



# TENOR IN *High* HEELS!

FROM PLAYING A MARINE IN *DOG FIGHT* TO TOURING WITH THE TEN TENORS, TOBY FRANCIS HAS FOUND HIS FEET – AND THE BOOTS TO MATCH! HE TELLS MATTHEW MYERS ABOUT HOW *KINKY BOOTS* BECAME THE PERFECT FIT.

**DNA:** Firstly, how does one prepare to wear kinky boots?

**Toby Francis:** Obviously I've never had to wear heels before so... as best one can! I do Pilates twice a week to strengthen my core, and gym three days, too, to make sure everything is strong and holding me up. I've actually got a pair of the boots at home and put them on every so often. I don't know if I'm meant to be putting them on, but I do.

**What is it about the *Kinky Boots* role that stands out for you?**

It's incredibly relatable to me. At the start, Charlie defines himself as a person by the things that he doesn't want and slowly transitions into a person defined by things he does want. I had a very similar experience when I was young because at one point in my early twenties I didn't know where to fit in. It's very easy to be negative and to make that part of who you are but eventually I came to be more positive. Charlie, to me, is incredibly relatable. And Charlie also sings high like me!

**So, you're a tenor?**

I call myself a "rock tenor". I was influenced by the likes of John Farnham, Jimmy Barnes and Steve Perry from Journey. I enjoy singing all of those '80s power ballads.

**But, is it true that you were also a punk?**

Oh, yeah. I'm a big Ramones fan and was into other punk bands like Millencolin and The Knock Backs. Then I started my own band with two of my friends in Canberra. I remember there'd be blood on my guitar because I played too hard and I would really thrash my voice.

### **Very punk!**

Yeah, but I never had the mohawk because I didn't have the right shaped head! I had a clipped cut and I'd wear T-shirts and sweat bands, which were big back in college.

### **So when you made your comparisons to Charlie in *Kinky Boots*, was this what you were referring to?**

Yeah, on a personal level, absolutely. When you're younger you have a lot of fuck-you attitude and I don't think you should ever lose all of that – but you should lose most of it. The other thing about the role of Charlie is how important it is to me due to the message at the heart of *Kinky Boots*. I got into musical theatre when I was quite young, and it's always been normal to have lots of gay friends around, and even though I'm not gay, I was called names in high school because I was in musical theatre. Some guys in high school realised they spent their weekends in locker rooms with a bunch of guys, while I spent my time in a dressing room with guys – and girls. It finally clicked for them that it was arbitrary.

### **You were called gay?**

Yeah, and when I was younger I used to get upset about it and then I realised that it was them who had the problem with it, especially as they were saying it in a negative way. Am I upset to be mistaken as gay? Absolutely not. I don't get offended because I don't think being gay is offensive.

### **The message of *Kinky Boots* sits well with you, then?**

The message is incredibly important on a large scale. The show has drag queens and a message of "just be" and acceptance. I also sang at the AFL Pride Game and that was so mainstream. The reason *Kinky Boots* won the Tony Awards is because of the story reaching a mainstream audience. On a personal level I relate but on a grander level, where it sits socially, is amazing.

### **As a Gen Y-er were you familiar with Cyndi Lauper's music before *Kinky Boots*?**

My mother is the biggest Cyndi fan. I grew up listening to her. I really like *Time After Time*.

### **Who's your diva?**

Celine Dion and Whitney Houston. They both have incredibly effortless voices. I find them very exciting as performers as well. When Whitney sang the national anthem at the 1991 Super Bowl it was amazing, and so consistent all the way through.

### **One of your acclaimed stage roles was playing a US marine in *Dogfight*. How did you prepare for that role?**

I did a lot of running. I wanted to get into really good shape but I got pneumonia a couple of weeks before we started and ended up very skinny. The director said it was perfect because looking back on those guys in Vietnam they weren't that fit. They were just young guys who were sent away to war. I was obsessed with that show and it was very challenging because I had never done what I considered an actor's role. For me, it had always been singing.

### **Many gay boys fantasise about dressing in military uniforms. Were you tempted to take the cast out to a gay bar?**

I think we would have been spotted pretty quickly because around Potts Point there are actual soldiers, and they would have known we were not real army!

### **When you do go to bars, do you get hit on?**

I don't really know. My ego would like to say I do but I don't know if I ever have. I think... maybe? I've been with my partner Lauren for 11 years so I'm so oblivious... but I hope so!

### **Who would you turn gay for?**

Oh, do you want the short answer or the long answer? I have a lot of dudes for that! Chris Pratt and Idris Elba. Chris Pratt is funny, smart and in incredible shape. Oh and John Krasinski, too. I could go on!

### **Yes, well, Chris Pratt in *Jurassic World* at the IMAX! For a gay man...**

For a gay man? Even for a straight man! I was thinking, "look at that guy!"

### **You could see he has a hot butt, right?**

Oh, absolutely! I think the point about attraction is how you actually find someone attractive, regardless of being straight or gay. I can see that

a guy's attractive, but whether he's funny for instance wouldn't change that opinion. But I can see how for women, something like that could change it. He could be attractive but not tick all the other boxes. Apparently studies have found that the more androgynous a face is, the more attractive it is to both genders, so I think we are just biological creatures that have to figure out who's attractive and who's not. I think any straight guy who says he can't tell that a guy is attractive is lying because you can always tell.

### **Is there a future role you'd love to play?**

Anything with a rock score! I would love to play Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I would also love to play in *American Idiot* and also *High Fidelity*, and I'm obsessed with *School Of Rock*. I'm not the right body type for it at the moment so I'll have to get back into the pizza!

### **Who has been your greatest influence?**

Professionally it would be Freddie Mercury as he was so effortless and charismatic. But, personally, without a doubt, David and Lisa Campbell. It was a week out of uni that I met them and as far as aspiring to where I want to go, David Campbell is a great example of that. I won the Cabaret Showcase a week after meeting them and David took me under his wing. Lisa considers me a little brother and they've been there for me the whole time. In fact, my partner Lauren and I are godparents to one of their twins.

### **Jocks, boxers or freeballing?**

I wear dad jocks! But mostly boxer briefs.

More: *Kinky Boots* is playing at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne.  
[www.kinkybootsthemusical.com.au](http://www.kinkybootsthemusical.com.au)

## WHO WOULD YOU TURN GAY FOR?

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