

Cercle Hermaphroditos

By

Shualee Cook

Cast:

Laureline Reeves - trans female, 38, mastermind and ringleader of the Cercle Hermaphroditos

Ambrose Carlton - trans male, mid 20s, prominent "gynander" looking to marry on his own terms

Bertram Templeton - cis male, 30s, Ambrose's brother, active mover in the banking world

Jennie June - trans female, 22, college student and aspiring author

Phyllis Angevine - trans female, 33, queen of the Rialto "androgynes"

Plum Gardner - trans female, 23, clerk by day, ingenue by night

Officer Leahy - cis male, 30's, an old hand at the beat

Officer Clark - cis male, late 20's, straight laced and by the book

A Gentleman and a Man, played by the actors playing Leahy and Clark

Setting: Rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos, an apartment on the upper floors of Columbia Hall, 32 Cooper Square, New York City; the ballroom below; a park bench on the Rialto

Time: Fall of 1895

Note: Throughout the script, *italics* isolate private conversations between two people from the chatter around them.

Act One

SCENE ONE

The rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos. Stage left and center, the main parlor. Stylish, tastefully decorated, with the occasional flamboyant touch. Stage right, the kitchen. Bright and cheerful. In the parlor, LAURELINE REEVES, in a dress that manages to be elegant and sensible all at once, arranges a table for tea, taking pleasure in precision. A knock at the door.

LAURELINE

Everything in its place, and just in time. (to the door) Yes?

VOICE

Carlton to see Mr. Roland Reeves?

LAURELINE

Alone?

VOICE

As we'd discussed.

Laureline looks through the door's peephole, is satisfied. She opens the door to reveal AMBROSE CARLTON, wearing a bulky coat over a rather plain woman's dress with curls down his shoulders. Laureline ushers him into the room, and closes the door behind him.

LAURELINE

You'll pardon the excessive discretion - I know throwing caution to the wind sounds grand, but it mostly just ends with you chasing down the street trying to get it back.

AMBROSE

You've always been a wise one, Roland.

LAURELINE

Come now, (gestures to her female attire) I'm already dressed.

AMBROSE

Yes, I beg your pardon.

He takes her hand, kisses it.

AMBROSE

Laureline.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, dear. Lovely to see you.

AMBROSE

And speaking of dress, you won't mind if I make myself comfortable as well?

LAURELINE

I insist! The door is closed, so anything goes. One of the far too many mottos of this place. We really ought to edit more thoroughly.

Ambrose quickly takes off the coat and undoes his dress.

AMBROSE

I don't know. I carry several mottos myself. For instance-

He slips off the dress to reveal a man's shirt, trousers and waistcoat underneath.

AMBROSE

Always come prepared.

He detaches the curled long hair with a flourish and is fully himself.

LAURELINE

That's quite handy. It tends to be a bit more difficult the other way around. May I take your coat and things?

Ambrose pulls out a morning jacket from inside his coat, puts it on.

AMBROSE

That depends. Will I get them back?

LAURELINE

With your taste in women's apparel, absolutely.

Laureline takes his coat, dress, and petticoats; hangs them in a closet nearly bursting with dresses.

LAURELINE

Your flair for suits, however, is impeccable. Though a touch casual for later on. There's to be a masked ball downstairs. Should be quite the jolly affair, if you care to join us?

AMBROSE

A masked ball in a brothel. Doesn't that create problems when it comes to billing?

LAURELINE

The sort of landlords that run fairy brothels downstairs will gladly accept cash from whatever name you choose to give them. How do you think I rented these rooms in the first place?

AMBROSE

The question I'd ask is why risk dealing with that sort of gangster at all?

LAURELINE

Because, as the scripture says, woman cannot live by fellatio alone.

AMBROSE

Your scripture says that? I've clearly been going to the wrong church.

Laureline gestures him over to the table, where they sit down.

LAURELINE

By which I mean that the Underworld tolerates androgynes because of what we do for men. Downstairs, we're an exotic sexual delicacy, which is all well and good so far as it goes. And in certain well-endowed cases, it goes quite far indeed. But it leaves precious few moments to explore one's feminine nature in the flow of the everyday. What am I like as a woman just reading a book? Chatting with friends with no men to impress? Preparing tea? (gestures with the teapot) May I?

