Red carpet or not, nobody brings it like BILLY PORTER

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After almost a full year in quarantine, legendary showman Billy Porter considers himself a changed man. It all started last March: As COVID-19 concerns were running high in New York City, Porter and his husband, Adam Porter-Smith, decided to temporarily relocate from Manhattan, where he's lived for 30-plus years, to Bellport, Long Island, a quaint seaside village full of artists and creative types. Porter is diabetic and therefore high-risk when it comes to the virus, so at first the move was logistical—a way to stay safe while escaping the chorus of blaring sirens outside his Harlem apartment. But then something unexpected happened: The longtime New Yorker fell in love with the small town and decided to stay for good.

Dialing in over Zoom on a wintery Friday night from his new home in the country, he looks happy and at ease, curled up on his couch in a cozy red flannel that's certainly more cottagecore than the flashy couture we're used to seeing him in. "This is the thing I didn't know I needed," Porter, now 51, says of the move. "I had no idea I was missing the woods, the

animals, the beach, and the consistent peace. For the first time, there's no noise. And because of that, there has been a healing. I decided I have to stay where the healing is."

The change of pace has given him the space to reexamine everything, from the nonstop speed at which he's been working in film, TV, and theater over the past three decades to his ever-evolving sense of style. It's also allowed him to savor the simple joys of a more domestic life, like cooking breakfast with his husband and planning movie nights. The couple even recently became dog dads to a cockapoo puppy they named Bader Lola Majors. The initials BLM are a nod to the Black Lives Matter movement, though they call her Lola, after Porter's grandmother and, of course, the beloved drag queen he played in Broadway's Kinky Boots.

Another perk of living outside the city? Anonymity. A few months before the big move, Porter recalls a particularly chaotic subway ride where the requests for selfies from fellow commuters ventured into uncharted territory. "I had on sunglasses, a coat, and earphones and I was on my iPad reading, but it didn't matter," he says, laughing. "I thought, 'OK. I think I've crossed over.' Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful, but there's an adjustment period with being a celebrity, or whatever this is called. Now we're tucked away in a little cul-de-sac, and there's a normalcy I've been able to carve out for myself. Do people know who I am? Yes. But they're more like, 'We don't want to bother you, but, hey, welcome to Bellport,' as opposed to, 'Oh my god, can I have a picture?'"

Part of his loss of privacy over the past few years stems from his larger-than-life Emmy-winning turn as Pray Tell in FX's ballroom-culture drama, Pose. The other part of it has to do with the massive following he's gained since the 2019 Oscars, when he arrived in a statement-making, gender-bending custom Christian Siriano tuxedo gown that both broke the Internet and launched him into instant fashion-icon status.

When speaking about his evolution, Porter puts things into two categories: "BO or AO," meaning before Oscars or after Oscars. The impact of the look on his career was no accident. Porter knew he was about to step onto one of the world's biggest stages and was ready to seize the moment. "I thought back to when my friend Idina Menzel was at the Oscars [in 2014] to sing 'Let It Go,' from *Frozen*, and John Travolta mispronounced her name onstage," he says. "I literally said out loud, 'She's going to be a household name in less than 24 hours.' And she was. As funny as it may sound, I'm a businessman, and wearing that [Oscars] dress was a business decision, in a sense. People were like, 'Oh, he's just trying to get attention.' Well, yeah, I'm in show business! It's part of my job. Otherwise, I don't eat."









"I was told that my queerness would be a liability in this business. And it was for decades—until it wasn't."

Porter's other hope was that the look would inspire a long-overdue conversation about genderless fashion. "I used to get frustrated that women could wear whatever they wanted and men had to show up in the same penguin suit," he says. "The reason why women wearing pants is considered OK by society's standards is because it comes from the patriarchy. The patriarchy is male, so suits are strong, and anything feminine is weak. I was sick of that discussion, and I knew my platform allowed me to challenge it."

