

'Transparent' Shows TV's First Transgender Full-Frontal Nude Scene

Transgender actress Alexandra Billings, alongside co-star Trace Lysette, talks about why she decided she wanted to bare all in the milestone scene from the Amazon series.



[Kevin Fallon](#)

09.24.17 9:00 PM ET



Amazon

Before [Season 4 of *Transparent*](#) started production, transgender actress Alexandra Billings, who plays Maura's friend and mentor Davina on the series, walked into the writer's room to pitch. She said she wanted to be naked.

That, of course, is a crude simplification of the process. Billings' friend and [Transparent co-star Trace Lysette](#) suggested that the two of them talk to the show's writers about their lives and experiences as transgender women, with the hope that they might incorporate them, and therefore a broader reflection of the varied transgender experience, into the show's storylines.

"And I asked for this specifically," Billings says, talking with *The Daily Beast* alongside Lysette ahead of the show's fourth season premiere. "It was Alexandra's idea," [Transparent creator Jill Soloway](#) corroborates. "She was like, 'I'm ready to show my body.'"

That she does. In the second episode of the season, "Groin Anomaly," Davina is lying naked, face-down on her bed, getting massaged by her boyfriend. When he tweaks her back, she rolls over, exposing her breasts and, for the first time for a transgender actress on television, her penis.

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"I don't think it's ever been done before, where you see someone who's a trans body that was pre-op, especially of a certain age, who looks a certain way," Billings says. "I wanted to show everything, but I said I don't want to be objectified. I don't want to be sexualized. And I don't want to be fetishized. I thought Jill's way of showing it was brilliant."

For Soloway, the everyday breeziness of the scene was crucial: "It's just life, living it, hanging out in your bed, getting a massage from your partner, turning over—just like life."

The milestone for Billings is about far more than nudity. It's another step in a career spent working to normalize and expand opportunity for transgender actors.

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She was the first openly transgender actor to play a trans character on television, when she appeared in the 2005 TV movie prequel [Romy and Michelle: In the Beginning](#). That same year, she had originally been cast in the lead role of [Transamerica](#), which eventually went to Felicity Huffman after producers struggled to get financial backing with Billings in the role. Huffman went on to earn a Golden Globe award and an Oscar nomination.

In the 12 years since, Billings has worked on episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*, *Eli Stone*, and *How to Get Away With Murder*, as well as become a passionate activist and organizer for her community. And she has strong opinions about that movement, too.

“I feel like this new trans generation that’s coming in the movement, you’ve gotta do two things: You’ve gotta love Laverne Cox and hate Caitlyn Jenner,” she says. “And if you don’t do those two things they take away your trans card. Both things are ridiculous. We don’t have to like each other. We don’t even have to get along! But we do have to honor each other.”

With the new season of *Transparent* now streaming, we talked with Billings and Lysette about the consideration that goes into the decision to be nude on screen as a trans actor (Lysette had a nude scene in the [series *Blunt Talk*](#)), their expanded roles on *Transparent* over the years, and the state of the transgender civil rights movement in the Trump era.

Did working on the show and being in production in February after Trump’s inauguration feel different from other seasons?

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Billings: I understand the question, because the political climate is so hot. But for trans people, the political climate is always hot. It's always toasty. We're always being silenced in some kind of way. We're always being disenfranchised and moved to the side and told to get out of the way. That's always been true. Now since the Trump administration certainly there's a bigger spotlight on it.

I talked to the rest of the cast about working on a show that felt like part of a wave of progress in the trans movement, and they spoke about how they felt shaken after the election in November. But they're all cis actors.

Billings: It's a very different experience for us.

Exactly. What was that like for the two of you?

Billings: It's different for them. They're looking at our experience from the outside. We don't have to join the revolution. We are the fucking revolution. We're in the center of it. We stand on the shoulders of our trans history in a way that is about presence and tribe. The cis people stand in the center of their experience, but they're usually either the protagonists of the movement or they're the spectators. [*Looks to Lysette*] Do you feel like it's different now just in the world of your community than it ever has been?

Lysette: No. I feel like we're used to this. What has really changed for trans people? I feel like cis people are all shaken up all of a sudden.

Billings: (*Laughs*) They're like, "Oh my god, are you OK?!"

Lysette: "We gotta get involved!"

Billings: Where ya been?

Lysette: Thanks for stepping up, guys! It's been great. That's how I feel about it. Maybe that's the silver lining: There's been this mass awakening. Cis people are more conscious and awake. But I don't feel like there's been too much of a shift. There's always been an ebb and flow when it comes to our rights as trans people.

