

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Transparent Soloways

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, September 4th, 2019

Jill Soloway is the writer-director who created the Amazon series *Transparent* (2014-2019), inspired by their father coming out as transgender in 2011. The 2018 memoir *She Wants It: Desire, Power, and Toppling the Patriarchy* starts with a phone call Jill receives from their parent, Hari Soloway, a psychiatrist, from their hometown of Chicago, “Are you sitting down?” It continues with the story of how the author explores the experience of trans women, befriends the trans community, depicts the life of a Jewish family, in the semi-autobiographical TV series, that ran four seasons, and came to a halt when Jeffrey Tambor, who played Mort/Maura Pfefferman, or Moppa as the family calls their dad in real life, was accused of [inappropriate behavior](#) in November 2017. Creators and cast regrouped and decided to produce a two-hour musical finale, rather than a full season, with songs written by Faith Soloway, Jill’s sister. It premieres on September 27, [watch trailer here](#).



Cast of *Transparent* (c) Amazon

Judith Light plays the mother, Gaby Hoffmann is the younger sister, Amy Landecker the older sister, Jay Duplass the brother, Alexandra Billings is Maura’s best friend, Kathryn Hahn, who had acted in Soloway’s *Afternoon Delight* (2013) and *I Love Dick* (2017), returns as the rabbi.



Jill Soloway (c) Magnus Sundholm-HFPA 2015

During that period, Jill Soloway underwent a personal transition from straight or cisgender woman, married to a man, Bruce Gilbert, mother of two sons, Felix, 11, and Isaac, 23, from a previous relationship, to lesbian, to trans. She now uses the singular they/their pronouns.

I have been intrigued by this show from the start, you may read my 2015 article [Transgender made Transparent](#).

In 2016 I attended an on stage conversation between Jill Soloway and former lover, poet Eileen Myles, at the Billy Wilder Theatre. [Watch video here](#).



Elisa Leonelli, Jill Soloway © Armando Gallo-HFPA 2017

As a journalist in the Hollywood Foreign Press, I interviewed Jill several times, and recently with sister Faith.

Q. Jill, did you express your own transition to gender queer, no longer identifying as a woman, through the character of the younger sister Ali?

A. Yes, working on the show for me, getting to know a whole bunch of trans people, including non-binary people, I learnt that there are people who identify as a woman, people who identify as a man, and people who identify as both, neither or either. And that seemed great to me that you can be in-between. The idea that I could be a little male, a little female, both or neither, started to feel very familiar to me, it felt like an emotional relief and it became more and more true. So I was able to show Ali's transition to Ari, give them the same journey. That's part of the fun of being a creator, that you can test things out on your characters before you do them in real life.



Jill and Faith Soloway (c) Armando Gallo-HFPA 2019

Q. Faith, you resemble the older sister, as well as the brother on the TV show *Transparent*. Are these characters based on you?

A. Yes, I would say that we Soloways are extremely close to the Pfeffermans. We see older sister Sarah, throughout the arc of the seasons, struggling with her sexuality, and that's always been a question for both of us. I was actually out as gay from a young age, I was the original queer person, so I wrote a song called "I Was a Lesbian First." As a child, I was a tomboy, and I was very depressed growing up, being gay and not being able to be out. I'm wondering, had I had the language that these kids have today, if I would look at transitioning as an option to be in the world as a boy. As women, we are allowed to wear men's clothes and express a male gender, so I had that fluidity to figure that out; but it's the young people that are helping the older people to name our genders or a lack of gender. So it's been an interesting journey for me too.



Transparent-Judith Light, Jay Duplass, Gaby Hoffmann, Amy Landecker (c) Amazon

Q. Jill, as one of the founders of the Time's Up movement, how did you deal with the accusations of sexual harassment brought against Jeffrey Tambor by three trans women working on your show?

A. I remember in one day being at a Time's Up meeting with all these women, writing on a board what consequences would we like to bring to Hollywood, unlock all NDAs (Non Disclosure Agreements) and all this power, topple the patriarchy, 50/50 by 2020. Then later that day going back to work and finding out that we ourselves, had had the same thing befall our show. So that was incredibly traumatic and painful, because as a cast we all cared about each other, like a family. In some ways, it is like the stages of grief with death, and that's why the *Transparent* movie was such an amazing catalyst for us, because sometimes you're sobbing and sometimes you're laughing at the absurdity of what your life has turned out to be. So we feel lucky that, as a group of actors, writers, musicians, we actually had this opportunity to do something that was a creative expression of our mourning, and we came up with a joyful ending.

Q. Do you see a big change happening in the interaction between men and women, since the explosion of the #MeToo movement?

A. Yes, the world is really changing for all cisgender men. I look at the revolution happening everywhere, not just in our show, and I'm comforted by the fact that every single institution is

reckoning with the relationship between gender, power and patriarchy. What we learned is that, if you're a man and you're white, please make sure you are getting consent, note that women may not say no, when you want to hug them, because we live in patriarchy, and people of color may not say no, because we live in a white supremacy. So we have to find our way into a new morality ahead of us, because it has been a moral reckoning, and not be defensive about the ways in which we've crossed those boundaries in the past, because we all have. It's only been about two years, and we're just at the beginning of a transition that continues to shock and surprise. I feel that anybody who has power and privilege has to be willing to strongly look at it and address their own power and privilege. We should start to really push ourselves day in and day out and say, who would I be if I wasn't white or if I wasn't a man?

Q. Are you optimistic that our society will continue to evolve towards inclusiveness, despite the major setback of the Trump era of intolerance and racism?

A. That's the shock, that we're moving forward and getting less tolerant; but I have to feel optimistic, because we're all gathering and galvanizing around what we know to be true. We have to expose the way that fascism uses otherizing for power, that when you feel bad, fascism can give you somebody to hate and blame, then you feel better; then people are sacrificed to this hierarchy of the in and the out, the good and the bad, the white and the black. It seems simple enough that, as artists, we should be able to tell stories about it in a way that communicates globally, and our media platforms have the ability to do that now. So, if we can hit on the right way of talking about love, about tolerance, about modernism, about progressivism, and how they need to go together, I believe that, with the kind of technology that we have, with this social media and streaming, where the whole globe is talking to each other, we can use art to do that.



For a short video interview with Jill Soloway on CBS This Morning, where “she” explains “their” transition to non-binary and the book title, *She Wants It*, [click on this link](#).

For Faith Soloway singing “I Was a Lesbian First,” before she introduces her sibling Jill interviewed by Favianna Rodriguez and joined by Amy Landecker, at the JCCFS, Jewish Community Center in San Francisco, [click on this link](#).

On September 28, Jill Soloway will receive the Equality Visibility Award from Equality California, “for their transformative work increasing representation of transgender and nonbinary people on television and empowering a generation of LGBTQ artists.”

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