While the look went viral and applause emojis showered Porter's feed in an outpouring of love, there were also a lot of close-minded comments hurled his way. A particularly frustrating moment happened in January 2020, when he was invited to appear on Public Television's *Sesame Street* wearing his Siriano gown. After the show shared Instagram photos of Porter on set, Jason Rapert, a Republican Arkansas state senator, wrote a Facebook post slamming PBS for using

taxpayer dollars to promote a "radical LGBTQ+ agenda," adding that he could pass a bill to "cut off all funding" to the network. A petition to remove Porter's appearance on the show from pro-life group LifePetitions also began to circulate, alleging that Sesame Street was trying to "sexualize children using drag queens" by featuring Porter in his gown.

"It was based on this idea that I'm coming to get their children because of the way I dress," says Porter, shaking his head. "What is that? I'm over here minding my own business. So why is it triggering you? At that moment, I was grateful that I am a man of a certain age, because when you become a certain age, zero f—s are given. I don't now, nor will I ever, adjudicate my life or my humanity in [other people's] sound bites or responses on social media. Simultaneously, it still hurts to have people come after me for nothing."

Porter looks at his sartorial choices as another form of his artistry, much like any song he performs or character he embodies. "It's how I express myself," he says. "When Lady Gaga dresses up and performs a song on TV as if she's a man [Jo Calderone at the 2011 MTV VMAs], no one bats an eye. They receive her as an artist who's playing with different silhouettes and ideas. Same with David Bowie. When white and straight people do it, they're (CONTINUED ON PAGE II4)

Happy Happy Joy Joy

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MM: It's very polarizing, but, I mean, I'm on the left for sure, though I'm not an extremist. And I think just saying like, "Can't we all just be kind to each other?" and that gets a "F—you, lady," I don't know what to do.

LB: How has it seeped into your mind as a performer?

MM: The world's tough on comedy right now. Not to be like, "Critics don't like us," but critics are so hard on comedy. You don't have to like what I do, or you don't have to like comedy. But you need to be able to laugh at something. Ben and I talk about it a lot from the perspective of "Will this make somebody happy? Can somebody at the end of an 18-hour ER shift just check out and laugh for, you know, an hour?" It's the one thing we can try to do, and we try to do our best. I'm not smart enough to know how to purify the water, but I can throw myself down a flight of stairs and hope that it lets someone forget their troubles.

LB: You are really good at throwing yourself around. Are you still as keen to do that as you were?

MM: I'm a little more hesitant than I used to be. My initial thought to anything is like, "Oh, I'll do it." Ben and everyone will be like, "Just walk through it. Don't actually fall down." I'll be like, "Absolutely!" And then when I do the rehearsal, I will always throw myself down, and everybody goes, "We just talked about this." Now I've hurt myself in enough places where I have to spend all week like, "I really have to work on my hips."

LB: You sometimes join Ben in an Instagram bit with a beer. When did you realize that beer o'clock was his Instajam?

MM: Feel confident I'm always close by with a beer. [laughs] Ben started that. I didn't even know he was doing it. All of a sudden he just does strange stuff and will never mention it. He'll write a whole script and be like, "Can you read this?" He was doing all these weird beer o'clocks, and then we both started doing it. As COVID and the quarantine kept going, it kept getting progressively earlier.

LB: One of the last times I saw you, we had dinner and you had come from a full-body scan for a superhero costume for *Thunder Force*. I remember you just loved that. [laughs]

MM: I mean, anytime you can stand in a nude Capezio and have people scan your body, that's when you know you're living. It's not seethrough, but it's not opaque. It's like, "Hi, nice to meet you, Carl." Usually, you walk into this huge machine and in 15 seconds it takes 3,500 pictures of your body. But I always say I'm technology poison, and as soon as I crossed the threshold, I heard somebody go, "Oh my god! Oh my god! What's happened?" And I heard this, like, "hubba, hubba, hubba," and everybody's running around this machine. It breaks down, and so instead of doing this thing for 15 seconds, it required two people coming in with cameras to take pictures of every square inch

of my body. So that took about 45 minutes. It's just me standing in a nude Capezio being like, "Yeah, OK, cool, cool, cool."