AMBROSE

Please.

She pours him tea.

LAURELINE

Sugar?

AMBROSE

None, thanks.

LAURELINE

If we are ever to know ourselves as whole people, we need room to do it in. And if we're going to be accepted by the world as more than circus freaks, we must show them that we're whole.

AMBROSE

So this place is your solution. The Cercle Hermaphroditos.

LAURELINE

Yes. Room for us to just be.

AMBROSE

I'm on a similar quest myself. But fellows like me offer the Underworld nothing, so there's nowhere for us to go. This year, I've had two acquaintances forced into marriages so dreadful they decided ending it all was the only way out. (pause) One even succeeded.

LAURELINE

I'm so sorry.

AMBROSE

I don't intend to end up that way myself. So I've devised a plan, the long and the short of which is this: I've come to your wonderful club in search of a bride.

LAURELINE

From our constituency?

AMBROSE

Of course. It's legally binding that way. All the clergy wants is to see a man and a woman standing in front them. Which one decides to be which behind closed doors is rather out of their jurisdiction.

LAURELINE

So in public, you'd be happy man and wife-

AMBROSE

And in private, we would be the same, but to our specifications, not theirs.

LAURELINE

There is a certain mathematical elegance to it, but would this arrangement leave you entirely satisfied in ... more intimate matters?

AMBROSE

When it comes to the bedroom, I'm strictly a Free Trade man. Whatever you happen to be supplied with, I have a demand for it.

LAURELINE

That's quite lucky.

AMBROSE

But I can't be the only one. The ladies here, are physical men always their preferred partners?

LAURELINE

Most of us keep hunting for our own personal Adonis, but there are a few who are more flexible.

AMBROSE

And one could find them if one were persistent enough?

LAURELINE

Provided a proper introduction to our sisterhood. Which is where I come into your plan, I suppose?

AMBROSE

Yes. What do you think of it?

LAURELINE

It's brilliant in a practical sort of way, but there's not much poetry in it, is there?

AMBROSE

It's all poetry so long as you know what poetry is. Or do you think it would be better if Shakespeare wrote, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day AND an autumn morning AND a winter's evening AND a spring afternoon?" No, he had room in the line for ten syllables and one metaphor, and he damn well stuck with them. Poetry is not mere excess of feeling. It's great passion rendered precisely, within a particular form. And that, my dear Laureline, is exactly what I am proposing.

LAURELINE

Put that way, I like it immensely. So yes, I'll gladly introduce you to our merry band. They should start trickling in any moment now. It's the weekend, so we're guaranteed Jennie June. And of course, Phyllis seldom misses a chance to- what do you tend to fancy in a girl, Ambrose?

AMBROSE

The usual sort of thing - Vivacious, yet delicate. And of course, beauty never hurts.

LAURELINE

Right. When you meet Phyllis, just remember that I wouldn't necessarily recommend her for you.

AMBROSE

Ah, a worshipper of Adonis, you mean?

LAURELINE

Among other things.

A knock at the door, obviously coded, with a specific number of knocks in a particular pattern. Laureline gets up to open the door.

AMBROSE

Laureline, wait. Before you let someone else in, there's something -

LAURELINE

We don't keep people waiting in the hall here. The less time to be seen by prying eyes, the better.

Ambrose sighs as Laureline opens the door to reveal JENNIE JUNE, looking quite serious in fastidious men's attire.

JENNIE

Have you read it yet?

LAURELINE

I'm quite well, thanks. And you?

JENNIE

If the dialogue you expect from me is that dull, I don't know why I want your opinion on the book in the first place.

LAURELINE

All right, if you'd rather I keep it to myself-

Ambrose gets up to introduce himself just as Jennie whirls back around to Laureline.

JENNIE

(overacting excitement)

Dearest Laureline, so divine to see you! Come here, my darling! (embraces her with exaggerated enthusiasm and kisses her on the cheek) You don't know how dreadful it's been to be without you! How are you? How's the family? How's life? You look lovely. Have you done something new with your hair? I so adore your dress! You really must tell me all about it! (catches her breath and reverts to her previous serious manner) Is that better?

LAURELINE

Quite. Thank you.

