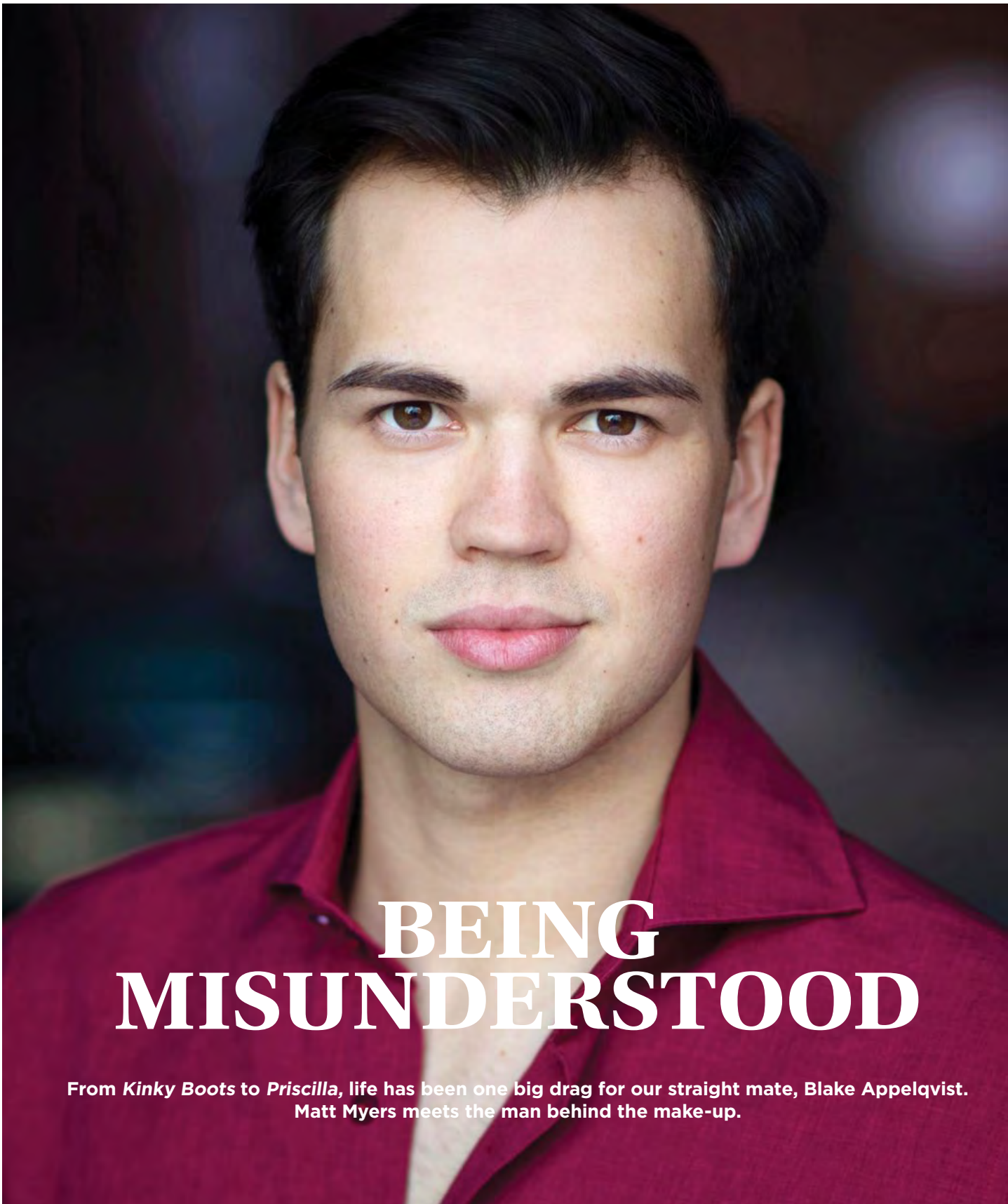




**STRAIGHT
MATE** /

BY MATTHEW MYERS



BEING MISUNDERSTOOD

From *Kinky Boots* to *Priscilla*, life has been one big drag for our straight mate, Blake Appelqvist. Matt Myers meets the man behind the make-up.

DNA: As a straight man playing a drag queen do you ever feel like a fish out of water?

Blake Appelqvist: I feel very privileged to have had the roles I've had. I've always felt included and everyone in this show knows what it's like to be an outsider and what it's like to bring someone into the fold. It's always like a family here.

You really are a brilliant drag queen. What do your family and friends think?

Why, thank you! My brother saw *Kinky Boots* about six times and brought his girlfriend and all his workmates and all of their mates. My parents are totally for it, too. In fact, my aunt was mistaken for one of the show's drag queens when she was walking to her car! [Laughs.] But she loved it. They had a ball. You can't *not* have a fun time at *Priscilla* – or *Kinky Boots*. There's just no way!