LB: One of the *New York Times*' 25 greatest actors of the 21st century, everyone.

MM: "But have you seen her Capezio work?" We did get the coolest superhero suits in the world. Octavia [Spencer, her co-star in the upcoming *Thunder Force*] and I were like, "Oh my god." I kept walking around with my fists on my hips.

LB: You and Octavia have known each other for 20-something years. How have you both changed over that time?

MM: She is one of the most incredibly gifted actresses on the planet. She always knows the most thoughtful thing to say. It's not like, "Oh, she can really turn a phrase." She speaks right from her soft, chewy heart. And she's also the funniest person on earth.

LB: If you were to assemble your own *Thunder* Force in 2021, who would be on it?

MM: I would say [Dr. Anthony] Fauci. Michelle Obama. Bill Gates. But then also James Corden for fun. Kristen Wiig. She'll make the world better. I think that list would keep going to include, like, my children, my family—uh, yes, all the people I'm going to be murdered by if I don't mention them.

LB: Mike McCarthy.

MM: Mike McCarthy for sure. [laughs]

LB: By the way, it's been 10 years since *Bridesmaids*.

MM: I don't think I realized that. That film instilled the best lesson of you just have to let things be what they are, because it wasn't supposed to work like that. Annie [Mumolo] and Kristen wrote it, and they had never written anything before. And it was like, "We're going to let your weirdness ride." And people on set were laughing and crying full-out in almost every scene because everybody felt so free and there wasn't a lot of pressure. Certainly, nobody thought it was going to be a game changer. The fit was just perfect.

LB: It's aged like a fine wine. Have you watched it lately?

MM: I haven't, but I'd actually love to see it. There are so many scenes to revisit. Like Kristen in that little cupcake moment that breaks my heart. And then at the same time, the plane scene. She must have done it 20 different ways. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen in my life. Ben and I were sitting next to each other on set, and I said, "I don't think I will ever forget this moment."

LB: "Colonial woman churning butter on the wing!"

MM: I mean, that just comes out of someone's mouth.

LB: Speaking of that magical flight, have you kicked your foot up on an airplane doorframe lately?

MM: I have not. Next time I'm on a plane, I will send you that picture. God help me.

LB: Please! Before your insurance people say you can no longer move anymore, put your hip out one last time.

MM: I'll be like, "This is for Brown!" ■

Billy G.O.A.T.

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considered artists. When I do it, I'm a perversion. The answer to that from me is *no*."

Having grown up in a very religious Pentecostal Baptist community in Pittsburgh, Porter has spent most of his life overcoming criticism for simply being himself. "At 5 years old, I was sent to a psychologist to deal with my sissiness," he recalls. "It was not a safe space for me, ever." Leaving home at 17, Porter studied drama at Carnegie Mellon University before landing his first big role in Broadway's Miss Saigon in 1991, where he struggled again to define his identity in an industry that likes to put people in a box. Various fashion phases followed, from a vintage-inspired period to an Abercrombie & Fitch era ("The closest I ever got to wearing athleisure," he jokes) to geek chic when he was starring in Kinky Boots. "I dressed like a dandy with colorful pocket squares, bow ties, and shorts with argyle socks," he says. "The crazy thing was that I was playing a drag queen every single day, but it hadn't occurred to me yet that as Billy I could also take myself out of the masculinity game and show up in a dress."

Then in 2017 Porter made an album called *Billy Porter Presents: The Soul of Richard Rodgers* and set out on a mini tour. "I needed a new look for it," he says. "So one day I happened to stumble upon the Rick Owens flagship store, and they had all of these cool rock-and-roll pieces. The woman working there was like, "These clothes are for everybody.' So I bought an entire wardrobe of gender-bending stuff—tight black dresses with slits up the side and killer boots. And that's what finally got the wheels turning. I had been running from my feminine side for years because I was told that my queerness would be a liability in this business. And it was for decades—until it wasn't."

