

I enjoy being feminine, not a sex object

I finished a role in a production earlier this month that would have made Linda Low, the character who sings “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” in the movie musical “Flower Drum Song,” proud. I changed costumes six times. I wore about two layers more of makeup on the stage than I would wear on the street. I danced to choreography that emphasized gender-based characteristics: strength (particularly upper-body strength) for men and delicacy and femininity for women through the movement of our hands and hips.

Five of my costume changes required the same base orange skirt and matching tunic with subtle switches of dramatic accessories. A waist-tie came off. I swapped one bold set of matching bracelets, earrings and necklac-

es for another. Scarves I wore on my shoulder in one scene became waist-ties in the next. A coordinating “gele” — a Yoruba word for head wrap — was added or subtracted. (The play is set in Nigeria.)

In the full costume change, I wore a purple faux-wrap skirt with a matching peek-a-boo tunic embroidered meticulously and elegantly in white and silver. The head wrap for that costume is a band of soft, thick

purple cloth that sits between two bands of silver fabric. The silver material is stiff, so the gele isn't just tied in that scene; it can be sculpted into designs resembling roses in full bloom, and it will stay put.

As the choreographer observed at our final dress rehearsal, I had fun with that purple and silver. It's almost impossible to tie a gele the same way twice, so the look is different every night. The fun for me, though, isn't just the variety; it's the femininity. It's dressing up, accessorizing and moving in ways that accent and celebrate a woman's beauty without sexualizing, or perhaps without hyper-sexualizing, the aesthetics.

I think feminine beauty and sexuality compliment one another and that both deserve some recognition. But I also believe that they are distinct and that our culture often blurs the fine lines between them. Body lotion isn't for preventing dry, flaky skin. It's for

drawing closer to the man who wants to touch his woman's smooth skin. I can't seem to find a marketer that can sell perfume without a female strip-teasing in the ad, and if men open a beer, they also attract women with beautiful faces and little clothing. Women become an extension of the product being sold and celebration is reincarnated as objectification.

That can make it difficult for some women to justify celebrating their features at all.

A friend and I got into a discussion about this recently when I stumbled onto an interview with a woman who believes our culture has brainwashed women into believing that their sexual appeal to men is the only measure of their worth. She's built a ministry on the premise and is raising young women's self-esteem by showing them God didn't make them sex objects.

As our conversation drifted, my

male friend and I agreed that while too many women devalue themselves, it's also detrimental to neglect physical beauty. I'm rarely seen in public outside of the gym, so I don't have to dress up very much. But looking pretty boosts my confidence a bit, especially after several days hunched over a computer in colorless sweats or jeans and T-shirts.

Like Linda Low, I think it's fun to have a curvy silhouette and to put on makeup and vary my wardrobe outside of the theater. I don't like objectification, and I would never alter my appearance to please someone else — what's the point when beauty is subjective? — but I absorb the attention the variety brings, and I make changes for me. I enjoy being a girl. ♣

Mariam Williams is a Louisville native. More of her thoughts and stories can be found at RedboneAfropuff.com.



MARIAM WILLIAMS