

Harry Stokes: A Pioneering Trans Man Lives Again

★★★★★ *By Dan Borden*

British performer Joey Hateley brings Harry back to life as ‘The Man Woman of Manchester,’ telling the eventful life of a trans man in the north of England in the 19th century.

As 21st century popular culture opens up to stories about trans people and their lives today, some art-activists are also shining light on trans pioneers, who courageously broke gender norms long ago. One fascinating example is Harry Stokes, a trans man whose eventful life in the north of England spanned the 1800s. Now UK-based performer Joey Hateley is bringing Stokes back to life in a one-person multi-media show entitled ‘The Man Woman of Manchester’.

First presented in Berlin as part of October’s go drag! festival, the piece dramatises an improbable series of real-life events that play out like a Dickens novel with a female to male trans protagonist. Hateley introduces us to Harry as a teen runaway, living rough on the moors of Northern England. Taken under the wing of

a kindly bricklayer, he climbs from apprentice “bricky” to the owner of a thriving construction business and pillar of Manchester society and volunteer police constable, while ‘passing’ as a man.



Harry courts and marries young Ann Hants in Sheffield Cathedral in 1817, as life plays out against the Industrial Revolution and intersects with real-life events such as the 1819 Peterloo Massacre. When Ann divorces Harry after years of marriage, his identity is publicly revealed and his life shattered. Alone on stage, Hateley delivered a tour-de-force performance, skilfully playing from adolescent youth to drunken middle age - interacting with the other characters through a multimedia display, launching into ballads illuminating the story's twists and turns.

Perhaps the biggest twist came at the end, as Hateley revealed this piece tells only a third of Harry's life. It's the first chapter of a projected three-part collaborative process that will further dramatise how Stokes rebuilt his life and career and found new love, which finally ended in a mysterious death. Based on comments from audience members young and old, this tale of a pioneering gender nonconformist both illuminates hidden invisible pasts and still reverberates loudly today. The fascinating life story of Harry Stokes deserves to be heard, seen and told in full universally for all.

