn, including a cucumber, obviously, including an american flag [L all the things you bring to the bathroom with you] including silly string, including maybe a churro if I have the energy to go buy one, and also a red dildo which is the most literal thing of all and god knows whatever else I'm gonna think of. And so I'm gonna be taking black paint and making this totally pure refrigerator box look like a dirty nasty old bathroom stall at some bar that's been open for fifty years and there's gonna be all sorts of things written and phone numbers...

Lily Narration: So it was at least a year after I first Paul that I found out he also goes by another name.

Paul: Hi I'm Dusty Porn, I'm a San Francisco drag performer I consider myself a performing artist which is a little bit more than a drag queen.

Lily Narration: That distinction feels important because when Dusty refers to herself as a drag queen -

Paul:...it feels a little bit limiting to me somehow. And like I'm only that persona somehow. But drag performing artist allows a little bit more permission to let that character or persona be just anyone or anywhere I want to take it.

Lily Narration: Paul's also an associate marriage and family therapist in San Francisco and as a cisgender, caucasian, neatly bearded, gentil, gay man he works with clients from all kinds of backgrounds. And none of them know about Dusty. Which made his choice to show up in this episode as both Dusty and Paul kind of tricky. Before the interview began, Paul was trying to think it through out loud.

Paul: [debating name use] will I be Google searchable? Do I mind that? That's what I'm trying to figure out. But I have lots of straight clients, I have lots of - yeah I'm not yet called to be a queer therapist if I'm ever going to be. That's just like a fifth of my practice.

Lily Narration: Ultimately, Paul decided it was ok to use his name. And lots of therapists go through a similar decision making process when faced with how we present in public. Having certain kinds of boundaries around our personal lives is a big part of this profession - most of us have our personal social media on lock down, we try to avoid running into clients in bars, and we're often trained to feel like it's kind of scandalous for our clients to know much about us.

Paul and I have had to think hard about these choices because we're the performer types - we like expressing ourselves in a visible space, sharing that with an audience. Even if, in Paul's case, it's with a corn cob being shoved through a glory hole, or in my case, occasionally revealing my deepest insecurities on this podcast. Worrying too much that a client's gonna find out can be really limiting. Which lacks no irony in a profession that's all about helping people open up and get real.

But when performing is a normal part of all our lives, on stage or off, what does it mean to be authentic? What is a "true self"? I'm hoping an opera singing drag performing therapist, some strangers in a bar, and a dead psychoanalyst can help me figure it out.

I'm Lily Sloane and this is A Therapist Walks Into a Bar.

Woman1: I was brought up in a family where it was ok for me to be myself so I didn't have to defend it in the way a lot of people have had to so I'm kind of lucky in that way, creatively I can just be a weirdo artist type and not have much of a filter on my language.

Lily Narration: I wrangled some people in my neighborhood bar into talk to me about what it means to be yourself. And it wasn't all that surprising that it's hard to talk about how we became who we are. Especially when there's still so much we don't understand about the nature/nurture debate.

Man: I was born in Iran. Yeah, but I've been in this country since nineteen sixty three. Long time. If I was in Iran, I'd probably be a little different.

Lily Narration: Where we came from and who we came from and where we've gone since matters. Because Dusty became such an important part of Paul's life, I wondered how? Why? Especially when these more classically feminine expressions at best aren't encouraged and at worst are often shamed out of kids who've been assigned male.

Paul: The shoes is where I started. When I was god knows, 6 or 7, I would hide in the basement and put on my grandma's shoes and walk around. So I mean, this was going on a long time ago. And there was - walking around in the basement, that's a little bit of a metaphor for shame, right? Like, there was some hiding there. So, I was never chastised in any mean way but I think it was probably a little bit of a running joke that I was going down and doing that. So that was just in me.

Lily Narration: Even though it was in Paul, he grew up and went about his life as a man. But clothing isn't everything. Paul was also an opera and musical theater singer. In fact, he trained as a countertenor which is higher in the vocal register than most male singers and associated with a kind of femininity.

Paul: Singing high like that was just one of the steps in being comfortable in doing something that isn't traditional to what you'd expect from a male. But to put on a dress, to step into a persona - it was very easy in that the movement and the mannerisms that I wanted to bring forth just poured out of me and I didn't have to think much about it.

So, it started out as sort of a Halloween thing - a friend had a Rupaul Drag Race viewing party and said dress up and I was dating a guy at the time who had a giant stack of porno magazines next to his bed. And I came up with this idea of being Dusty Porn for this drag party and a making dress out of the porno magazines. So I said to him, like you're not using those, can I use those to make something?

Lily Narration: And this elaborate dress, made of old porn magazines was the first time he really created his own handmade drag look, persona and all.