Porter's current phase of fashion has certainly been his most authenticyet. "It's the freest I've ever felt," he says, reflecting on some of his greatest hits, which include over-the-top performance-art moments like getting carried into the 2019 Met Gala in a sun-god-inspired bodysuit by the Blonds or the wide-brimmed Baja East and Sarah Sokol hat with a motorized crystal peekaboo fringe that launched a million memes after the 2020 Grammys. "In the past, when I would show up to an event in a big hat or something, I used to have colleagues who said to me, 'You look ridiculous.' It's like, 'Who's ridiculous now?'"

Since Porter has come onto the scene, it's hard to ignore the impact he has had on the fashion industry and the culture at large. When I mention the names of other stars like Harry Styles and Jonathan Van Ness, who have seemingly followed in his footsteps by wearing dresses and other traditionally feminine garb on the red carpet and in editorials, he blurts out, "You're welcome!" with a sly grin before taking a beat. "It's hard because I feel like I've had an influence, but I also don't want my ego to get big. For instance, I just saw some of the latest fall men's collections, and there are a bunch of coats

that have these little trains behind them. Now, I could say, 'I may have been an influence there,' but I'd rather let other people say it. When *Time* magazine called me a fashion icon, I finally said, 'OK, maybe now I can say it myself without sounding like an ass—'"

What his style is not, however, is just for shock fashion's sake. "I am playing with traditional gender norms, but it's not always Billy showing up in a gown everywhere," he says. "This year has allowed me to have the space to step back and clarify what exactly it is I want to say with my look." A big part of that vision is Porter's new stylist, Ty Hunter, who is best known for his work with another fashion titan, Beyoncé. For InStyle's shoot, which took place around Bellport (including in front of the restaurant that Porter often orders takeout from, called, serendipitously, Porters on the Lane), the actor worked closely with Hunter to find the right sartorial balance. "I loved that most of it was menswear except one dress [by upand-coming gender-fluid label Queera Wang], and yet I was still able to play with both the masculine and the feminine. Because sometimes I'm full-on masculine and sometimes I'm full-on feminine. That's just who I am."

When I ask Porter if he's ever actually ever gone to the local bistro or the bus stop in straight-off-the-runway Louis Vuitton, a scene that doesn't seem completely out of the realm of possibility for a man who so easily turned a driveway into a runway for this shoot, he throws back his head in laughter. "No, because I don't own any Vuitton!" he says. "People don't understand: You get this s— on loan, and then you have to send it alllll right back."

Though what he wears may be the thing that initially attracted everyone's attention, it's Porter and his incredible talent that have held it—and he's got an Emmy, a Grammy, and a Tony on his mantel to prove it. "My work as an actor speaks for itself, and that's the reason why I'm at these red carpets in the first place," he says. "I am not a social-media influencer. I'm not a clown. I am an artist, and that has been a really interesting road to navigate because it can be confusing for people. Yes, I do have influence on social media, but that's just a piece of it. It's not the whole thing."

Since the upcoming season of *Pose* has been delayed due to COVID restrictions, Porter's next project will be the feature film *Cinderella*, which is set to be released in July. Pop star Camila Cabello will play the title role, with Porter stepping in as the all-important Fairy Godmother, or, as he says, the Fab G. "A lot of our fairy tales from days gone by are problematic, but in this version, Cinderella is her own woman who wants to be her own thing, and across the board the conceit was inclusivity," he says. "In that world, the Fab G could be anything or anybody. It's a spirit. Magic has no gender."

Porter is also set to make his directorial début with the film *What If?*, a rom-com coming-of-age story centered around a trans high-school girl. The project was two decades in the making. "I put it out into the universe ex-

actly 20 years ago that I wanted to direct, and it's finally happening," he says. When he's not in production, Porter is working on new music and a capsule shoe collection. "I can't say which shoe company yet, but we're already starting," he says. "And one day LVMH will want to buy all mys—up instead of the other way around!"