From an Angel in *Kinky Boots* to *Priscilla's* Miss Understood – has it been a smooth transition from one queen to another?

I'd say the character I played in *Kinky Boots* was very different to the one in *Priscilla*. They're obviously both camp and bubbly, but I like how Miss Understanding really owns the stage. She feels more like an authentic Australian drag queen. She gives the audience sass and doesn't take any nonsense.

What about with the drag queen make-up? You must be an expert by now!

I certainly learned a lot on *Kinky Boots* doing eight shows a week, but what's interesting is that by the end, our make-up artist/designer Connie, was very comfortable with my ability in changing the process from *Kinky Boots* to match the aesthetics of *Priscilla*. It's more '90s – thin, high brows – and closer to the style in the film.

The stage show of *Priscilla* is now 10 years old and the movie is over 20; why do you think the story still resonates, even with those outside the LGBTIQ world?

Well, all three of the queens feel like outsiders, and I think anyone in or out of the LGBTIQ community can understand what that feels like. That also includes some of the show's other characters, such as Shirly the burly bartender who doesn't think she's good enough, and the queens inspire and give her confidence. A lot of people can relate to feeling alone or outside the norm.

Everyone imagines that backstage at *Priscilla* it would be a lot of camped-up frivolity. Is it?

It's everything you imagine and more! It's ridiculous. We're dressed as cupcakes and paint bushes and there's make-up and glitter flying around everywhere.

So, like football's Mad Mondays, minus the showers!

[Laughs.] We do have "muck-up matinee". Once through a contract there's always a muck-up matinee where something goes wrong – not by our own fault, of course! One time we tried to paint our nails during interval, and we didn't wait for them to dry. When you touch anything with wet nails... well, long story short, I looked like a zebra! My stockings were covered with lovely stripes.

While in *Kinky Boots*, you and the cast really got behind the Yes same-sex marriage campaign. What was your experience of that?



DNA: IF YOU WERE GAY, WHO WOULD BE THE ONE?

Blake: That's easy. I love Frank Ocean. His music is incredible. He's one of several openly gay singers in the R&B/pop community. He's cool and good-looking. There's something sexy about a really good singer.

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Blake (right) as Miss Understood backstage at *Priscilla* with DNA's Matt Myers.

Apart from it being a dark point in our history, it was really comforting to see so much support from friends and strangers for the Yes campaign. You don't realise just how much support is out there until it's constantly in your social media feed. It was a weirdly sad yet uplifting time.

Growing up, did you witness homophobia?

I grew up in Canberra. When you grow up in a certain place you learn that, unfortunately, that can be the normal behavior. There was a lot of that. For me, being a guy who is camp and who performs, it could have been an issue but being 190cm [six-foot-three] I didn't get bullied, but my generation coined the phrase "that's so gay," which is awful – it's awful! In 2018 people are more vocal about that phrase not being right.

Who's your diva?

Beyonce, especially after her performance at Coachella. She's been changing the game since I was first introduced to music and I really love the *Lemonade* album. She's the queen!

Being a dancer, what do you do for fitness?

I do it all on stage! The show is a lot of cardio and if we're not on stage we're back stage getting changed into some elaborate costume, which the whole show is full of. Other than that, for fitness I usually run the dog around the Tan [Melbourne's Botanic Gardens track].

Is there a dream stage role for you?

That would be the lead in *Dear Even Hansen*. The role is what I'm most drawn to, but the show itself is similar to *Priscilla* in that its core message is, "You are good enough and worthy." I like shows that have a very strong message.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career so far?

There's so many. I worked with Caroline O'Connor in The Production Company's *Funny Girl* and it felt like I was in the presence of a truly great world performer. I feel the same with Tony Sheldon in *Priscilla*. It's such a privilege to work with them and to see them work.

There must be slips and spills with your type of performance. Have you had any memorable wardrobe malfunctions?

There's a costume piece that I'm supposed to throw off-stage, and sometimes it will hit something instead, and just stay there. So, this one time, I panicked and death dropped [a backward theatrical fall]. But I grabbed it, got pulled off stage, and received one of the biggest applauds I've ever had! It ended up being one of the worst things and the best things to happen. It was one of the most satisfying pieces of theatre.

Briefs, boxers or free-ball?

Briefs, but boxers when I want to chill.

And, like most performers, do you find wearing a dance belt an odd experience?

Oh, yes, it's something you never get used to. No matter how many times you wear it, but we have to wear them. All the boys wear them because that's where our microphones sit as well. Taking them off is a euphoric experience!

MORE: *Priscilla Queen Of The Desert: The Musical* is playing around the country. Go to priscillathemusical.com.au for bookings.