Paul: So I had this visual of creating this sort of tutu out of multilayered accorded porn and tying it all together and having a corset and decollete area made out of the magazines. And what's fabulous is I don't have sewing skills so it was all duct tape,

honey. It was all duct tape and it was pink duct tape which I still use. And I'm telling you, put pink duct tape on almost anything and it looks great.

Lily Narration: Even before discovering dusty, Paul spent a lot of his life in this tension that I think a lot of us feel - do I fit in? Do I stand out? Can I seek validation for the ways I'm different?

Paul: Coming out as a gay man was one huge step in stepping into essential self and which also allowed me to realize any of the templates I thought I had to live by just probably aren't gonna line up for me so here we go, jumping off a cliff, with a skydiving kit. But many of the things in my life have felt like they've needed to be big risks because they've called me further and further away from maybe where I started. So to come out as a gay man. To learn the technique of a counter tenor - to sing in the high vocal range, I can tell you performing for people outside of the drag context you can see on people's faces like "what the fuck is this? Is this guy a fag?" It scared the shit out of me to get up and sing like that because I could see people squirm.

Lily Narration: And in each space Paul navigated as he came more and more into contact with these parts of himself, this concern about being accepted was present. Drag, for instance, is not universally accepted amongst gay men. So after Dusty's first appearance -

Paul: I remember I posted the photos, I was a bit worried about who might see them. I was a little edgy with the boyfriend at the time, like is he freaking out about this? Let me just say out loud it's no secret that for many gay men the idea of doing drag or the idea of dating someone that does drag is absolutely a deal breaker. So, put on a dress, perform as a drag performer, and it's a big old red flag for a lot of people. And I felt that at the time.

Lily Narration: And yet what Paul felt in terms of fear, was overshadowed by what he got out of bringing this part of himself forward in such a bold way.

Paul: It was some kind of aspect of play that I'd wanted to tap into and just kind of emerged out of me and I didn't know that it would become what it's become and this happens a lot in life. Like I moved to San Francisco twenty five years ago, little did I know I'd still be here. I probably thought I'd be out here three to five years. Same kind of thing. It just sort of emerged out of me, I pursued it, I created it. I created the beginnings of this persona.

Lily Narration: Like I said, we're often caught in this tension between fitting in and finding belonging. Seeking this in communities that share similar values and interests is kind of what we do. But no group can fully encompass the complexities of our individual selves.

As Dusty developed herself in the drag world, which was freeing in so many ways, yet again the unspoken rules of community, real or perceived, felt like another limitation.

Paul: I don't want to create too much of an energy that I'm pushing against something, but that can often be my story. And maybe that helps and motivates me so maybe that's not all bad. Most artists are pushing against something to some degree. Whether it be an inner critic, whether it be an introject from childhood of some thwarted dream they had that a parent didn't support, whether it be some cultural resistance, whatever. It feeds art so I can't say that all of that's bad. But there's been a little bit of that story because I often think you know what? I should be living in New York. I often think I'm in the wrong city as far as my drag aesthetic or my drag brand. At least when I want to do some of the material that's more esoteric.

Lily Narration: And this question of “do I belong here” was something Dusty faced when she competed in the California Gold Pageant early this year.

[\[Dusty Porn California Gold Pageant Clip plays in background\]](#)

Paul: Yeah, it felt like a huge risk. I'll first say that. Because it was all live sung. I wasn't able to do a sound or a mic check. Which is - as a musical theater and cabaret performer, that's kind of scary - especially since none of the other performers were singing live.

Lily Narration: Paul said live singing as opposed to lip syncing is one of those ways he pushes against the norm in San Francisco drag culture.

Paul: So that's why there is a sadness for me sometimes that the live sung drag is not as supported in this city and there's even some shows that don't allow the singing. I don't say that with any shade but it just means that I have to find the places where that's welcome but then it's like really you don't want that?

Lily Narration: And then there's the piece itself, conceptualized by Paul from the songs to the entire artistic aesthetic, the choreography, the props.

Paul: I decided for that number to create something that expressed beauty and that expressed innocence and expressed wonder. Those were sort of the big thematic felt words of the number. Well, in this town, what's valued most most often is camp and ridiculousness and filth. And I'm not saying any of those are bad. I support traditional pageant drag, I support live sung more musical theater drag, I support filth drag, I support all of it. But no question if you asked someone around the nation what's San Francisco drag about, they would probably tout those. And as a result I often feel a little bit unseen or misunderstood.

Lily Narration: But, Dusty went for it.

Paul: I created a medley of four songs. It's Pure Imagination from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory and that was live sung. And then that phases into a portion of The Aquarium from Sat Sons the Carnival which is a really beautiful ethereal piece of music and then that phased into a portion of O mio babbino caro from Puccini's Gianni Skeeke and that was live sung in my countertenor soprano voice. And then the final piece was When You Wish Upon a Star from Pinocchio. They all connect to beauty, wonder, and the sense of magic.