He also has started writing a memoir in quarantine, which, more than anything else, has forced him to slow down and take stock of where he came from and where he's going. "One thing I've realized while writing is how grateful I am that all of this didn't happen when I was in my twenties because I wasn't ready," he says. "Who I am and what I represent is very specific, and one needs to be an adult to handle what's coming, both the good and the complicated. I've been in this business for 35 years now. I'm a grown-ass man. I know what I want. I know what I don't want. I know how to handle all of it. And I know what to do with it."

It's then that Porter gets up from his couch and disappears for a few seconds. He returns holding a handmade card with a colorful crayon drawing of a man in a dress. "This is what I do it for," he says. "This card was sent to me from a couple in Australia whose son likes to wear dresses. He came home one day from kindergarten or first grade and said he didn't want to wear them anymore because people were making fun of him. Apparently, seeing me in my gown at the Oscars empowered him to not care and to put his dresses back on."

When I ask what the card says, Porter reads it aloud: "Dear Billy: You look so happy and beautiful in your dress. You are amazing. Maybe one day we can have a fashion show together. Love, Colin."■

Super Nia

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Walk, [laughs]

Why is it so important to you to keep these moves in your routine? The UCLA gymnastics team is known for its floor routines, and this year celebrating authenticity was really important to me because of the social justice issues going on. Also, Black culture is not really known in the gymnastics world. The Black Lives Matter movement really inspired me to bring [Black culture] to the sport. I kind of did a little bit last year with my Beyoncé routine. That was *some* Black culture, but it wasn't enough where people could grasp it. And [this year] I wanted the message to be very clear.

What is your beauty routine before a meet?

I try not to do too much, but I do like to beat my face. Everybody likes to look cute. I get eyelash extensions. I don't know how to put fake lashes on. But, luckily, my best friend on the team knows how to do it. I also try to match whatever leotard we're wearing. I like a dark lip because it's bold and stands out against my skin.

What do you do to take care of yourself mentally, emotionally, even physically?

Your schedule is full. You're a student. These routines are hard on your body. We focus a lot on mental health at UCLA. Because, honestly, gymnastics is a mind game. If your mind is not strong, chances are you're not going to be strong on the competition floor. We really take the time to tend to each other's needs. I love to dance in my free time. I think it's a form of freedom and just a way to communicate your thoughts and emotions through movement. I also journal a lot. It's really good for me to get all my thoughts out on paper even

if I can't talk to somebody about them.

How has it been practicing and competing during quarantine? It's been crazy. L.A. County is so bad in terms of COVID numbers, so the rules here at UCLA's campus are very strict and protocols are intense. I can't fill up my own water bottle; there's one designated person to fill up the water. But it's all for our safety, so I'm down to do it. We've had the least amount of training to prepare for this season. Last year got cut short, and then we had eight months off. That is the most time I've ever had off in my entire life doing gymnastics.

What did you do? I got shoulder surgery in June, so I was doing physical therapy every single day. Then I was trying to find time and places to work out—parks, stairs, anywhere, really.

What's your favorite part about competing? Performing for an audience! We work so hard, and it's a showcase. You want to show off everything that you've been working so hard to do. This year has been different. I'm celebrating myself, my girls are celebrating me, and we're all celebrating each other.

You're a senior this year. What comes next for you? Are you looking toward the Olympics? I tried out for the Olympics in 2016, and then I tore my Achilles [tendon] three months before the Games. After that I definitely wanted to quit gymnastics. I never wanted to do it again. I'm glad I didn't quit and kept pushing. My Olympic dreams didn't die, but at the same time there are a lot of opportunities right now. I'm trying to figure it all out, but that would be so crazy and fun. We're pushing boundaries here at UCLA, and I would love to do that at the Olympics, the world's biggest stage. ■

Bella

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shift to webcams. It was not easy for a designer who once trained as a sculptor and typically worked by blocking clothes to the body rather than building from sketches. "I need to touch fabrics and have deep sessions with my coworkers to rethink and put everything together," says Chiapponi. "For me, the creative process is when I'm in the factory and start to build up with chains, a piece of leather, a heel."

So it's perfectly understandable why, in the months since the lockdown was imposed, when Chiapponi produced his second collection and needed someplace to show it off, he chose the

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