Billings: And you know, there's a great bridge that's built across generations. I'm 55 years old. I transitioned when I was 20, so I've been through revolutions in our movement. And the bridge between who we used to be and who we are becoming is steady. My point is that we, in the center of the movement, know how to do this. We know how to not only fight it, but we know how to survive it. My hope and my fear is that within the movement we don't fracture. Because the trans movement in and of itself needs to continue to be more inclusive. So my fear is that we start battling each other. That I don't want to see, and I won't stand for it. When that happens, I will get very vocal. It's the only time I ever really come out and say, "Listen!"

Lysette: Are you referencing the Caitlyn/Ashlee thing? [*Note: For more on the confrontation between Caitlyn Jenner and journalist Ashlee Marie Preston, [click here.](#)*]

Billings: To the Caitlyn/Ashlee thing. To just Caitlyn, in general. I said this to Trace the other day. I feel like this new trans generation that's coming in the movement, you've gotta do two things: You've gotta love Laverne Cox and hate Caitlyn Jenner. And if you don't do those two things they take away your trans card. Both things are ridiculous. We don't have to like each other. We don't even have to get along! I don't care about that. There are a lot of trans people I don't particularly care for. But we do have to honor each other.

We've got to stay in the same fight, and battling each other is going to get us nowhere. That will be the death. Because I've seen it!

A lot of what happens in Davina's flashbacks this season reflects your own story, Alexandra. How did that come about?

Billings: Trace called me before the season happened and said, "Hey, you know what we should do? We should go into the writers' room and give them our lives and tell them what should happen with these characters." I went, "We can do that?" She said, "I don't know!"

Lysette: I just wanted to give them options!

Billings: It was really extraordinary. We both went in with a bunch of things.

Lysette: Some of my ideas were not directly from my life. They were just ideas for Maura and Shea and Davina. There was one thrown out about a trans girls' trip somewhere. I've gone on trips with my trans girlfriends in real life, and you don't really get to see that. I just wanted them to have resources to pull, in case they needed them.

Billings: That's what caused the dialogue. And that's why I think Davina's back story happened. I said, "Here's what I went through in my life." And they put it in the show.

With *Blunt Talk* and now this season of *Transparent*, you've both done nude scenes. What are the conversations like for those, considerations you had before or after, and what did you hope they would accomplish?

Lysette: It was like a duel in my head of, "No, don't let these fucking cis people objectify you again," and "Yes, you have to show your trans body and be proud of it because we don't get to see it." Then there's another voice that's like, "Well, your tits are only going to be up there for so long, you might as well show them." So I was like, OK, I'll show my tits on *Blunt Talk*. But then they wanted me to do a stripper scene on *Transparent* that same year and they wanted me to be topless again. I was like, you could literally switch the channel and see my tits on *Blunt Talk*. So I was like, let's do a G-string and bikini top, which is more truthful for strippers because you don't take your top off until the last song anyway. I was a stripper for eight years.

So you know.

Lysette: Exactly. I think that the really important thing was just seeing trans bodies. Nudity doesn't have to be salacious and sexualized. I think the way that the *Blunt Talk* scene was written was very sweet. It was a sweet moment with Patrick Stewart, even though he was picking me up and I was a date. I think that the beginning of the relationship with Jay Duplass in Season 3 was really sweet boy-meets-girl, and she's just at work. I feel about your scene, how amazing it is to see you in all of your glory...

Billings: Literally! All of it!

Lysette: And how important that is.

This is an Emmy-winning show with reach and an audience. People will see this.

Billings: I asked for this specifically.

Lysette: In the room that day.

Billings: I said I don't think it's ever been done before, where you see someone who's a trans body that was pre-op, especially of a certain age, who looks a certain way. I'm not built like a model. I'm built in a very specific way, and I'm at a point now where I'm OK with my body. I like it. I don't love it, but I like it. I'm OK with it. I've made peace with what I look like. I've traveled through years of not only my HIV and also my silicone injections and all the things we go through in order to survive. I wanted to show everything, but I said I don't want to be objectified. I don't want to be sexualized. And I don't want to be fetishized.

It's handled beautifully.

Billings: I thought Jill's way of showing it was brilliant. Because that wasn't my idea. I had no idea how they were going to do it or if they were going to do it. So the fact of it was extraordinary. I think the result, because I think that's the great part of your question—what was the hope—the hope is that when we talk or don't talk about surgery that it is not the foundation of our question for trans people. Have you had this done or haven't you had this done? I don't know that it matters anymore. The point is this is how I see you, this is how I receive you. So it doesn't matter what's going on with your genitalia. The important thing is how do we treat each other? That's hopefully the conversation.