My friend puppet master Rich created some of the magic effects and I had my friends Katy Holt and Richard Sherwin like flap the giant gold gossamer wings as I sang the aria and so it all kind of - really what I say I love to do is to create mini operas that resonate in people. And my goal is to provide people with catharsis or to provide people with an experience of their own inner child or some aspect of play within themselves or joy.

What was really beautiful is it felt like everything kind of lined up because I was looking out in the audience as I was performing and you have those moments where you're both in the moment and you're expressing and telling a story and you also have some moments where you might pop out of your experience or out of your body and think - I wonder what kind of experience the audience is having? What was really lovely is I didn't have to do that nearly as much as usual. The audience was giving a lot of response. It was a very vibrant, loving audience, so I could just really be in the moment and feel like we were all riding a wave together.

Lily Narration: And wanting an audience to see you and understand you - that's normal. People talk about doing things just for yourself, but it's rarely that simple. We come into this world needing our caregivers to mirror us and reflect back what they're seeing with love and acceptance in order to grow up and be people in the world.

So there goes Dusty, taking all these risks, singing four challenging pieces, unsure if her style will even land with this crowd but trying to be present and really feeling that. And she wins.

Paul: My narrative changed with winning that crown, it really has changed. Because now I can feel like look I had a moment where I got valued externally and so now it can really be about connecting to my inner value. It really can be. Cuz sometimes you need a little hit from outside. But I don't want that to be what it's all about.

Lily Narration: It struck me how discovering drag and discovering Dusty Porn within Paul didn't just resolve this question of belonging. That there's still a fight.

Paul: Exactly. And that reminds me again of the fight within self sometimes. The fight of omg this sucks or the fight of I shouldn't sing live because I'm gonna crack or the fight of I should cover up my chest hair because you know people aren't gonna get that, the rest

of me looks like a female, like all of that. And because I'm a therapist I tend to overprocess things, God love us, and so therefore there is a struggle there sometimes.

Lily Narration: That interaction between self and other is a huge part of what shapes who we are. It's where we learn what parts we can bring forward and which parts are safer left out. Sometimes certain corners in our lives just don't provide the right audience. I struggle with that all the time. Who are the people that are really gonna to *get* this part of me? Who can I share this with? Expressing myself into the void, it's terrifying. I might go into my own process cave for a bit working on something creative, but when I come out, I want to share it. In some ways it's hard to feel like the experience was even real until I have other people to bounce it off of. Not everyone feels this way. Some people create for other reasons and get satisfaction from other places. But for me, a big part of self expression is to express TO someone and to have them respond.

One of the women I spoke to at the bar is a dancer. She said she doesn't think she can speak well but she wanted to create a piece that could convey something about her experiences working in Turkish restaurants, getting to know the people she'd become close to who'd immigrated to the United States, because they'd impacted her life.

Woman2: I don't think I could do justice speaking to someone or drawing a picture but I was able to - I recorded some audio of each of my coworkers, having them speak in turkish telling why they moved to sf and I have each of them send me a song that made them nostalgic for home, something. I came up with descriptive words for each person and we made dance moves based on those words.

Lily Narration: Communication, in whatever form, is always limited. In conveying one thing clearly, I made have to leave a lot out. Every expression - every conversation, dance piece, article, podcast episode, song, every painting - dances around some big complicated ideas and feelings that we're trying to synthesize. I'd argue that nothing can fully encompass every aspect of experience. But hopefully, an expression can contain something that's true in the moment.

Woman2: You never know with art, it might not come across the way you're imagining it, but that was one thing I did and it felt so good to do. I really enjoyed being able to think about musicality and how someone else perceives it, how I perceived it, personality traits, and how that comes across in dance like how you can do a dance move that looks really angry or timid - you can express physically with textures and timing so many things. It was probably the best way I could the fullness of my experience.

Lily Narration: Even though this piece was about other people, creating it and expressing her experience with others felt good, in part, because it was deeply tied to what made her, her.

It can be hard to put your finger on what it's like when everything lines up and you just feel like you. Paul experienced it on stage in his pageant when he was connecting both to himself and

the audience. Another woman I spoke to at the bar had her own musical way of describing what it's like when she's being herself.

Woman1: You know how music can sound flat? Or it could sound right. And the same thing kind of happens in my core and I'm assuming it's probably the same way for a lot of people, like when you're being honest it feels right. It might be scary, but it feels right. There's something not flat about it I guess. Or rich about it.

Lily Narration: I remember singing in choir when I was younger, how powerful it felt when all the harmonies came together and singing my note, I was enveloped in dozens of other voices that came together to make something so beautiful, I'd tear up almost every time. It kind of reminds me of having that expression of myself resonate with people around me.

