

Changing Normal

The Storyteller as Culture Bearer, Researcher, and Change Agent

Allison Downey with David Novak

In *Changing Skins: Folktales about Gender, Identity and Humanity*, Milbre Burch challenges the binary construction of gender, advocating for gender fluidity in the place of gender dichotomy. Performed during the 2013 National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, *Changing Skins* is refreshingly brave in terms of its contemporary content and dynamic form when compared to typical performances for the festival audience. The form matches the content: stories about gender fluidity are presented with genre fluidity.

Burch defines *Changing Skins* as “performed research,” a blending of platform storytelling and research. While research is common in preparation for telling stories, the research and researcher are rarely the focus of the storytelling event. Likewise, in the world of research, traditional stories are rarely considered valid, factual data. Research is based on logical, analytical thinking. Story is based on narrative, metaphorical thinking. The storyteller asks you to suspend your disbelief, the researcher asks you to address your belief.

As “performed research,” *Changing Skins* is not a treatise, fixed and didactic, but rather an ongoing search for answers to a contemporary social issue. From the Middle French of the fifteenth century, “research” means “the act of searching closely.” As a verb, “to research” is “to seek out, search closely.” The act of research

is inherently a quest. Burch's research is the narrative through line that ignites the dramatic action of the piece, and Milbre Burch, as "Milbre-the-Researcher," is the questing hero.

Changing Skins was performed at the International Storytelling Center theatre, an intimate, ninety-five-seat theatre with a modified thrust stage and shallow proscenium providing offstage areas to the right and left. Upon entering the theatre, we knew we were in for something different. Framed photographs of gender-bending youth were displayed from the aisles to the stage, where they defined a semicircular playing space. Burch entered from the wings carrying her script, walked to center stage, and announced to the audience that this is a work in progress. There had not been time to adjust her blocking to the stage, and a mistake might trip up the text. What we will experience is ongoing research, and we shouldn't miss a word. With that, she placed the script downstage center for her reference, if needed. Although she did not refer to the text again, this simple gesture broke the theatrical fourth wall and invited the audience into her process. We were on this journey with her and a work in progress became an adventure. According to Burch, "The script was present as a Brechtian reminder that research and script development are ongoing, living processes."

At the top of the show, Burch questioned "the mechanisms of cultural bias that pit men and women against one another and ostracize anyone who exists in the liminal—ambiguous—spaces in between those designations." She acknowledged the lens through which she approaches this research, using personal narrative to do so, setting up the stakes for her character. The format is crucial to how the content will be perceived. Burch's choices created an environment conducive to changing minds.

Peter Alsop's "It's Only a Wee Wee" was a playful introduction to the topic of gender construction. Burch entered the stage for the last verse and invited the audience to sing along:

*It's only a wee wee so what's all the fuss?
It's only a wee wee so why do you watch?
It's only a wee wee and everyone's got one.
There's more to life than your crotch!*

Burch's opening direct address picked up where the song left off:

When a child is born, what is the first question anyone asks: Is it a boy or a girl? From that accident of anatomy, everything else about a human being's life begins to be directed. . . . Before you can make your mark in the world . . . you are judged by what's between your legs—something most people never see.

This playful opening elicited laughter at the preposterousness of the hype around our sex, our gender. The laughter relaxed us, disarmed us, and allowed us to safely question unexamined beliefs. We empathized with her in the intimacy of her introduction to a work in progress. The carefully constructed audience engagement allowed the audience to walk *with* Burch in this journey. We made discoveries *as* the character of “Milbre-the-Researcher” did and, therefore, became much more invested in the outcome of her quest. Through reenacting her process of grappling with the questions, Burch invited the audience to grapple with the questions as well, not simply to wait for the answers. At one point she stepped into the house and held hands with the audience.

Educational researchers who study cognition and learning will tell you that questioning and analyzing the process of learning *while in* the process of learning (metacognition) is the most effective approach to profound learning: effective learning is not just the manipulation of information so that it is integrated into an existing knowledge base; it also involves directing one's attention to what has been assimilated, understanding the relationship between the new information and what is already known, understanding the processes that facilitated this, and being aware when something new has actually been learned (Flavell, Green, and Flavell).

