

Tuning in to yourself: Finding “you” on the screen

s an Asian trans person, finding representation on screen is rare and beautiful. It was even rarer in the days of VHS tapes, so we took what we could get, even if it wasn't meant to be for queer audiences. Here's one such film and how it shaped the writer's life.

Art imitates life, and vice versa. We look for pieces of ourselves in the characters on the screen to find a connection. In some way, we live through these characters. We relate to their struggles and find assurance in their triumphs. When the protagonist wins in the end, we also want that for ourselves.

I'm a cusp millennial – old enough to remember a time before the internet, but young enough to accept social media as a third arm. I grew up in the late 80s and 90s, before the discussion around gender became mainstream. As a third culture kid, or “TCK”, I spent my formative years moving from country to country, always an outsider. It didn't help that I was largely isolated from pop culture and gadgets. My only access to films early on were rented VHS tapes curated by my mother. While my local peers had satellite TV and the latest video games, I had *Bambi* on repeat.

Despite – or maybe because of – my lack of coolness and limited access to pop culture, what little I could get my hands on was devoured and permanently seared into my impressionable mind.

Still, with so many “otherness” points to my name, I couldn't draw parallels to the characters in any of the kid-friendly movies I watched. These characters were representations of distant and imaginary lives, where mysteries are solved in time for dinner and children are trained ninjas. (Yes, I also believed I was a ninja, but that's beside the point). There was no “me” on the screen, no little trans boy, until I watched *Something Special*.

Speaking of movies, here's a little commercial break list of 10 movies/documentaries you might want to check out. Some address serious gender-related issues, and some are just here for fun.

Disclosure (2020)

She's the Man (2006)

Tomboy (2018)

Cowboys (2020)

Super Deluxe (2019)

Joyland (2022)

Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001)

Beautiful Boxer (2001)

Ma Vie En Rose (1997)

Tangerine (2015)

Back to the story. I have no idea how *Something Special* managed to pass the mother censorship board, but the stars were aligned. On the cover of the tape was a cartoon of a feminine presenting person, holding her pants out in front of her. Her face bore an expression of bewilderment, as if there was a little something she was not expecting in those pink pants. Was it a frog? Or *gasp...* a peepee?? I was dying to find out. I knew I wouldn't be disappointed either way.

By today's standards the film hasn't aged well at all, with its dated views on gender roles, and denim-vested school toughies. But this movie came into my life exactly when I needed it.

Milly Niceman (very realistic name) is a 14-year-old tomboy who rebels against traditional gender roles and wishes she was a boy so she could do whatever she wants (me!). Her mother's well-meaning attempts to guide her towards dresses and more socially accepted gendered interests are greeted with disdain (relatability factor: VERY HIGH).

I was hooked. Milly was as close as I had ever gotten to seeing myself in a fictional character.

Then, a miracle happens that kicks off the rest of the film, something that I wished so hard in my little trans boy heart would happen to me. Milly's best friend's little brother, Malcolm, (played by a very young Seth Green) sells her the chance to grant her deepest wish (whose child is this wandering around doing black magic?). She wakes up the next day as a BOY. Just like that.

It gets even better. Milly (now Willy, duh) has breakfast with his family and his dad is pretty chill about the sudden change. This very scenario played in my mind a million times, with my own parents, and watching it played out on screen brought me so much joy. I needed to see that acceptance.

Willy moves to a new school (how convenient) and begins life as a boy. There, he meets Alfie, and their friendship grows. Teenager stuff happens, and Alfie develops feelings for Willy. After some awkward situations, Willy realises that life isn't better as a boy and asks Malcolm for help, mostly because he wants to kiss Alfie at some dance (there's *always* a dance). Ever the entrepreneurial witch-boy, Malcolm sells him another product that will change him back into a girl.

My little heart broke. I rooted for him. I wanted to *be* him. I wanted so badly for Willy to stay Willy forever, because I wanted that for myself. So what if he wants to kiss another boy?

Now, before we slam our keyboards in disgust at the transphobic and homophobic elements of the plot, I must say I actually gained a lot from this film, both as a kid, and now. This movie wasn't meant to challenge the binary or blow our minds with a progressive statement. It was just meant to show kids that, regardless of our gender, we all have our struggles, and we shouldn't buy witchy things from strange children. I can let the "reversion" agenda of the story slide, considering it was made in the 80s when transgenderism wasn't yet as openly discussed or accepted. I can appreciate it for what it is – just a kid movie that allowed me to escape my life for a while.

Re-watching it as an adult who is now comfortable in my own skin, I'm glad it was stored in my long-term memory. Through Willy, I got to see gender and sexuality from the perspective of freshly pubescent teens in a time when one couldn't just google things. I cheered Willy on as he navigated the hormonal hallways of teenagehood. My own teenage years were some of the most difficult and

confusing in my life, when my own body was turning against me, and I'd have given anything to have someone on my side back then.

Having safely moved on from that difficult part of my life, I was able to recall my own painful teenage struggles and truly appreciate how far I've come to being me. For a little while, I got to go back in time to my 8-year-old self, reliving those same emotions, this time with the hindsight and security of a 37-year-old man with a mortgage. In my own way, I did get to be Willy.