Paul, Dusty, and I are at times literally giving a performance. But we're all performing, everyday, as we bring ourselves out into the world and interact with others. And one expression or another serves to bring certain aspects to the forefront, leaving other parts of ourselves in the darkened wings, waiting for their cue.

Lily: when people say just be yourself, what does that mean to you?

Woman2: Lately I've been like - what is that supposed to mean? like what do you mean just be myself? I'm just starting to learn who I am or I've been in a lot of situations in the last year or so that I've never been in and I'm navigating them and learning who am I in this situation? What kind person am I going to be?

Lily Narration: In 1960 British Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott introduced the concepts of true self and false self. Winnicott believed the false self was the result of potentials of the true self getting squashed. And I think the idea of potentials is really important here. Because I wonder, if we somehow existed in a vacuum with no outside societal influences, what would or could we become?

Paul: It reminds me of when I talk to actors about roles in general. Even when I was talking to friends back when I was maybe struggling to find expressions within some characters, they were like don't think that you can't be closer to who you are when you perform this role.

Lily Narration: Dusty, has done just that for Paul - given him an outlet for playing with and expressing parts that aren't all that appropriate to express all the time without having to reject or abandon them.

Paul: I've noticed very much that my need for attention outside of my drag persona and world is far less now. I feel like it's given me a place to put some things that I wasn't perhaps entirely comfortable with. narcissistic parts. Parts that want to be more sassy or wanna be more bitchy or wanna be more judgy. In experiencing it through Dusty I'm also

then able to reintegrate it in more soft ways or ways that feel more appropriate or more aligned with my non-drag persona, though again I am in drag 24/7 because my male drag is drag too.

Lily Narration: We're always existing in dialog with the outside and with our various inner selves. So the question then becomes, how squashed are your possibilities of expression? How constricted are you in your life. A true self may exist, but digging in our heels and saying "this is just who I am" is actually working against true self, which is much less static. True self absolutely includes playing dress up, putting on masks and trying them out in order to explore the further reaches of our inner worlds, attempting to access different voices we don't entirely know how to use.

So while I get this man's sentiment that being yourself means -

Man: It means don't pretend. Don't try to be somebody else.

Lily Narration: Thinking of Paul transforming into Dusty or the dancer embodying characters from her life, I actually think we can benefit from trying to be someone else. But for a different reason and with a different intention - from a place of play and experimentation as a means to expand your repertoire rather than out of insecurity and self rejection. In a sense, most of the way we are was acting at some point anyway.

Paul: I have to say what Rupaul said about how we're all born naked and the rest is drag - as soon as you do drag performance or if you do pretty intense Halloween type stuff, when you experience these other parts of yourself come forth through play and through dress and through drag or dress up, you realize just how much of every step you take throughout the day is really much more adaptive than you have any idea it is. Everything about the way I move. Everything about the way I step. Everything about the way I lift my arm and my hands - it's fascinating now. I'm not saying this to be like "I'm aware of everything" but just this piece of it opens up all these portals of awareness that this stuff isn't just "I'm me, I'm one thing, I'm this person, I'm Paul." It opens up all these portals of understanding about yourself and all of a sudden that all does feel very malleable. And that was a little scary at first actually.

Lily Narration: And Paul says this realization comes into his work as a therapist -

Paul: Because I understand just how malleable all that can be and I understand just how scary any kind of changes or opening up different parts can be for clients.

Lily: First I want to ask you -

Paul: SING LIVE?! I'm just kidding -

Lily: YES! That is actually what I was gonna ask!

Paul: Are you kidding?? [laughing]

Lily: What are you working on right now?

Paul: I'm totally fine with that. I notice the ego - like do I need to check my ego [laughing]
[Lily: check your ego girl] Girl check your ego. And it's very interesting because this in real time is bringing up what comes up in drag for me. This piece of the shame around bringing forth talent or the shame around sharing talent or the shame around, yeah people actually want to hear me sing? Ok there's the moment where I don't believe that's ok for me to want that. So just naming that.

Lily: I relate to that a million percent.

Paul: I'm gonna turn on my full nun right now

Lily: Ok full nun!

Paul: I literally almost have to prep my system to step into that because it's not the voice I've been using.

[Paul sings first few lines of "Climb Every Mountain" from *The Sound of Music*]

Paul: I think I totally changed the lyrics but that's a little bit - my neighbors are gonna be hitting on the wall pretty soon.

Lily Narration: Even without the contoured makeup, without the wig, and the butt and breast padding, and certainly without the nun's habit, sitting on the living room couch, Paul transformed into Dusty transforming into Mother Abbess from *The Sound of Music* right there in front of me. I felt the shift and I couldn't look away, the notes pounding in my chest. For a few seconds, I was there with someone else. This person is in Paul all the time but it's a special moment when he invites her to enter the room. To know Dusty is to know so much more of Paul.