Jennie starts taking off her hat and jacket. Ambrose steps forward to assert himself. Jennie hands him her hat and jacket, attention still riveted to Laureline.

JENNIE

(to Laureline)

So what did you think?

LAURELINE

I'll collect my thoughts while you get dressed.

JENNIE

You have to collect them? Is it because my prose whisked them off to new worlds, or sent them fleeing in terror?

Laureline pushes Jennie toward the other rooms with a laugh.

LAURELINE

Go!

JENNIE

(as she exits)

All right, but I expect in-depth analysis on my return!

Laureline notices Ambrose standing there, staring at the clothes in his hands. She takes them and hangs them in the closet.

LAURELINE

I'm terribly sorry. I should have explained. We wait to introduce our members as their true selves here.

AMBROSE

Of course. How many members do you have?

LAURELINE

About twenty, but you'll rarely see them all together. A score of ladies trying to stuff their real lives into the margins makes for odd hours.

The coded knocking again. Laureline answers and ushers in PHYLLIS ANGEVINE, a stunning beauty even when tamped down in male drag, which still manages to be bright and fanciful. She carries four large hat boxes.

PHYLLIS

Laureline, darling, such a joy and relief to see your smiling face again.

LAURELINE

There are few who make me smile quite like you.

They kiss each others' cheeks.

LAURELINE

Now that's what I call a proper hello. Can I help you with some of those?

PHYLLIS

Hoping to sneak a peek? You'll see in good time! But honestly, you're going to love them! (to Ambrose, on her way out) And I'm not quite sure who you are yet, but you'll love them too.

Phyllis disappears into another room. Laureline joins Ambrose at the table again.

AMBROSE

Well, something to look forward to.

LAURELINE

You're quite certain about this? There's still time to retreat while they lace their corsets.

AMBROSE

Is there a reason why I should?

LAURELINE

Gynanders and androgynes may share a common goal, but that doesn't make us the most natural bedfellows.

AMBROSE

Yes, we tend to worry that you find us to be overbearing bores.

LAURELINE

And we worry that you find us to be frivolous ninnies.

AMBROSE

Which is why I'd prefer you not mention my ... physical disposition to your friends.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, dear-

AMBROSE

Not just yet.

LAURELINE

I established the Cercle Hermaphroditos as a place where the whole truth is spoken. You're welcome here, but hiding who you are goes against the entire-

AMBROSE

Not hiding, Laureline. Merely saving that information for when it is pertinent.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, really-

AMBROSE

I'm merely asking for the chance to go about my search without all the baggage of what your ladies expect gynanders to do or not do. That's all.

LAURELINE

And you'll tell them before you engage in a relationship of any kind?

AMBROSE

Of course. How else could I hope to make it permanent?

LAURELINE

All right. I'll introduce you as my friend, which you are, and let them make of you what they will. But if anyone asks me the question right out, I'm not going to lie for you.

AMBROSE

That's more than fair.

He holds out his hand. Laureline shakes it.

LAURELINE

When do you plan to begin?

AMBROSE

Immediately. There's someone in pursuit of me now who's a good match so far as my family's concerned, and they're likely to insist on it this time. That makes a very small window of opportunity to secure a life I want, and I'll be damned if it closes before I've made a go of it.

LAURELINE

Well then - a toast!

Laureline grabs a small flask out of her handbag, pours into each of their teacups.

LAURELINE

To jumping through open windows.

AMBROSE

To graceful landings on the other side.

They clink their teacups together and drink.

Jennie enters in a fashionable dress, a good deal less serious in her manner. Laureline and Ambrose stand up.

LAURELINE

Ah, and here we are. Jennie, allow me to introduce my good friend, Ambrose Carlton. Ambrose, this is Jennie June.

Jennie offers her hand, which Ambrose takes with a small bow.

JENNIE

Bon soir, monsieur.

AMBROSE

Bon soir, madame.

JENNIE

(a nod of approval)

French. Meine sehr geliebten junge Herr, wie geht's bei Ihnen?

AMBROSE

Ganz gut.

JENNIE

(another nod)

And German. I miei amici, siete amati da me.

AMBROSE

I'm afraid you've got me there. I never quite took to Italian.