Reflection is crucial to effective learning and effective teaching. It is equally beneficial for storytelling as advocacy. Burch engaged the audience in “meta-storytelling,” directing its attention to the connections between stories, deconstructing the stories, and acknowledging when discoveries are made, in the moment. We were immersed in the world of the story, then pulled out for reflection that directed us to another set of questions, thus propelling the plot forward. Burch's reflections allowed the content to more profoundly affect the audience. For instance, “Milbre-the-Researcher” explained:

The world over, traditional cultures have recognized and made room for a variety of gender expressions. . . . So why do so many folk think only in terms of the outermost, opposite ends of a gender continuum, the points marked “he” and

“she”? And why are we such unquestioning foot soldiers in the War between the Sexes?

If the goal of *Changing Skins* was changing minds, such questioning is an important involvement strategy.

It is not easy to separate the content from the form of *Changing Skins* because they are interrelated. Form and content together explore the “problem” of what is considered normal (“heteronormative”) and what might be imagined as a new normal (“gendernormative”). Burch “searches closely” for acceptance of gender fluidity in traditional stories from around the world and then places these findings in their sociological context. Not only does she create a fluid relationship between research and storytelling, she also employs a variety of formats that seamlessly weave into one another (genre blending): personal, true, and traditional tales; historical, sociological, and zoological data; Internet anecdotes and jokes. This variety serves to “triangulate the data.”

The first traditional story, “The Girl Who Became a Boy,” provided a cultural representation of gender fluidity. Burch finds the story in Armenia, Albania, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Greece, India, and Chile. She went on to present multiple gender-bending stories from around the world and through the ages until we were convinced of a new normal in gender fluidity. At this point, she told the story of the Ice Bear, a story about being forced to destroy your true self for acceptance. We switched from the traditional story and the personal narrative format to historical fact. It is only then that we learned of a Navajo teenage boy who, if he had lived at another time, would have been celebrated for his gender fluidity but instead was murdered for his gender “otherness.”

While the stories had considerable impact, the direct musings of “Milbre-the-Researcher” grappling with questions and discoveries in between (and as a result of) the stories was equally effective. The moments in between stories were not merely transitions; they plotted the main character’s journey to discovery. Through the presented research we discovered that a greater anatomical diversity exists in nature than is represented by a binary construction of gender. In an article for *Storytelling Magazine* (“Changing Skins, Changing Minds”), Burch notes that “animals engage in all types of sexual expression—including gender-bending presentation, and same-sex courtship, pair-bonding, sex and co-parenting—but human beings alone respond to homosexuality with aggression” (26–27). This discovery fuels her quest. “Milbre-the-Researcher” described the roots of her advocacy:

Statistically speaking, one in ten of our children self-identifies as Other than heterosexual. In response to soaring suicide rates among transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth, it is my “mother’s heart” that led me to tumble headfirst into this rabbit hole in search of ways to make our culture a little bit safer for all of its children.

Who can argue with a “mother’s heart” or saving children? She spoke of wholesome family values. Apparently the audience in Jonesborough thought so, too. If there was a question about the readiness of the festival audience to address this contemporary content, the packed house suggested they were. It is noteworthy that a standing-room-only crowd waited in line to talk with Burch following the performance. One mother of an hermaphroditic child emotionally thanked Burch for the performance.

In an e-mail exchange, Burch explained that her intentions were for the audience to “wonder with me,” “to become aware,” “to question.” This is in stark contrast to didactic storytelling that provides answers, with the moral to the story neatly wrapped up at the end.

Toward the conclusion of *Changing Skins*, Burch shared a quote from a movie about the murdered Navajo boy: “The bravest choice you can make is to be yourself.” Burch did not tie up the piece with “the moral of the story.” Instead, employing the tools of meta-storytelling, she left us with a series of questions:

“How many of us are that brave? . . . I wonder what stories we shall choose to tell the young people in our lives about the intimate landscapes of their bodies, their minds, as they become their true selves? Wonder with me, if you will.”

I wonder in what other ways we may “change normal” and use genre-blending storytelling to be effective agents of change. Wonder with me, if you will.

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